

QATAR 2018 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. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) continued to allow more than 100 house churches to operate in the country. 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 again discouraged citizens and residents from taking part in the Hajj or Umrah. The government reviewed, censored, or banned print and social media religious material it considered objectionable. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) reported several instances in which the government promoted strident anti-Semitic preachers and stated the government-owned al-Jazeera media network continued “to be a major exporter of hateful content against the Jewish people.” On May 21, the government submitted documents to the United Nations, following cabinet approval on March 14, to accede to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The government formally stated in its accession documents that it would interpret the ICCPR’s Article 18, paragraph 2 (“No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice”) “based on the understanding that the article does not contravene” sharia, and that it reserved the right to implement the article in accordance with its understanding of sharia. The government also declared it would interpret several other provisions of the ICCPR in line with sharia, including Article 27 (regarding the rights of minorities “to profess and practice their own religion”), which could impinge upon freedom of religion. New leadership within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) worked to engage with Christian leaders and reported direct contact and dialogue with the Christian Church Steering Committee (CCSC) concerning the Christian community’s desire to develop a positive relationship with the MFA and develop channels of communication for addressing concerns such as the impact of security measures. The Ministry of Culture and Sports approved the staging of a two-day Christian musical concert in Doha that was attended by 18,000 persons. In April the Maronite Patriarch laid the cornerstone for the first Maronite church in the Gulf region on government-owned land at the Mesaymeer Religious Complex.

Media based in the country periodically published anti-Semitic material. Following the move of the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem in May, national newspapers published a number of anti-Semitic editorial cartoons. One appeared in *al-Watan* on May 15, showing a pig marked with the Star of David resting on a pillow with the pattern of the U.S. flag, with its stars replaced by Stars of David. In December the ADL criticized the Doha International Book Fair for including anti-Semitic books. Members of the CCSC stated pamphlets containing anti-Christian and anti-Semitic content that had previously been removed from some public places such as schools and hospitals had sporadically reappeared.

In November embassy officials met with the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (MEIA) to discuss means to spread tolerance and raise awareness of the rights of religious minorities. After outreach from the U.S. embassy to the Ministry of Culture, which organized the book fair, the government reported removing the offensive content and pledging to take a more proactive approach to prohibiting anti-Semitic content in the next book fair. The Charge d'Affaires and embassy officers continued to meet with relevant government bodies, 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 MEIA officials, and government efforts to prevent the spread of extremist ideologies within mosques. In November the embassy participated in the eighth roundtable discussion by the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID), which was an opportunity for Christian church leaders to meet with Muslim scholars. In December the embassy hosted a Thanksgiving dinner with an interfaith theme. Participants represented a wide spectrum of faiths, including Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population as 2.4 million (July 2018 estimate). Citizens make up approximately 12 percent of the population, while noncitizens account for approximately 88 percent. Most citizens are Sunni Muslims, and almost all of the remaining citizens are Shia Muslims. 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. . 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 Protestant denominations, Egyptian Copts, Baha'is, 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 MFA. The only registered religious groups are Sunni and Shia Muslims and eight Christian denominations. Protestant denominations other than the registered eight denominations, including nondenominational house churches, may be registered with the government with the support of the CCSC – an umbrella organization consisting of representatives of the eight already registered denominations. The eight registered Christian denominations are the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Coptic, Maronite, evangelical Protestant, and the Inter-Denominational Christian Churches. In practice, nearly all of the remaining denominations are registered under the aegis of the Anglican Church.

Non-Christian groups must apply for registration through the MFA. 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 problems with authorities), import religious texts, and publish religious newsletters or flyers 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.

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 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 reviews, censors, or bans 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 only religions registered to have their own places of worship are Islam and Christianity. All mosques and Islamic institutions in the country must be registered with the MEIA. The law designates the MEIA minister as the final authority for approving Islamic religious centers. The MFA approves non-Islamic houses of worship 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 whether those convicted receive a sharia-based sentence. There are certain criminal charges, such as alcohol consumption and extramarital sex, for 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 Shia interpretation of sharia upon the agreement and request of the parties involved in the dispute.

The government submitted documents to the United Nations on May 21, following cabinet approval on March 14, to accede to the ICCPR, with a formal statement in its treaty accession document that the government shall interpret Article 18, paragraph 2, of the ICCPR (“No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice”) “based on the understanding that it does not contravene the Islamic Sharia” and that the government would reserve the right to implement paragraph 2 in accordance with its understanding of sharia. The government also formally stated in its accession document that it would interpret several other provisions of the ICCPR in line with

sharia, including Article 27 (regarding the rights of minorities “to profess and practice their own religion”). The government made a formal reservation against being bound by gender equality provisions in Article 3 and Article 23.4 regarding family law and inheritance.

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, as in previous years, said none had done so. The government continued to permit adherents of unregistered religious groups, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Baha’i Faith, and unregistered small Christian congregations, to worship privately in rented villas, their homes, workplaces, and with others, although they lacked authorized facilities in which to practice their faiths.

The Office of the Secretary General of the MFA was responsible for handling church affairs, replacing the Department of Consular Affairs within the MFA. It worked in coordination with the director of the Human Rights Department within the MFA. This new leadership worked to engage with Christian leaders and reported direct contact and dialogue with the CCSC to develop channels of communication for addressing concerns such as the impact of security restrictions. In August the assistant office director for services affairs of the Office of the Secretary General met with church leaders at the Mesaymeer Religious Complex also known as “Church City” and located on government-owned land, to discuss challenges faced by the Christian community. In October the head of the MFA’s Human Rights Department led a delegation of the National Committee for Human Rights in an official visit to the complex. Church leaders stated both visits were positive, being the first of their kind by high-ranking officials.

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, focusing mainly on Islamic rituals and social values, with clear restrictions from using the pulpits to express political views or attack other faiths. 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 remind the public during Ramadan of its view of the correct way for Muslims to perform their religious duties. The penal code stipulates that individuals seen eating or drinking during daylight hours are subject

to a fine of 3,000 riyals (\$820), three months' imprisonment, or both. There were no reports of arrests or fines during the year for violation of this stipulation of the code. All restaurants not located in hotels were required to close in daylight hours during Ramadan.

The government discouraged citizens and residents from taking part in the Umrah or Hajj due to the ongoing dispute with Saudi Arabia that started in mid-2017. Officials at the MEIA stated the decision was made because of concerns for pilgrims' security, due to the lack of diplomatic representation or coordination with Saudi religious and security authorities.

In its report on the government's accession to the ICCPR, Human Rights Watch stated that the government rejected the ICCPR's gender equality provisions in marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance on grounds that they contravened sharia. The government also declared it would interpret several provisions of the ICCPR in line with sharia, including those defining cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishment; bans on capital and corporal punishment; minimum marriage ages; and freedom of religion.

Although the law prohibited 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.

In April the ADL reported that in the past year the "government has actually continued to use its prominent platforms to promote strident anti-Semitic preachers..." The ADL cited imams, including Abdullah al-Naama and Mohammed Hassan al-Muraikhi, who had delivered anti-Semitic sermons at the state-controlled Grand Mosque in Doha. The minister of the MEIA stated that the ministry did not condone anti-Semitic language and would investigate the matter. Earlier in the year, the Education City Mosque in Doha, which serves learning institutions on the Education City campus, including branches of several U.S. universities, hosted four Friday sermons by Shaqer al-Shahwani, whose sermons were promoted at government-controlled mosques. Al-Shahwani had previously

stated on Twitter that “the Jews” are “behind every immorality and vice” in the world. In July the ADL reprinted an article that a member of its staff had written for the online blog, *The Long War Journal*, stating that al-Naama and al-Muraikhi continued to deliver regular Friday sermons at the Grand Mosque that demonized the Jewish people and told fellow Muslims that Jews and Christians were their natural enemies, according to sermon transcripts on the Grand Mosque’s website. The report said state television awarded each imam with a series of Ramadan specials during the year.

According to the ADL, the government also demonstrated support during Ramadan for at least five other preachers with hateful messages through the MEIA, using its Twitter account to promote their lectures during the month at prominent locations, including the Grand Mosque, the mosque in Katara cultural village, and the Education City Mosque. These preachers included Thabit al-Qahtani, who through his Twitter account called upon God to “destroy the Jews”; Mowafi Azab, who declared (on a government website for fatwas called IslamWeb) that “the Jews” used pornographic movies to “destroy the world and control it”; and Ahmed al-Farjabi, who issued rulings on that same website calling the Jewish people “our enemy.”

According to an August 10 article in *The Hill* newspaper, written by the CEO of the ADL and reprinted on the organization’s website, the government-owned al-Jazeera media network continued “to be a major exporter of hateful content against the Jewish people...” The report cited a May 23 news story carried by the network that cast doubt on the Nazi genocide of Jews, referring to “the alleged Holocaust.” In July al-Jazeera broadcast a speech by a Hamas official calling for “the cleansing of Palestine of the filth of the Jews” and called for the establishment of a caliphate “after the [Muslim] nation has been healed of its cancer, the Jews.” A blog post published on the network’s website accused the Jewish people of “killing the Prophets” and asserted that the historical existence of a Jewish temple in Jerusalem was a fabrication. A separate article on its Arabic news webpage decried the “control of the Jews over the pornography industry.”

The Mesaymeer Religious Complex continued to provide worship space for the eight registered Christian denominations, with clear government instructions that Christian symbols such as crosses, steeples, and statues, were not permitted on the exterior of church buildings. 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 88

congregations of different denominations and languages. In addition to the primary buildings, the churches were allowed to erect additional tent structures during Easter and Christmas outside of the primary complex to house surge volumes of congregants.

In April the Maronite Patriarch laid the foundation stone at the Mesaymeer Religious Complex for the Saint Charbel Maronite Church, which would be the first Maronite church in the Gulf region. During the year, the Maronites continued to worship at the Roman Catholic Church building but intended to move to the new church once completed. Land was designated and fund raising began for a new Ethiopian church.

The CCSC reported that Christian clergy were allowed to visit members of their congregations when they were hospitalized and have monthly trips to both male and female prisons to meet with incarcerated Christians.

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 donors and on contractors doing business with churches. Some smaller unregistered churches continued to use the personal accounts of religious leaders for church activities.

Leaders of the Evangelical Church Alliance in Qatar (ECAQ) stated that the government, represented by the MOI, retained the possession of a plot of land after it had been allocated to the alliance, saying the plot of land would be used as a police station. The government promised to provide ECAQ leaders with an

alternative plot of land, but as of the end of the year, had not done so. The ECAQ leaders stated the government's decision caused the alliance to sustain financial damage because it had already laid a foundation for the building and paid contractors for the work.

The MOI allowed more than 100 house churches to operate throughout the country, including 90 that were allocated to members of the ECAQ.

In December the ADL criticized the government-sponsored Doha International Book Fair for including anti-Semitic books. The book titles included *Lies Spread by the Jews*; *Talmud of Secrets: Facts Exposing the Jewish Schemes to Control the World*; *The History of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the History of the Corruption of the Jews, and the Demise of their Entity*; *Awakening to Jewish Influence in the United States of America* by David Duke; *The Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Purported Temple*; and *The Myth of the Nazi Gas Chambers*.

On November 29, the government-funded al-Jazeera News Channel broadcast a conference held in Gaza marking the UN-declared International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, during which a Palestinian youth recited a poem entitled "Rifle" that included references to Jewish people as "apes" and "pigs."

The Ministry of Culture and Sports approved the staging of a major two-day Christian musical conference in Doha in November that was attended by 18,000 persons.

The government-funded DICID, which operated independently, hosted discussions on the freedom to worship within one's home, and on 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. In November the DICIC held its eighth interfaith roundtable, inviting Christian church leaders and Muslim scholars to the event.

In December the Lebanese Maronite Patriarch consecrated a church in Lebanon that was funded by a donation from the emir. The country's ambassador to Lebanon, attending the ceremony, stated the emir was a "fervent supporter" of Islamic-Christian dialogue.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Private media in the country published anti-Semitic material. In March a cartoon in *al-Arab* depicted Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Jewish leaders with stereotypical “Jewish features” meeting in New York and discussing the Palestinian issue. Following the move of the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem in May, newspapers published anti-Semitic editorial cartoons. One appeared in *al-Watan* on May 15, showing a pig marked with the Star of David resting on a pillow with the pattern of the U.S. flag, with its stars replaced by Stars of David.

Members of the Church Steering Committee stated that select pamphlets containing anti-Christian and anti-Semitic content, which had previously been removed from some public places such as schools and hospitals, had sporadically reappeared. The members reported the government was generally receptive to removing the content when it was identified.

In October the Doha branch of Georgetown University faced backlash from Qatari social media users, including threats of violence against campus staff, following publicity surrounding an advertisement for a discussion titled “This House Believes That Major Religions Should Portray God as a Woman.” The event was eventually cancelled by campus management, who stated that the organizers had failed to follow standard operating procedures to obtain permission to hold the event.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Charge d’Affaires and embassy officers continued to meet with relevant government bodies, including the Office of the Secretary General and Human Rights Department at the MFA, the MOI Department of Human Rights, and the MEIA, as well as quasi-governmental religious institutions such as the DICID, concerning the rights of religious minorities, Sunni-Shia relations in the country, interest in international exchange programs for imams and MEIA officials, and government efforts to prevent the spread of extremist ideologies within mosques. In November the embassy participated in DICID’s eighth roundtable discussion, attended by Christian church leaders and Muslim scholars. The embassy facilitated two sets of meetings between MFA officials and Christian church leaders at the Mesaymeer Religious Complex.

The embassy worked with the Ministry of Culture and Sports and other stakeholders to secure the required approvals for the November Christian musical concert featuring American performers in Doha.

Embassy officials facilitated an agreement between the Ministry of Administrative Development, Labor, and Social Affairs and the CCSC to raise awareness among churchgoers about recent changes to the labor law, which affected the expatriate population, and the means to submit complaints to authorities concerned. The ministry agreed in principle to use churches as dissemination platforms to highlight reforms and help educate congregations about future labor law developments. The ministry subsequently held multiple meetings with clergy to discuss how to proceed with a similar outreach event in 2019.

The embassy held a Thanksgiving dinner attended by representatives from a wide spectrum of faiths in Doha, including Sunni and Shia Muslims, Christians, Jews, Sikhs, and Hindus.

In December the embassy responded to complaints from the ADL that anti-Semitic literature was displayed at the Doha International Book Fair. Embassy officials raised these concerns with high-level officials at the Ministry of Culture and Sports. The ministry responded by removing the offensive content and pledging to take a more proactive approach to prohibiting anti-Semitic content in the next book fair on the grounds that the books violate their exhibitor rules of conduct and the country's laws.