

QATAR 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution stipulates that Islam is the state religion, and national law incorporates both secular legal traditions and Sharia (Islamic law). In practice, the government generally respected religious freedom, with some restrictions. Sunni and Shia Muslims practiced freely. Practitioners of other religions generally worshipped in specially designated or private locations. The government restricted public worship, prohibited non-Muslims from proselytizing, monitored religious expression in the media and on the Internet, and required formal registration of religious groups that some found cumbersome. The law recognizes only Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were no reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. However, there were some instances of anti-Semitism in the media.

U.S. embassy officials met with government officials and representatives of religious groups, foreign embassies, and locally-based quasi-governmental organizations to discuss religious freedom issues such as restrictions on number, type, and location of places of worship, and the potential for the 2011 religious establishments law to deny religious freedom. The ambassador hosted an interfaith iftar during Ramadan, which brought together religious leaders from the Christian community, academics from Qatar University's College of Sharia and Islamic Studies, and representatives from the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the Qatar Statistic Authority, the population is 1.8 million. Citizens make up approximately 14 percent of the population. Sunni Muslims constitute the majority of citizens; Shia Muslims number between 5 and 15 percent.

Most noncitizens are Sunni or Shia Muslims, Hindus, Christians, or Buddhists. While the government does not release figures regarding religious affiliation, some estimates for noncitizens are available from Christian groups and local embassies. The Hindu community, almost exclusively from India and Nepal, comprises more than 30 percent of noncitizens. Roman Catholics are approximately 20 percent of the noncitizen population, while Buddhists, largely from South, Southeast, and

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East Asia, are estimated at 7 percent of noncitizens. Groups constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Anglicans, Egyptian Copts, Bahais of Iranian or Lebanese origin, and members of the Greek and other Eastern Orthodox Churches.

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 non-Muslims from proselytizing and restricts public worship. Islam is the state religion, and Sharia is the main source of legislation. The law does not recognize religions outside the three Abrahamic faiths of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion. However, custom outweighs government enforcement of nondiscrimination laws, and legal, cultural, and institutional discrimination exists.

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

A 1973 law punishes proselytizing on behalf of an organization, society, or foundation of any religion other than Islam with 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. However, the government’s policy is to deport suspected proselytizers without formal legal proceedings.

The law calls for two years imprisonment and a fine of QR 10,000 (\$2,746) for possession of written or recorded materials or items that support or promote missionary activity. The law imposes a prison sentence of up to seven years for defaming, desecrating, or committing blasphemy against Islam, Christianity, or Judaism. The law stipulates a one-year prison term or a fine of QR 1,000 (\$275) for producing or circulating material containing slogans, images, or symbols defaming those three religions. The law also prohibits publication of texts provoking social discord or religious strife.

The Ministry of Social Affairs must approve all religious charitable activities in advance.

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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; therefore most government officials are Muslims. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs controls the construction of mosques, clerical affairs, and Islamic education for adults and new converts. The emir participates in public prayers during both Eid holiday periods and personally finances the Hajj (religious pilgrimage) for some citizen and noncitizen pilgrims who cannot otherwise afford to travel to Mecca.

A unified civil court system has jurisdiction over both Muslims and non-Muslims. 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 Sharia in family law cases, including inheritance, marriage, divorce, and child custody. Non-Muslims are subject to Sharia in cases of child custody. In these proceedings, the testimony of men can be given more credence than that of women. While a non-Muslim woman is not required by law to convert to Islam when marrying a Muslim, their children are required to be Muslim. There are also certain criminal cases, such as drunkenness, in which Muslims are tried and punished under Sharia. 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 Quran while imprisoned. A judicial panel for Shia Muslims decides cases regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other domestic matters. In other religious matters, the country's family law applies across all branches of Islam.

The government regulates the publication, importation, and distribution of all religious books and materials but permits individuals and religious institutions to import holy books and other religious items for personal or congregational use.

A 2011 law designated the minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs as the final authority for approving religious centers. Christian groups must register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) for legal recognition. The government maintains an official register of approved Christian denominations and grants legal status to the Catholic, Anglican, Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Coptic, and Indian Christian churches. To be recognized, a 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. The government permits adherents of unrecognized religions, such as Hinduism,

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Buddhism, and the Bahai Faith, and small Christian congregations, to worship privately in their homes and with others.

Islamic instruction is compulsory for Muslims attending state-sponsored schools. While non-Muslims may provide private religious instruction for their children, most foreign children attend secular private schools. Muslim children may attend secular and coeducational private schools.

The government observes two Islamic holidays as national holidays: Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.

Government Practices

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom, including reports of imprisonment and detention. Adherents of most major religions in the country worshipped with limited government interference, although there were some restrictions.

Amnesty International reported that in February the court sentenced a citizen to five years imprisonment for blasphemy.

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 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and that the inability to register also made it difficult for religious groups to conduct financial activity.

The government restricted the number and type of bank accounts churches could hold, and imposed reporting requirements on contractors doing business with the churches, as well as on donors supporting them, similar to its approach to the registration of foreign businesses.

Christian church leaders reported that the government continued to make significant efforts to facilitate the construction of new worship space and improve roads and other infrastructure in Mesaymir. The Mesaymir Religious Complex, widely known as “Church City,” provides worship space for thousands of Christians.

The government permitted the six registered Christian denominations to worship at Church City, but required unregistered churches to worship under the patronage of

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one of the six recognized denominations, and to function as a subgroup of that religion. For example, Protestant congregations were required to register as a denomination of the Anglican Church. The infrastructure improvements at Church City made it easier for disabled worshippers to participate.

The MFA led a permanent intergovernmental committee charged with addressing the concerns of non-Muslim religious groups, including legal incorporation and sponsorship of religious leaders. Clergy members reported they maintained good relations with the government during the last year.

Hindus, Buddhists, Bahais, and other unrecognized religious groups did not have authorized facilities in which to practice their religions. The government generally considered members of religious groups other than Islam, Christianity and Judaism as transient members of the community not requiring permanent religious facilities or clergy; however, the government permitted these groups to worship in private homes and workplaces.

The government limited the length of Friday sermons at mosques, and previewed sermons for language that might “incite listeners to violence.” The government reserved the right to take judicial action against individuals and facilities when these standards were not met, but there were no public examples of the government doing so, primarily because clerics adhered to the standards.

The government reviewed foreign newspapers, magazines, and books for objectionable religious content. Government censorship was infrequent, but journalists and publishers continued to self-censor when reporting on material that could be deemed hostile to Islam.

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, email, and chat rooms using the state-owned Internet service provider. For example, the government blocked sites and postings that contained content deemed anti-Islamic. It also blocked posts 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.

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The Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID) continued international and domestic engagement to promote interfaith dialogue. In March the DICID hosted a roundtable on the “Role of Media to Enhance Community Dialogue.” In August the center sponsored a group of eighty women traveling to the United States to broaden awareness of religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue. In September the DICID issued a statement about an amateur video denigrating the Prophet Muhammad, urging tolerance and respect in religious discourse.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. 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.

In response to political events in the region, some of the country’s privately owned Arabic-language newspapers occasionally carried cartoons depicting offensive caricatures of Jews and Jewish symbols. These occurred primarily in the daily newspapers al-Watan, al-Sharq, al-Arab, and al-Raya and drew no government response.

Anti-Semitism and Holocaust revisionism appeared in local press, including in one documented Friday sermon. On June 29, a televised Friday sermon stated that Jews were “always like parasites, living off others, rather than striving for self-improvement.” There was no indication that the government penalized the author of the sermon under the law, which calls for a one-year prison term or a QR 1,000 (\$275) fine for producing or circulating material containing slogans, images, or symbols that defame Islam, Christianity, or Judaism.

On February 13, the daily al-Sharq published an article by Dr. Khaled al-Hindawi in which he alleged that the Syrian murders in Homs surpassed the Nazi actions against the Jews in the Holocaust.

During a sermon in September, Sheikh Yusef al-Qaradawi, chairman of the International Association of Muslim Scholars and one of the most prominent Sunni clerics in the world, denounced violence in response to an amateur online clip depicting the Prophet Mohammed. He also, however, called on governments to criminalize blasphemy.

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Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officers met with government officials and representatives of religious groups, foreign embassies, and locally-based quasi-governmental organizations to discuss issues such as restrictions on number, type, and location of places of worship, and the potential for the 2011 religious establishments law to deny religious freedom. The embassy facilitated contacts between religious leaders and the government.

The embassy sponsored the visit of American Imam Jihad Turk to promote understanding about religious diversity in America and religious tolerance. During his visit, he led prayers at two prominent mosques, met with the chairman of the DICID, and participated in an interfaith iftar the ambassador hosted with Muslim and Christian religious leaders and Islamic scholars.