

# QATAR

## Executive Summary

The constitution stipulates that the state religion is Islam and national law incorporates both secular legal traditions and Sharia (Islamic law). Sunni and Shia Muslims practiced freely. Practitioners of other religions generally worshipped in specially designated or private locations. The law prohibits proselytizing by non-Muslims and restricts public worship, monitors peaceful religious expression via the Internet, and requires formal registration of religious groups that some found cumbersome. The law does not recognize Hinduism, Buddhism, or the Baha'i Faith. The government did not demonstrate a trend towards either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom. In practice, the government generally enforced legal and policy protections of religious freedom. Adherents of most major religions worshipped with limited government interference, although there were restrictions.

There were few reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom. However, there were some incidents of anti-Semitism in the media.

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. embassy officials continued to meet with representatives of religious communities and foreign embassies to discuss religious freedom issues, including protection of the interests of minority congregations. The embassy brought these concerns to the attention of appropriate officials.

## Section I. Religious Demography

Of the citizen population, which comprises approximately 13 percent of the resident population, Sunni Muslims constitute the great majority while estimates for Shia Muslims vary between 5 to 15 percent.

Most noncitizens are Sunni or Shia Muslims, Hindus, Christians, or Buddhists. While the government does not release figures regarding religious affiliation, some membership estimates for noncitizens are available from Christian community groups and local embassies. The Hindu community, almost exclusively from India and Nepal, comprises more than 30 percent of non-citizens. Roman Catholics are

unofficially estimated at 20 percent of the noncitizen population, while Buddhists, largely from South, Southeast, and East Asia, are estimated at approximately 7 percent of noncitizens. Groups constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Anglicans, Egyptian Copts, Greek and other Eastern Orthodox, and Baha'is of Iranian origin.

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

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws provide for freedom of association, public assembly, and worship, within limits based on public order and morality concerns. The law prohibits proselytizing by non-Muslims and places restrictions on public worship. The state religion is Islam, and Sharia is a main source of legislation.

Converting to another religion from Islam is considered apostasy and technically a capital offense; however, since the country gained independence in 1971, there has been no recorded punishment for apostasy.

The government and ruling family are strongly linked to Islam. All members of the ruling family and virtually all citizens are Muslim. Most high-level government positions are reserved for citizens, and thus most government officials are Muslims. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs controlled the construction of mosques, clerical affairs, and Islamic education for adults and new converts. The emir participated in public prayers during both Eid holiday periods and personally financed the Hajj (religious pilgrimage) for some citizen and noncitizen pilgrims who could not otherwise afford to travel to Mecca.

According to the criminal code, individuals caught proselytizing on behalf of an organization, society, or foundation of any religion other than Islam may be sentenced to a prison term of up to 10 years. Proselytizing on one's own accord for any religion other than Islam can result in a sentence of up to five years. Individuals who possess written or recorded materials or items that support or promote missionary activity can be imprisoned for up to two years and fined 10,000 Qatari riyals (\$2,746). However, the government has not convicted anyone for proselytizing since the law's 1973 inception. In practice, individuals or groups caught proselytizing are deported without legal proceedings.

Both Muslims and non-Muslims are tried under a unified civil court system. National law incorporates both secular legal traditions and Sharia, with the

exception of a separate limited dispute resolution system for financial service companies managed under the Qatar Financial Center. The unified court system applies Islamic law in family law cases--inheritance, marriage, divorce, and child custody--and non-Muslims are subject to Sharia in cases of child custody. In these proceedings, the testimony of men can be weighted more than women's testimony on certain matters. There were also certain criminal cases, such as drunkenness, in which Muslims were tried and punished under Islamic law. In matters involving religious issues, judges have some discretion to apply their respective interpretations for Shia and Sunni groups.

Convicted Muslims may earn a sentence reduction of a few months by memorizing the Qur'an while imprisoned. In 2005 a judicial panel for Shia Muslims was established in the courts. The panel decides cases regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other domestic matters. In other religious matters, the country's family law applies across branches of Islam.

The government regulates the publication, importation, and distribution of all religious books and materials. However, in practice, individuals and religious institutions were not prevented from importing holy books and other religious items for personal or congregational use.

Religious groups must register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) for legal recognition. The government maintains an official register of approved major Christian denominations and has granted legal status to the Catholic, Anglican, Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Coptic, and Indian Christian churches. To be recognized, any denomination must have at least 1,500 members in the country. The MFA requires smaller congregations to affiliate and worship under the patronage of one of the six recognized churches, all of which are centrally located in Mesaymir on the outskirts of Doha. While several evangelical Christian congregations are not legally recognized because they individually lacked the required membership, some organized worship services and are provided physical security for their congregations by the Ministry of Interior when required. Other religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Baha'i Faith, are not legally recognized, although adherents are permitted to worship privately in their homes and with others.

Islamic instruction is compulsory for Muslims attending state-sponsored schools. While there are no restrictions on non-Muslims providing private religious instruction for children, most foreign children attend secular private schools. Muslim children are allowed to attend secular and coeducational private schools.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

The government generally enforced legal and policy protections of religious freedom. Adherents of most major religions in the country worshipped with limited government interference, although there were restrictions.

The registration process for new religious groups continued to be cumbersome, inconsistent, and confusing, especially for small religious groups. Religious leaders complained that it was difficult to get an appointment with the appropriate office in the MFA, and that the inability to register also made it difficult to conduct financial activity in the name of their churches. The MFA led a new, permanent intergovernmental committee charged with addressing the concerns of non-Muslim religious groups, including legal incorporation and sponsorship of religious leaders. Clergy members report improved relations with the government during the last year.

The government permitted the six registered Christian denominations to worship at a government-provided area known as “Church City” in Mesaymir. The government required unregistered churches to worship under the patronage of one of the six legally recognized Christian denominations, and to function as a subgroup of that religion. For example, Protestant congregations would be required to register as a denomination of the Anglican Church. Government regulations for denomination and congregation registration are established in the MFA and have not been fully codified in legislation. There are some restrictions on the number and type of bank accounts churches can hold, and there are reporting requirements for contractors who do business with the churches, as well as for donors who support them. Reflecting the government’s approach to the registration of foreign businesses, MFA officials stated that smaller congregations not meeting the threshold of 1,500 registered congregants would require an endorsement from the Council of Churches consisting of the representatives of the six registered denominations in Mesaymir before being officially registered.

Hindus, Buddhists, Baha’is, and other religious groups do not have authorized facilities in which to practice their religions. The government generally considered

members of these religious groups as transient members of the community not requiring permanent religious facilities or clergy; however, worship by these groups in private homes and workplaces was allowed.

The government placed limits on the length of Friday sermons at mosques. The government also previewed the sermons for inflammatory religious or ethnic language that might incite listeners to violence. The government may take judicial action against individuals and facilities when these standards are not met, but has not done so recently, primarily because clerics have adhered to these standards.

The government reviewed and infrequently censored foreign newspapers and magazines for objectionable religious content.

The government restricted the peaceful expression of religious views via the Internet and at times censored the Internet for religious content through a proxy server that monitored and blocked Web sites, e-mail, and chat rooms through the state-owned Internet service provider. For example, the government blocked sites/postings that called for violence against other religious groups in the country or that supported violent religious extremists or Christian proselytizers.

The government prohibited Christian congregations from advertising religious services or using religious symbols visible to the public, such as outdoor crosses.

### **Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom**

In October the Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue organized the Annual Doha Conference on Interfaith Dialogue with the theme “Means of Social Communication and the Interfaith Dialogue: A Futuristic Outlook.” The three-day event attracted world religious personalities representing three major religions--Islam, Christianity, and Judaism--and focused on how social media can enhance relations among religions.

Christian church leaders reported that the government made significant efforts to facilitate the construction of new worship space and improve roads and other infrastructure at Church City, giving thousands more Christians the opportunity to practice their faith. The infrastructure improvements at Church City have also made it easier for disabled worshippers to participate.

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

There were few reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom. There were few manifestations of religious discrimination. While discrimination occurred against foreigners in employment, education, housing, and health services, nationality, rather than religion, was usually the determining factor. There were some examples of anti-Semitism in the media.

Privately owned newspapers occasionally carried editorials and cartoons that stereotyped Israeli leaders, sometimes comparing Israelis to Nazis, and occasionally stereotyped Jews. These occurred primarily in the Arabic daily newspapers *Al-Watan*, *Al-Sharq*, and *Al-Raya*. The government did not respond to these publications.

For the sixth consecutive year, Sheikh Yusef al-Qaradawi, Chairman of the International Association of Muslim Scholars and one of the most prominent Sunni clerics in the world, boycotted the Annual Doha Conference on Interfaith Dialogue saying he opposed discourse with Jews except anti-Zionist Jews. A statement from al-Qaradawi's office said he took part in the first three conferences when only Muslims and Christians were in attendance, but he refused to attend when Jews began participating, citing the Palestinian conflict.

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

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. embassy facilitated contacts between religious leaders and the government and coordinated initiatives with other foreign embassies to increase their effect.

U.S. embassy officials continued to meet with representatives of religious communities to discuss religious freedom issues, including protection of the interests of minority congregations. The embassy brought these concerns to the attention of appropriate officials.