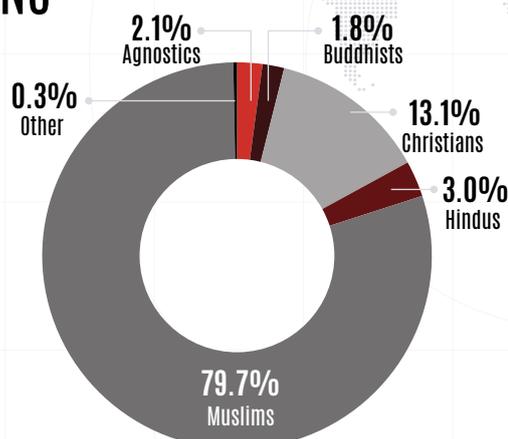




QATAR

RELIGIONS

LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION
AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

Qatar is a hereditary monarchy (emirate) ruled by the Al Thani dynasty. Rich in natural gas and oil, it is one of the wealthiest countries in the world per capita. All Qatari citizens are Muslims, but represent only around 10 percent of the resident population; the rest are mostly expats and guest workers. The Wahhabi form of Sunni Islam dominates, but there is a Shi'a minority.

Most foreign residents are Muslim (Sunni or Shi'a) but there is a sizeable number of Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists. The local Catholic Church estimates the number of Catholics to be as high as 300,000. Other Christian groups such as Anglicans and Orthodox number less than five percent of non-citizens.¹

The eight registered Christian denominations² are permitted to hold group worship at a government-provided location on the outskirts of Doha, on land donated by the emir. Before this area was set aside, Catholics used to pray and worship in makeshift 'chapels', in private homes and, in one case, at a school.

In 1995, freedom of worship was granted, but only to the People of the Book, i.e. the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Other faiths cannot register nor establish places of worship.

Pursuant to Article 1 of its constitution,³ "Qatar is an Arab State, sovereign and independent. Its religion is Islam, and the Islamic Law is the main source of its legislations." Article 35 states that "people are equal before the law. There shall be no discrimination against them because of sex, race, language, or religion." Article 50 stipulates that "freedom to worship is guaranteed to all, according to the law and the requirements to protect the public order and public morals"; however, Qataris cannot convert to another religion. People who leave Islam do so at great risk and have to conceal their new religious beliefs. According to the Christian advocacy organisation, Open Doors, "[Apostates] risk being ostracised by their families and communities, physical violence or even honour killing if their faith is discovered."⁴ Qatari Muslims who convert to Christianity do so mainly abroad and never return for fear of their safety.

The "Law No. 11 of 2004 Issuing the Penal Code" (full name of the law),⁵ incorporates traditional punishments prescribed by Islamic law, which penalises various offenc-

es, including apostasy.⁶ It stipulates: “The provisions of the Islamic Shari’a shall be applicable on the following offences when the defendant or the plaintiff is a Muslim”:

- The Dogma/Qur’anic offences (hudûd offences) related to theft, banditry, adultery, defamation, drinking alcohol and apostasy.

- Offences of retribution (qisas) and blood money (diya).

While apostasy is one of the offenses subject to the death penalty, Qatar has not imposed any penalty for this offense since its independence in 1971.⁷

Article 257 of the Penal Code criminalises proselytising. Anyone who “establishes, organizes or runs an assembly, association, organization or a branch aimed at opposing or challenging the basics and tenets of Islam, or calls upon, or favors or promotes another religion; cult or concept shall be punished with imprisonment for a term not exceeding ten years.”⁸

Article 58 of Qatar’s Family Law⁹ states that a wife “must take care and obey” her husband, while he has “to look after her and his property”. Under Article 69 a “disobedient” wife risks losing her financial maintenance. She is deemed “disobedient” if “she refuses to surrender herself to her husband or to move to the marital home without legitimate reason.” The same is the case if she travels or works “without his permission [. . .] unless he is abusing his right in preventing her from working.”¹⁰

Article 256 of the Penal Code criminalises blasphemy, including insulting “Allah”.¹¹ Although officially the defamation or desecration of any of the three Abrahamic faiths is punishable by up to seven years in prison, it has not been enforced.¹²

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

According to the US Office of International Religious Freedom, an Arabic-speaking evangelical Christian pastor was deported in June 2018. He was accused of leading an unauthorised place of worship and of proselytising.¹³

Anti-Semitism in Qatar remains a major issue, in religious circles, media and school textbooks.¹⁴ School books purportedly teach that non-Muslim “infidels” such as Jews are “combatants” whom God has mandated Muslims to fight, except in the extenuating circumstances that they have diplomatic immunity, pay a special tax associated with second-class citizen status, or have a formal pact to leave

off fighting with Muslims.”¹⁵ Anti-Semitic material has been promoted at the Doha International Book Fair; no less than half a dozen titles were listed at the December 2018 event.¹⁶ According to the Anti-Defamation League, the US Embassy took immediate action contacting the Qatari government, which decided to remove some of the books.¹⁷

In May 2019, a video was posted by Al Jazeera Arabic claiming that Israel was the biggest “winner” from the Holocaust, and that Zionism “suckled from the Nazi spirit” and that “some people believe that Hitler supported Zionism.” After over one million views, and following protests, the video was removed.¹⁸

In the same month, Al Jazeera English also released a video on the Holocaust, however, with an entirely different approach. On Holocaust Remembrance Day, the broadcaster posted an interview with a 94-year-old Holocaust survivor who talked about the Auschwitz concentration camp.¹⁹ The program also stressed the fact of a 13 percent rise in anti-Semitic attacks worldwide. The discrepancies between the English and Arabic versions caused a backlash. Following protests, the video posted by Al Jazeera Arabic was removed.

During a debate on Al-Araby TV in June 2019, Ahmad Zayed, professor of Shari’a law at Qatar University, was asked whether Shari’a allows Christians to run for office and rule over Muslims. He replied that according to Shari’a, Christians can run for public office, but Muslims should not vote for them “since Shari’a says the ruler must be a Muslim.”²⁰

In July 2019, Qatar, along with other Muslim countries, signed a letter supporting China’s human rights record, particularly with regard to Uyghur Muslims. But a month later, it decided to withdraw its support and remain neutral in this matter.²¹

In August 2019, a campaign was organised in favour of Ablikim Yusuf, a Uyghur activist. He had been deported from Bosnia and Herzegovina where he was planning to ask for asylum in Germany, and was held at Doha Airport under threat of repatriation to China.²² After international pressure, Yusuf found refuge in the United States.²³

Following the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020, Qatari authorities closed all places of worship.²⁴ The Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs eventually authorised the reopening of mosques starting on the 15th of June. Some restrictions remained in place with regular services to resume in September 2020.²⁵

PROSPECTS FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGION

Qatar remains a highly conservative Muslim country with restrictions and constraints on religious freedom at both the state and societal levels. Foreign members of registered non-Muslim religious groups, however, are able to worship without interference. Worship by members of non-registered groups is tolerated.

Thanks to its wealth, the emirate is able to exert growing international influence via sports sponsorships. It is also using “soft power” in religious matters in third-world countries, something that has raised concerns in some quarters. Together with Turkey, Qatar has been accused of financing the Muslim Brotherhood and even terrorist groups, a charge the government denies.²⁶

Despite some recent moves towards rapprochement, the political and diplomatic crisis that broke out in June 2017 with a coalition of Arab countries (led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and including Bahrain and Egypt) was still keeping Qatar isolated at the time of writing. Qatar tolerates non-Muslims and non-Muslim worship, but this still falls short of full freedom of religion. Prospects for improvement in this area remain dim.

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