

# QATAR 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution states Islam is the state religion and sharia shall be “a main source” of legislation. The constitution guarantees the freedom to practice religious rites in accordance with “the maintenance of public order and morality.” Religious groups must register with the government to acquire property, raise funds, or hold bank accounts. Sunni and Shia Muslims and eight Christian denominations comprise the only registered religious groups in the country. Unregistered religious groups are illegal but generally may practice their faith privately. The law provides for prison sentences for blasphemy against Islam, Christianity, or Judaism and criminalizes proselytizing on behalf of any religion other than Islam, with a punishment of up to 10 years in prison. Eight registered Christian denominations worshipped freely at the Mesaymeer Religious Complex. The government allowed unregistered churches to worship there as well, but only under the patronage of one of the eight recognized denominations. The government said it was open to considering the creation of dedicated worship spaces for Hindus, Jews, and Buddhists. The government continued to monitor print and social media for religious material it considered objectionable.

Media based in the country periodically published anti-Semitic material. In January the privately owned newspaper *Al-Sharq* published an anti-Semitic editorial, and in June it also published an anti-Semitic poem. Critics in local news and social media accused a local writer and entrepreneur of disrespecting Islam after she appeared without a hijab in an international television broadcast in October.

In February U.S. embassy officials and the Department of State Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia met with the government to clarify its stance on the registration of non-Abrahamic religions and spoke with members of various religious communities about their opinions of religious freedom in the country. Embassy officials also met with foreign embassies representing countries with large numbers of followers of non-Abrahamic faiths to discuss registration issues. Embassy officials discussed faith issues with quasi-governmental organizations such as the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID) and academics focused on interfaith dialogue.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population as 2.3 million (July 2016 estimate). Citizens make up approximately 10.5 percent of the population, while noncitizens account for 89.5 percent. Reliable figures are unavailable, but estimates based solely on the religious composition of expatriate source countries suggest Muslims, while the largest religious group, likely make up less than half of the total population. Most citizens are Sunni Muslims, and almost all of the remainder are Shia Muslims. The breakdown of the noncitizen population between Sunni, Shia, and other Muslim groups is not available.

Other religious groups in descending order of size include Hindus, almost exclusively from India and Nepal, Roman Catholics, primarily from the Philippines, Europe, and India, and Buddhists, largely from South, Southeast, and East Asia. Smaller groups include Anglicans, Egyptian Copts, Bahais of Iranian or Lebanese origin, and Greek and other Eastern Orthodox.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution declares Islam to be the state religion and states sharia shall be “a main source” of legislation. The constitution guarantees the “freedom to practice religious rites” to all persons “in accordance with the law and the requirements of the maintenance of public order and morality.” It prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion. According to the constitution, the emir must be Muslim.

Conversion to another religion from Islam is defined by the law as apostasy and illegal, although there have been no recorded punishments for apostasy since the country’s independence in 1971.

The law provides for a prison sentence of up to seven years for defaming, desecrating, or committing blasphemy against Islam, Christianity, or Judaism. The law stipulates a seven-year prison term for producing or circulating material containing slogans, images, or symbols defaming these three religions. The law also prohibits publication of texts provoking social discord or religious strife, with a potential punishment of up to six months in prison.

To obtain an official presence in the country, non-Muslim religious groups must apply to register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Department of Consular Affairs. Muslim religious groups must apply to register with the Ministry

of Endowment and Religious Affairs. The only registered religious groups are Sunni and Shia Muslims and eight Christian denominations. The only religions registered to have their own places of worship are Islam and Christianity. Registered groups may hold bank accounts in the organization's name and may apply for property to build worship space, whereas unregistered entities are unable to open accounts, solicit funds, or legally hire staff.

The government maintains an official list of previously registered Christian denominations, consisting of the Catholic, Anglican, Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Coptic, Lebanese Maronite, evangelical Protestant, and Indian Churches. Sunni and Shia Muslims are registered with the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs.

According to the law, unregistered religious groups that engage in worship activities are illegal, and members of those groups are subject to deportation.

The law restricts public worship for non-Islamic faiths. It prohibits non-Muslim religious groups from displaying religious symbols, which includes banning Christian congregations from advertising religious services or placing crosses outdoors, where they are visible to the public. The law criminalizes proselytizing on behalf of an organization, society, or foundation of any religion other than Islam and provides for punishments of up to 10 years in prison. Proselytizing on one's own accord for any religion other than Islam can result in a sentence of up to five years. The law calls for two years' imprisonment and a fine of 10,000 Qatari riyals (\$2,700) for possession of written or recorded materials or items that support or promote missionary activity. The law allows importation of religious holy books, such as Bibles.

The government regulates the publication, importation, and distribution of all religious books and materials. Groups may publish newsletters without government censorship but may only distribute them internally within religious organizations and with appropriate markings to that effect. In order to import religious materials, groups must submit one copy to the Ministry of Culture and Sports and receive written approval before making large orders or risk having the entire shipment confiscated.

The law designates the minister of endowments and Islamic affairs as the final authority for approving Islamic religious centers. Non-Islamic houses of worship are approved by the MFA in coordination with the private office of the emir.

While a non-Muslim woman is not required by law to convert to Islam when marrying a Muslim, the law considers offspring of such a marriage to be Muslims. A non-Muslim man marrying a Muslim woman must convert to Islam.

Islamic instruction is compulsory for Muslim and non-Muslim students attending state-sponsored schools. Non-Muslims may provide private religious instruction for their children at home or in respective faith services. All children may attend secular and coeducational private schools. These schools must offer optional Islamic instruction; non-Muslim religious education is prohibited.

A unified civil court system, incorporating sharia and secular law, has jurisdiction over both Muslims and non-Muslims. The unified court system applies sharia in family law cases, including those related to inheritance, marriage, divorce, and child custody. For Shia citizens, a judicial panel for Shia Muslims decides cases regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other family matters utilizing Shia interpretations of religious law. In other religious matters, the country's family law applies across all branches of Islam. Non-Muslims are subject to sharia in cases of child custody, but civil law covers other personal status cases, including those related to divorce and inheritance.

Criminal law is based on the principles of sharia but not its penalties. The type of crime determines whether those convicted receive a sharia-based sentence. There are certain criminal cases, such as drunkenness, in which Muslims are punished according to sharia principles. Sharia-based punishments may also apply to non-Muslims for certain crimes such as alcohol consumption or illicit sexual relations. Muslim convicts may earn a sentence reduction of a few months by memorizing the Quran while imprisoned. Secular law covers dispute resolution for financial service companies.

The Regulatory Authority for Charitable Activities must approve all religious charitable activities by local charities, including religious ones, in advance. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Department of Consular Affairs is in charge of supervising donations to, and charitable activities of, foreign religious groups.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

## **Government Practices**

The government stated it would consider allowing nonregistered religious groups to have land for a place of worship if they applied to register, but none had done so.

In practice, authorities did not disband unregistered religious groups as illegal and deport their members. The government continued to permit adherents of unregistered religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Bahai Faith, and unregistered small Christian congregations, to worship privately in rented villas, their homes, workplaces, and with others.

Hindus, Buddhists, Bahais, and other unregistered religious groups continued to lack authorized facilities in which to practice their faiths. The director of the Department of Consular Affairs within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated the ministry was open to considering the creation of dedicated worship spaces for Hindus, Jews, and Buddhists, and that any organized, non-Muslim religious group could use the same process as Christians to apply for official registration. No non-Christian groups were known to have applied to register.

The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs reported it continued to hire clerics and assign them to specific mosques. The ministry continued to provide thematic guidance for Friday sermons and reviewed content but did not require clerics to obtain prior approval of their sermons. The government reserved the right to take judicial action against individuals who did not follow the guidance. There were no reported instances of clerics failing to adhere to the guidance or of judicial action against them.

The government continued to issue a decree during Ramadan describing its view of the correct way for Muslims to perform their religious duties. The decree also stipulated that non-Muslims seen eating or drinking during daylight hours were subject to arrest.

The emir again personally financed the Hajj for some citizen and noncitizen pilgrims who could not otherwise afford to travel to Mecca.

Although the law prohibited Christian groups from advertising religious services, Christian churches posted details on hours of services and other information on publicly accessible websites.

The government maintained its policy of reviewing foreign newspapers, magazines, and books for “objectionable” religious content. Journalists and

publishers reportedly practiced self-censorship about material the government might consider contrary to Islam.

The government continued to permit non-Muslim religious groups and individuals to import holy books, such as Bibles, and other religious items for personal or congregational use, provided they first applied for and received written approval.

The Mesaymeer Religious Complex known as “Church City” continued to provide worship space for the eight registered Christian denominations. The government allowed unregistered churches to worship there as well, but only under the patronage of one of the eight recognized denominations. The Anglican Center within Church City housed a number of other smaller denominations and offered space to 76 different congregations of different denominations and languages.

Christian leaders continued to report government cooperation to facilitate the construction of new worship space, provide security, and improve highway infrastructure in and to the Mesaymeer complex. The government continued to enforce additional security measures at Church City, including closing parking lots, setting a curfew on church access, and using metal detectors.

The government prohibited the slaughter of animals outside of licensed facilities; a measure it said was designed to ensure hygienic conditions. In practice, individuals were able to conduct ritual slaughter in private. For example, Nepali Hindus reported they were able to perform animal sacrifices in housing accommodations.

Church leaders and religious groups said individuals practiced self-censorship when expressing religious views online and relied mostly on word of mouth, church websites, social media platforms, and email newsletters to distribute information about religious groups’ activities.

The government’s policy continued to be to deport foreigners suspected of proselytizing rather than filing criminal charges against them.

An MFA-led permanent intergovernmental committee continued to meet to consider the concerns of registered non-Muslim religious groups, including the legal status of churches and contracts governing the residency of foreign religious workers in the country.

Church leaders stated their ability to collect and distribute funds for charity continued to be limited by the government's restrictions on the number and type of bank accounts churches could hold, as well as reporting requirements on contractors doing business with the churches and on donors. Some smaller, unregistered churches continued to use the personal accounts of religious leaders for church activities.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Private media in the country published anti-Semitic material. In January the newspaper *Al-Sharq* published an editorial entitled "The Jewish Personality" which described the "Jewish problem" as the "most dangerous and complex in the modern era" and described the "Jewish personality" as "distorted and malevolent" and an "imminent danger threatening the Islamic nation." In June the same newspaper published an anti-Semitic poem entitled "The Plot of the Jews," which accused Jews of spreading corruption and plotting against Muslims. The government did not prosecute the newspaper under its legislation prohibiting defamation against Judaism.

In October writer and entrepreneur Maryam Al-Subaiey sparked public debate after appearing on the France 24 Arabic channel without a hijab. While some observers defended her choice, critics in local news and social media accused her of disrespecting national religion and culture.

The government-funded Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID), which operated independently, hosted discussions on the freedom to worship within one's home and how religious tolerance could be used to resolve intercommunal strife through seminars and roundtable discussions. The center also hosted discussion on difficulties faced by non-Muslim groups. Publications by the DICID during the year included essays from authors of non-Abrahamic faiths and covered topics ranging from the origins of religious violence to the role of religion in the modern age and the importance of pluralism.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officers continued to meet with relevant government bodies, including the Department of Consular Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Interior Department of Human Rights, and the Ministry of Religious Endowments, as well as quasi-governmental religious institutions, concerning religious freedom. They also met with representatives of

Christian groups in the country. The embassy discussed religious freedom issues informally with speakers and participants at the 12th Doha Interfaith Conference in February and the 6th roundtable discussions organized by the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue in May. The Department of State Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia visited Doha in February and asked the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the International Center for Interfaith Dialogue, and the National Human Rights Committee to clarify its stance on the registration of non-Abrahamic religions. He also discussed with members of Christian communities their opinions about religious freedom in the country. Embassy officers discussed faith issues with DICID and academics who focused on interfaith dialogue.