

QATAR 2017 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 constitute the only registered religious groups in the country. Unregistered religious groups are illegal but generally may practice their faith privately. In the wake of the severing of relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and continuing security concerns for Qatari citizens in Saudi Arabia, the government discouraged citizens and residents from taking part in the Hajj or Umra. 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. The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (MEIA) continued occasionally to provide thematic guidance for Friday sermons and reviewed content but did not require clerics to obtain prior approval of their sermons. The 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 reviewed, censored, or banned print and social media religious material it considered objectionable.

Media based in the country periodically published anti-Semitic material. In June the government-funded Al-Jazeera English website posted and then deleted a Twitter message featuring an anti-Semitic cartoon claiming a Jewish plot to deny climate change. In June privately owned *Al-Raya* newspaper published a cartoon showing a witch with a Star of David wand causing inter-Arab disputes. In July *Al-Raya* also printed a cartoon depicting an octopus with the Star of David on its forehead trying to devour the Aqsa Mosque. In December, after the announcement that the United States would relocate its embassy, *Al-Watan* newspaper published a cartoon caricature of an orthodox Jew standing in front of the Arabic word for “Jerusalem.” In December cartoons published in a local media outlet used anti-Semitic imagery in its criticism of a Bahraini nongovernmental delegation to Israel as an act of betrayal of Arab nationalism.

In July embassy officials met with the MEIA to discuss ways to deepen bilateral exchanges on religious topics and to discuss the rights of minority groups. Embassy officials discussed faith, registration restrictions, promotion of religious tolerance, and anti-Semitism issues with quasi-governmental organizations such as the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID), academics focused on interfaith dialogue, and religious minority communities including Christians and Hindus.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population as 2.3 million (July 2017 estimate). Citizens make up approximately 11.6 percent of the population, while noncitizens account for approximately 88 percent. Reliable figures are unavailable, but estimates based solely on the religious composition of expatriate source countries suggest Muslims, while they are 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 and other Protestant denominations, Egyptian Copts, Bahais, 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 punishment if convicted 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. All mosques and Islamic institutions in the country must be registered with the MEIA. The only registered religious groups are Sunni and Shia Muslims and eight Christian denominations. Protestant denominations other than those among the registered eight denominations, including nondenominational house churches, may be registered with the government with the support of the Church Steering Committee – an umbrella organization consisting of representatives of the eight already registered denominations. In practice, nearly all are registered under the aegis of the Anglican Church. Non-Christian groups must apply for registration through the MFA. 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, apply for property to build worship space (or have already built structures such as private villas recognized as worship spaces to avoid any problems with authorities), import religious texts, and publish religious newsletters or fliers for internal distribution, whereas unregistered entities are unable to open accounts, solicit funds, worship in private spaces legally, acquire religious texts from outside the country, publish religious-themed newsletters or pamphlets, 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 mosques are registered with the MEIA.

According to the law, unregistered religious groups (i.e., those not registered or under the patronage of one of the registered 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 punishment 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' imprisonment. 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. The government reviewed, censored, or banned foreign newspapers, magazines, films, and books for objectionable sexual, religious, and political content. Religious groups may publish newsletters without government censorship but may only distribute them internally within their respective communities. 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 Muslim. 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 their faith services. All children may attend secular and coeducational private schools. These schools must offer optional Islamic instruction; non-Islamic 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 Muslims, a judicial panel 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. The type of crime determines, however, whether those convicted receive a sharia-based sentence. There are certain criminal charges, such as alcohol consumption and extramarital sex, in which Muslims are punished according to sharia principles, including court-ordered flogging. Sharia-based punishments may also apply to non-Muslims in these cases. The government often commutes harsher punishments mandated by sharia. 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 law approves implementing the Shiite interpretation of sharia upon the agreement and request of the parties involved in the dispute.

The Regulatory Authority for Charitable Activities must approve all religious charitable activities by local charities, including religious ones, in advance. The MFA's Department of International Cooperation is in charge of supervising donations to, and charitable activities of, foreign religious groups. Because of changes begun in July, the only charities now authorized to disburse funding abroad are Qatar Charity and Qatar Red Crescent.

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

Government Practices

The government continued to state it would consider requests from nonregistered religious groups to acquire a place of worship if they applied to register but said none had done so. Unregistered groups continued to worship in private.

The government continued to permit adherents of unregistered religious groups, 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 MFA continued to state 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. Members of at least

one group reportedly filed for land in previous years to build their own complex but received no response from the government.

The MEIA reported it continued to hire clerics and assign them to specific mosques. The ministry continued to provide on an ad hoc basis thematic guidance for Friday sermons, especially on certain domestic or international occasions such as Sports Day or during certain international awareness-raising events such as antidrug campaigns. The ministry 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.

The MEIA 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. All restaurants not located in hotels are required to close in daylight hours during Ramadan.

The government discouraged Qatari citizens and residents from taking part in the Umra or annual Hajj due to the severing of relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Officials at the MEIA stated the decision was made due to concerns for pilgrims' security given the lack of diplomatic representation or coordination with Saudi religious and security authorities.

Although the law prohibits Christian groups from advertising religious services, Christian churches continued to post hours of services and other information on publicly accessible websites; however, they were not permitted to publish such information in local newspapers or on public bulletin boards.

The government maintained its policy of reviewing, censoring, or banning newspapers, magazines, books, and social media for "objectionable" religious content, such as an attack on Islamic values or depictions of the Prophet Muhammad. More commonly, journalists and publishers reportedly practiced self-censorship regarding material the government might consider contrary to Islam.

The government continued to permit non-Muslim religious groups and individuals to import religious publications, 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, also 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 the Mesaymeer Religious Complex housed a number of other smaller denominations and offered space to 76 congregations of different denominations and languages.

The Church Steering 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.

Christian leaders reported a continued lack of communication with the government throughout the year. New leadership within the MFA, however, worked to re-engage and reported direct contact and dialogue with the Church Steering Committee concerning the desire of the Christian community to develop a positive relationship with the MFA and develop channels of communication for addressing concerns such as the impact of security restrictions. The head of the MFA Human Rights Department expressed willingness to visit the church complex for a tour in early 2018. The government continued to enforce strict security measures at the Mesaymeer Religious Complex, 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 intended to ensure hygienic conditions. In practice, individuals were able to conduct ritual slaughter in private.

Church leaders and religious groups continued to state that 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.

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 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 June the government-funded Al-Jazeera English tweeted a post featuring an anti-Semitic cartoon claiming a Jewish plot to deny climate change. It showed a character representing a Jew saying: “He, he, he, my global warming, uh, I mean, climate change scam is working out perfectly for our long-term Talmudic plan of world domination!” The tweet was later deleted. In June the privately owned *Al-Raya* newspaper published a cartoon showing a witch with a Star of David wand causing two Arab men to fight one another in a crystal ball. In July *Al-Raya* also printed a cartoon depicting an octopus with the Star of David on its forehead trying to devour the Aqsa Mosque. In November local newspaper *Al Arab* published a cartoon depicting a dark scorpion with a Star of David and the words “Balfour Declaration” in Arabic threatening the people of Palestine. In December, after the announcement by President Trump that the United States would relocate its embassy, *Al-Watan* newspaper published a cartoon caricature of an orthodox Jew standing in front of the Arabic word for “Jerusalem.” In December cartoons published in a local media outlet used anti-Semitic imagery in its criticism of a Bahraini nongovernmental delegation to Israel as an act of betrayal of Arab nationalism.

The government-funded DICID, which operated independently, hosted discussions on the freedom to worship within one’s home and how seminars and roundtable discussions on religious tolerance could be used to resolve intercommunal strife. The center also hosted discussions on difficulties faced by non-Muslim groups. Publications released by 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. During National Day celebrations held at Katara Cultural Village, DICID arranged a prominent display declaring “Qatar Always Tolerates All Religions,” visible to pedestrians walking through the festival.

In October the Doha-based Arab Center for Research and Political Studies held a two-day conference on “Christian Arabs in the Greater Mashreq: Determinants of Continuity, Emigration, and Forced Emigration.” Although it did not touch upon the conditions of Christians in Qatar or the Gulf Cooperation Council and focused only on Christians in the Levant, Egypt, and Iraq, conference participants, mostly from overseas, spoke openly about the challenges facing Christians in the Middle East and highlighted forms of persecution that force Christians to leave the region.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Charge d’Affaires and embassy officers continued to meet with relevant government bodies, including the Department of Consular Affairs at the MFA, the Ministry of Interior Department of Human Rights, and the MEIA, as well as quasi-governmental religious institutions, concerning the rights of religious minorities, Sunni-Shia relations in the country, interest in international exchange programs for imams and Awqaf officials, and government efforts to prevent the spread of extremist ideologies within mosques. The embassy worked to broker re-engagement between the MFA and the leadership of the Church Steering Committee of the Mesaymeer Religious Complex after a prolonged lack of engagement. They also met with representatives of Christian groups in the country. The embassy worked with DICID in planning a February 2018 interfaith conference that would involve participants from each of the Abrahamic religions. The head of DICID worked with the embassy to engage newspaper cartoonists and editors on the need to promote religious tolerance and discuss which kinds of images and statements could be viewed as anti-Semitic content.