



Qatar

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution and various laws provide for freedom of association, public assembly, and worship so long as these freedoms are exercised in a manner consistent with requirements and standards of public order and morality. Government policies continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion. The law prohibits proselytizing by non-Muslims and places some restrictions on public worship. The state religion is Islam.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report. During the reporting period, notable progress was made including the public opening of a new Roman Catholic church facility.

There were no reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 4,254 square miles and a population of more than 1.5 million, of whom 225,000 are citizens. Of the citizen population, Sunni Muslims constitute the vast majority, while Shi'a Muslims account for less than 5 percent. There are a very small number of Baha'i and Christian citizens.

The preponderance of noncitizens are from South and Southeast Asia and Arab countries and are in the country on temporary employment contracts, in some cases accompanied by family members. Most noncitizens are Sunni or Shi'a Muslims, Christians, Hindus, or Buddhists. Most foreign workers and their families live near the major employment centers of Doha, Al Khor, Mesaieed, and Dukhan.

While the Government does not release figures regarding religious affiliation, some membership estimates for noncitizens, available from Christian community groups are as follows: Roman Catholics (80,000), Eastern and Greek Orthodox, and Anglicans (10,000), Copts (3,000). The Hindu community is almost exclusively from India, while Buddhists come from South, Southeast, and East Asia. There are 500 Baha'is of Iranian origin.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution and various laws provide for freedom of association, public assembly, and worship so long as these freedoms are exercised in a manner consistent with requirements and standards of public order and morality. The law prohibits proselytizing by non-Muslims and places some restrictions on public worship. The state religion is Islam.

The Government and ruling family are strongly linked to Islam. Non-Muslims, however, serve in government posts. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs controls the construction of mosques, clerical affairs, and Islamic

education for adults and new converts. The Amir participates in public prayers during both Eid holiday periods and personally finances the Hajj for citizen and noncitizen pilgrims who cannot otherwise afford to travel to Mecca.

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

The Government observes the Islamic holy days of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha as national holidays.

Both Muslims and non-Muslims are tried under the unified court system, incorporating both secular law and Shari'a (Islamic law). Convicted Muslims may earn a sentence reduction of a few months by memorizing the Qur'an. Litigants in civil cases may request the Shari'a courts to assume jurisdiction. In 2005 a panel for the Shi'a was established in the courts. The panel decides cases regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other domestic matters. In other religious matters, the new Family Law applies across branches of Islam.

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 5 years. Individuals who possess written or recorded materials or items that support or promote missionary activity can be imprisoned for up to 2 years.

Religious groups must register with the Government for legal recognition. The Government has granted legal status to Catholic, Anglican, Greek and other Eastern Orthodox, Coptic, and Indian Christian churches. It maintains an official register of approved religious groups. To be recognized, each group must have at least 1,500 members in the country. While evangelical congregations are not legally recognized because they individually lack the required membership, they organize worship and are provided physical security for their congregations by the Ministry of Interior when required.

The Government was designing a permanent intergovernmental committee to address issues concerning non-Muslim religious groups, including legal incorporation and sponsorship of religious leaders.

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

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.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion, although there were some restrictions.

The Government prohibited Christian congregations from advertising religious services or using religious symbols visible to the public, such as outdoor crosses; the Government has claimed, however, this was done to protect the congregations from attack by Muslim extremists. Nonetheless, the March 2008 public opening of the new Roman Catholic church was attended by the Deputy Prime Minister.

Hindus, Buddhists, Baha'is, and members of other eastern religious groups do not have authorized facilities in which to practice their religions. The Government generally considers 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 is tolerated.

While discrimination against expatriates in the areas of employment, education, housing, and health services occurred, nationality was usually the determinant rather than religion.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The new Roman Catholic church opened March 14, 2008, was the first church to be completed in Doha. The opening was attended by government officials, including the country's Deputy Prime Minister.

Construction also continued on six other churches near Doha, fulfilling an agreement signed by the Government and Christian representatives in May 2005. Three other churches (two orthodox and one Indian Christian) are expected to be completed in 2008.

The Sixth Conference of Inter-Faith Dialogue took place in Doha May 13-14, 2008. Christian, Muslim, and Jewish representatives were invited. Invitations were extended to Muslim representatives, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Coptic, and Orthodox Churches, the Middle East Churches Council, the Vatican, and rabbis, among others. Rabbis from the United States and other countries participated. At the conclusion of the conference, the Government officially opened the "Doha International Center for Inter-Faith Dialogue" (DICID). The Government claims that although it finances the DICID, the center will function as an independent entity. The stated goal of the DICID is to promote interfaith dialogue and find common ground for understanding among Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, by following up on conference resolutions, papers, studies, and engaging local and international research centers and universities.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom. Discrimination was largely absent; however, there were a few reports of anti-Semitism in the media.

On occasion, in response to political events and developments in the region, some privately owned newspapers carried editorials and cartoons depicting caricatures of Jews and Jewish symbols that compared Israeli leaders and Israel to Hitler and the Nazis. These occurred primarily in the Arabic daily newspapers, *Al-Watan*, *Al-Sharq*, and *Al-Raya*, and drew no government response.

In an October 2007 editorial in *Ash-Sharq*, titled "Israel Is Using the Media to Mislead and Delude the Western Nations," the newspaper referred to the anti-Semitic *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The Embassy facilitated contacts between religious leaders and the Government and coordinated initiatives with other foreign embassies to increase their impact.

U.S. embassy officials also met 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 the National Human Rights Committee and other appropriate officials in the Government.

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