

# QATAR 2019 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.” The law punishes “offending” Islam or any of its rites or beliefs or committing blasphemy against Islam, Christianity, or Judaism. Sunni and Shia Muslims and eight Christian denominations constitute the registered religious groups in the country. Unregistered religious groups are illegal but generally may practice their faith privately. The government continued to censor or ban print and social media religious material it considered objectionable. In June the government deported an Arabic-speaking evangelical Christian pastor after interrogating him for three days on charges of leading a place of worship without authorization and inviting non-Christians to his church. 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. On May 18 AJ+ Arabic, an online media platform run by the government-owned Al-Jazeera network, posted a video on Facebook and Twitter that stated that Israel is the biggest “winner” from the Holocaust and that Zionism “suckled from the Nazi spirit” and that “some people believe that Hitler supported Zionism.” The network apologized for the video, removed it from its site, and took disciplinary action against the reporter responsible. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) identified numerous anti-Semitic references in Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOE) textbooks.

Privately owned media as well as social media included anti-Semitic material in their content. On May 22, Ahmed Al-Raissouni, head of the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS), posted an article entitled “Why It Is Necessary to Question the Holocaust” on the IUMS website and his personal website and Facebook page. According to his posting, the Holocaust narrative “fabricated by the Zionist movement” contains “politically slanted and questionable” material. On June 12, on a program on *Al-Araby TV*, Ahmad Zayed, a professor of sharia at the state-run Qatar University, stated that although sharia allows Christians to run for public office, Muslims should not vote for them since sharia requires rulers to be Muslim.

In January a delegation led by the Secretary of State met with senior counterparts in Doha and signed a statement of intent to “support the shared ideals of tolerance

and appreciation for diversity.” In April the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities met in Doha with officials to urge the government to allow greater religious freedom for minorities, and with representatives of religious groups to discuss their concerns. Embassy representatives met with government officials to express concern over anti-Semitic cartoons. The Charge d’Affaires also met with leadership at Al-Jazeera regarding anti-Semitic political cartoons. The embassy continued to meet with relevant government bodies, as well as with quasi-governmental religious institutions concerning the rights of religious minorities, Sunni-Shia relations, and anti-Semitism. In July the embassy participated in a religious freedom conference between Christian leaders and Muslim leaders to discuss religious tolerance hosted by the Center for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID).

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population as 2.4 million (midyear 2019 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 expatriates 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, which are comprised exclusively of expatriates, 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. According to the constitution, the emir must be Muslim. The constitution provides for hereditary rule by men in the emir’s branch of the Al Thani family. The emir exercises full executive power. 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.

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 offending or misinterpreting the Quran, “offending” Islam or any of its rites or beliefs, insulting any of the prophets, or 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 of up to six months in prison.

To obtain an official presence in the country, expatriate non-Muslim religious groups must apply to register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (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 register with the government with the support of the Christian Church Steering Committee (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 other 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. 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 may result in a sentence of up to seven 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 (MSC) 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 Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (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.

The Office of the Secretary General of the MFA, working in coordination with the director of the MFA's Human Rights Department, is responsible for handling church affairs.

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, however. The law dictates that 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, 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 penal code stipulates that individuals seen eating or drinking during daylight hours during Ramadan are subject to a fine of 3,000 riyals (\$820), three months' imprisonment, or both.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The government submitted documents to the United Nations in 2018, and made 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**

In June the government repatriated an Arabic-speaking evangelical Christian pastor who led a house church after interrogating him for three days on charges of leading a place of worship without authorization and inviting non-Christians to his church. Authorities allowed the pastor to leave the country without trial. According to sources, some foreign members of the church stopped attending services for fear of being deported.

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 stated that it continued to permit expatriate adherents of unregistered religious groups such as Hinduism, Buddhism, the Baha'i Faith, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 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.

According to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detentions, whose representatives visited prisons throughout in the country, there are approximately 26 cases of expatriate women serving prison terms for adultery and five cases of individuals serving time for "sodomy," behaviors that are prohibited by sharia.

In September the Director of the National Human Rights Committee visited the CCSC for the first time to discuss religious tolerance, security, and space for the growing number of visitors. The CCSC regularly met with the MFA to discuss issues related to its congregants and to advocate for increased space due to the growing number of parishioners.

In its 2019 World Watch List report, the Christian NGO Open Doors USA stated, "There are two groups of Christians in Qatar that are strictly separated from each other. Expatriate communities consisting of Christian migrant workers are the biggest group. Proselytizing Muslims is strictly forbidden and can lead to prosecution and banishment [deportation] from the country... The other group consists of converts from Islam to Christianity. Converts from an indigenous and migrant background bear the brunt of persecution."

The MEIA 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 against using 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 suspended the Dean of the College of Sharia and Islamic Studies in Qatar from public speaking, citing an October sermon that was recorded and posted online before ministry approval.

The MEIA continued to remind the public during Ramadan of its view of the correct way for Muslims to perform their religious duties. There were no reports of arrests or fines during the year for violation of the penal code's ban on eating or drinking during daylight hours in Ramadan. All restaurants not located in hotels were required to close in daylight hours during Ramadan.

The government continued to discourage citizens and residents from taking part in the Umrah or Hajj due to an 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 and coordination with Saudi religious and security authorities. While MEIA officials report that no citizens participated in the pilgrimages, there is anecdotal evidence that a handful traveled without government consent or assistance.

On May 18, AJ+ Arabic, an online media platform run by the government-owned Al-Jazeera network, posted a video on Facebook and Twitter that stated that Israel was the biggest "winner" from the Holocaust, that Zionism "suckled from the Nazi spirit," and that "some people believe that Hitler supported Zionism." The network later deleted the social media posts, apologized for the video, suspended two employees involved in its production, and stated the video contravened its editorial standards.

On May 14, *Al-Arab*, a newspaper owned by the ruling family, published an article by Youssef Qaradawi, the former head of the Doha-based International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS), as part of a series of daily reflections during Ramadan. In the article, Qaradawi interpreted Quranic verses to describe Jews as "apes and pigs and slaves of *taghut* [idols or demons]." Later in the piece, Qaradawi said Jews had provoked God's anger. Qaradawi attended an iftar hosted by the country's emir on May 13. According to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), "Qaradawi was kissed by Emir Tamim and given the best seat in the house ahead

of all other preachers at the ...iftar ...for at least the fifth year in a row.” ADL stated that in the past, “Qaradawi has justified terrorism and called for genocide against the Jewish people, and [referring to the *Al-Arab* article] he continued to spread dehumanizing messages about Jews within a day of his embrace by the emir.”

In a July report, the ADL said, “As recently as this Ramadan, [the] government continue[d] to advertise, host, and broadcast sermons at state-controlled mosques by preachers who have had longstanding past records of encouraging bigotry or even violence.” The report stated these imams were allowed to preach at Doha’s Grand Mosque.

The public school curriculum did not include information about non-Islamic religions. In books reviewed for a February report, the ADL found passages stating that most Jews in the world believe in seeking world domination and that Judaism is an “invalid, perverted religion” and that the Torah teaches Jews to kill, steal, deceive, and engage in racial supremacy. The report said that in the textbooks, non-Muslim “infidels” were identified as “combatants” whom Muslims were sanctioned to fight and that sorcerers should be killed. The ADL said that the textbooks contained the name and logo of the MOE on their cover and were included on a page on the ministry’s website that described all the books as constituting material for the fall semester for the 2018-2019 academic year. DICIP and the MOE reported that due to the break in relations with Saudi Arabia that began in 2017 which cut off the MOE from its traditional source of textbooks, the government has moved to introduce new textbooks promoting religious tolerance.

The NGO Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) reviewed textbooks in use for the 2018-19 school year and found, “the textbooks for junior high and high school repeatedly stress the difference between Muslims and non-Muslims, describing the latter as ‘unbelievers’ who will suffer terrible tortures in Hell.” MEMRI said the books stressed the superiority of Islam over other religions, especially over Judaism and Christianity, which were presented as false and distorted, and that they featured anti-Semitic motifs that portrayed Jews as treacherous, dishonest, and crafty, and at the same time as weak, wretched, and cowardly.

The conclusion of the July ADL report read, “To be fair, Qatar’s record is not one of uniformly promoting hatred. Some of its laws, rhetoric, dialogue summits, and educational programs seem to be attempts at addressing some real problems of



intolerance or extremism. But Qatar's simultaneous enabling of so many extremist messages would seem to nullify any of its activities to counter hate and is inconsistent with [U.S.] values ... Having occurred so many different times in so many different areas makes this problem seem systematic and willful rather than a simple oversight."

In a June interview on the German state-owned DW (Deutsche Welle) broadcast channel, MFA spokeswoman Lolwah Al-Khater said it was untrue that the government continued to use its platforms to promote anti-Semitism. She stated "There always needs to be a balance between freedom of expression and what people think and what the government should do." Saying that "all voices" are represented in the country, she described anti-Semitic speech as "absolutely not acceptable."

Although the law prohibits Christian groups from advertising religious services, Christian churches continued to post hours of services and other information on publicly accessible websites; however, the government continued to prohibit them from publishing such information in local newspapers or on public bulletin boards. 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.

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. Journalists and publishers at times said they practice self-censorship regarding material the government might consider contrary to Islam.

The Mesaymeer Religious Complex, also known as "Church City" and located on government-owned land, 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 continued to allow 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.

According to church leaders, approximately 50,000 expatriate Christians continued to attend weekly services at the Mesaymeer Religious Complex. Representatives of the CCSC continued to state there was overcrowding in seven buildings in the complex, and noted difficulties with parking, access, and time-sharing. In addition to the permanent buildings, the government allowed the churches to erect tents during Easter and Christmas outside of the primary complex to accommodate the extra congregants wanting to attend services during these holidays. 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. Ministry of Interior (MOI) security personnel continued to ask churchgoers to show their IDs at the gates because non-Christians, either expatriates or citizens, continued to be prohibited access to the complex.

Representatives of the Hindu community continued to express concern that the government had not granted Hindus permission to open new places of worship. In 2012 the government closed a private villa being used for this purpose. Community representatives reported that the Indian prime minister, during a visit to the country, asked government representatives to allow the construction of a Hindu temple or community center.

In February Greek Orthodox Patriarch Theophilos of Jerusalem consecrated Saint Issac Church, located in the religious complex, to host followers of this denomination after years of serving in a temporary location.

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

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 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.

The MOI allowed more than 100 house churches to operate throughout the country, including 90 that were allocated to members of the Evangelical Church Alliance in Qatar.

In October following criticism of the 2018 Doha Book Fair for including anti-Semitic books, the MSC posted a public letter on its website soliciting feedback from the public about books that do not adhere to book fair guidelines.

The government-funded DICID held a roundtable international religious freedom conference in July, inviting embassies and government ministries.

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

Media in the country continued to publish anti-Semitic material.

The daily *Al-Rayah* published April 30 an article claiming, “The Zionist movement managed to establish the ‘Holocaust culture’ in Western political ethics and morally forced it on European societies.” The article characterized German reparations to Israel and Jews after World War II as “compensation for the ‘victims’ of the alleged Nazi Holocaust.”

On May 22, Ahmed Al-Raissouni, new head of the Doha-based IUMS, posted an article entitled “Why It Is Necessary to Question the Holocaust” on the IUMS website and on his personal website and Facebook page. According to his posting, the Holocaust narrative, which it said was fabricated by the Zionist movement, consists of claims that are “politically slanted and questionable,” many of which cannot be verified.

On June 12, on a program on *Al-Araby TV*, based in the United Kingdom, Ahmad Zayed, a professor of sharia at the state-run Qatar University, stated that although sharia allows Christians to run for public office, Muslims should not vote for them since sharia requires rulers to be Muslim.

On March 27, Abdul Aziz Al-Khazraj Al-Ansari, identified as a sociologist, posted a video to his YouTube channel criticizing U.S. decisions to move the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem and to recognize Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. In the video, Al-Ansari, who is not a public figure in the country, described Jews as “filthy and lowly people. They are cowards.” He said Arabs should arm Gazans to “go after those Jewish dogs.” In a video posted on March 15, Al-Ansari said the March 13 attack on two New Zealand mosques only

benefitted “those impure people, the Jews,” who were trying to sow discord between Islam and Christianity.

The privately owned newspaper *Al-Rayah* published an anti-Semitic political cartoon by a Palestinian cartoonist on October 2019 depicting Israel as a stereotypical caricature of an Orthodox Jew.

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

In January a delegation led by the Secretary of State met with senior counterparts in Doha. The results of this dialogue included a Memorandum of Understanding on educational cooperation with Qatar and a signed Statement of Intent to “support the shared ideals of tolerance and appreciation for diversity.” In April the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities met in Doha with officials to urge greater religious freedom for minorities, including Hindus and Buddhists. He also met with representatives of religious minority groups to discuss their difficulties in securing approval for places of worship.

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, including the need for additional worship space for many communities and registration issues. Other issues discussed included the status of 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 July embassy officers participated in a religious freedom conference with Christian and Muslim leaders to discuss religious tolerance hosted by the Center for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID).

As it did in 2018, the embassy worked with the Ministry of Culture and Sports and other stakeholder to secure approvals for a November evangelical Christian musical performance in Doha attended by approximately 15,000 concertgoers.

Embassy officials continued to facilitate an agreement between the Ministry of Administrative Development, Labor, and Social Affairs and the CCSC to raise awareness among churchgoers about ongoing changes to the labor law, which affected the expatriate population, and the procedures for submitting complaints to authorities. 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.

In April and September embassy officials met with government officials to discuss concerns over past publication of anti-Semitic cartoons. The Charge d'Affaires met with representatives of Al-Jazeera to emphasize that anti-Semitic depictions of Jews or Israel were offensive. Embassy representatives also raised anti-Semitism with other media representatives, including staff members at Arabic- and English-language newspapers. In October the MFA sent a letter to the embassy stating its intentions to remove any anti-Semitic publications from the 2020 Doha International Book Fair. Embassy officers also encouraged MSC, the agency that organizes the book fair, to take a more proactive approach in prohibiting anti-Semitic content at the next book fair in January 2020.

In April the Charge d'Affaires also met with leadership at Al-Jazeera to discuss concerns about its broadcasting and publishing anti-Semitic content.