



Religion

Population

Area

- Muslims : **83.8%**
- Christians : **9.2%**
- Hindus : **2.5%**
- Agnostics : **2.4%**
- Buddhists : **1.9%**

2.291.000

11.607 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Qatar is a hereditary monarchy ruled by the Emirs of the Al Thani dynasty. The country is very rich in natural gas and oil and is thus, by per capita income, one of the richest in the world. All its citizens are Muslims, including the ruling family. The Wahhabi form of Sunni Islam predominates and Shia are in the minority. Of the entire population, Qataris with full citizenship are only around 10 percent. The remainder are residents who are mostly guest workers. Most of the non-Qataris are either Sunni or Shia Muslims but there are also Hindus, Christians and Buddhists.

The local Catholic Church estimates the number of Catholics to be up to 300,000. Other Christian groups such as Anglicans and Orthodox number less than five percent among non-citizens.

The eight registered Christian denominations are permitted to hold group worship at a government-provided area on the outskirts of Doha, on land donated by the Emir. Before this area was established, Catholics used to pray and worship in makeshift 'chapels' – homes and, in one case, a school. Following the Iranian Revolution, the practice of non-Islamic religions was prohibited in Qatar. Finally, in 1995, freedom of worship was granted. That freedom is limited to the Abrahamic faiths only, i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Non-Abrahamic faiths cannot register establish places of worship. The state tolerates their adherents praying in private homes.

Apostates from Islam do so at great risk and have to conceal their new religious beliefs. The Christian human rights organisation Open Doors states: "[Apostates] risk being ostracised by their families and communities, physical violence or even honour killing if their faith is discovered."^[1] Most Qatari Muslims convert to Christianity abroad and never return for fear of their safety.

According to Article 1 of the constitution, "Islam is [Qatar's] Religion, and the Islamic Law is the main source of its

legislations". Article 35 states that "people are equal before the law. There shall be no discrimination against them because of sex, race, language, or religion." Article 50 reads as follows: "The freedom to worship is guaranteed to all, according to the law and the requirements to protect the public order and public morals."

Qatar's Law 11, of 2004, incorporated the traditional punishments of Islamic law for various offences, including apostasy. Article 1 of the law states that: "the provisions of Islamic law for the following offences are applied if the defendant or victim is a Muslim: 1. The hudud offences related to theft, banditry, adultery, defamation, alcohol consumption, and apostasy. 2. The offences of retaliation (qisas) and blood money (diyah)." While apostasy is one of the offences subject to the death penalty, Qatar has not executed anyone for this offence since its independence in 1971. Qatar also criminalises proselytising. Under article 257, any individual who establishes an organisation in order to proselytise may be punished with a term of imprisonment of up to seven years.^[2]

Blasphemy against Islam, Christianity or Judaism is punishable by up to seven years in prison.^[3]

Incidents

According to the Catholic Church's Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia, "the current Emir has been praised for his religious tolerance and support of inter-religious dialogue, despite keeping a firm eye on Islamic law"^[4] This tallies with earlier descriptions provided by state officials. In a speech delivered in March 2015 in Geneva at the 28th session of the Human Rights Council dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on religion or belief, Sheikh Khalid bin Jassim Al -Thani, the Director of the Human Rights Department at Qatar's Foreign Ministry, said: "The State of Qatar has confirmed its guarantee of freedom of religion or belief of non-Muslims by establishing buildings for worship such as the Religious Complex, widely known as 'Church City'. It also confirmed that it had strengthened the constitutional protection of freedom of religion or belief through adopting several related legislations and the establishment of many institutions at both government and non-governmental level, including Doha International Centre for interfaith dialogue which was set up in 2008, with the aim of promoting and spreading the culture of dialogue, acceptance of others and peaceful coexistence of different religions." He added that the State of Qatar had continued hosting international conferences and fora on human rights issues and the promotion of a culture of peace, including an annual Conference on interfaith dialogue.^[5]

Following directives from the government, churches at the Mesaimeer Religious Complex stepped up safety measures in July 2015 by closing off gated parking, introducing metal detectors and increasing the number of security guards.^[6] There were thousands of people for Christmas services at the Complex in December 2016.^[7]

Qatar's mosques were used in the past as platforms by hard-line clerics. One notorious incident took place in March 2015, when Saudi cleric Sa'ad Ateeq al Ateeq preached in the Grand mosque in Doha and prayed for the destruction of a number of non-Muslim groups: "Allah, strengthen Islam and the Muslims, and destroy your enemies, the enemies of the religion. Allah, destroy the Jews and whoever made them Jews, and destroy the Christians and Alawites and the Shias."^[8] There has not been a recurrence of this kind of attack since then.

Some 615 expats in Qatar became Muslim during the month of Ramadan 2017, according to the Qatar News Agency, which cited figures released by the Qatar Guest Centre and the Sheikh Eid Charity Association. Qatar regularly announces conversions to Islam, which can number in the thousands each year. The conversions may be encouraged by easy access to information about the state religion but some groups have suggested that they may also be motivated by social and economic benefits.^[9]

In June 2016, Qatar's foreign minister, Sheikh Mohamed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, reiterated the Qatari government's rejection of all forms of violent extremism and its support for the international community's commitment to tackle it. Speaking at a conference on children affected by extremism, held at the UN headquarters in New York, he said extremism was not rooted in religion but social, economic and political factors. According to the Gulf Times, Sheikh Mohamed "underlined the role of religious figures who preached tolerance and humanitarian values as well as the role of

civil society organisations and intellectuals in spreading a spirit of forgiveness and tolerance and searching for compromises rather than imposing opinions on others.^[10]

In October 2017, a two-day conference was held at the Doha Institute for Higher Studies^[11] University professors, political scientists, researchers and writers who took part in the meeting focused on the violence that pushes Christians out of the region. They talked especially about Egypt and Iraq. Participants agreed that democracy and the rule of law could be used to redefine the role of religion in the region. The main conclusions were that the lack of civil rights in the Arab world does not only have an impact on religious minorities but also affects the Muslim majority. Furthermore, it was clearly stated that, rather than stressing religious differences, shared values should be promoted. “One cannot simply separate Christians from the rest of the Arab region,” said Azmi Bishara. He added that “equal citizenship and democracy” were the only real solution.

In February 2018, the 13th Doha Conference on Interfaith Dialogue themed “Religions and Human Rights^[12]” was attended by Muslim, Christian, and Jewish leaders, alongside academics and other specialists in interfaith relations. Speakers called for “the implementation of religious values in the divine religions and to strengthen international laws to protect human rights and to stop violations, whether the perpetrators are the states, individuals or groups.” Furthermore, Dr Ibrahim bin Saleh Al Nuaimi, Chairman of the DICID, stressed the need to find “effective international mechanisms to guarantee freedom of belief and practice of religious rites, as well as the need to respect religious sanctities, customs and traditions of all peoples”.^[13]

Prospects for freedom of religion

Qatar remains a highly conservative Muslim country with restrictions of religious freedom at both a state and societal levels. There are also many radical Muslims. That said, members of registered religious groups are able to worship without interference. The approved construction of an Evangelical church is a positive sign. Worship by members of non-registered groups was tolerated.

Qatar has been accused of collusion with Iran, and of financing the Muslim Brotherhood and terrorist groups. The political and diplomatic crisis that happened in June 2017 between a coalition of Arab countries (led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and including Bahrain and Egypt) isolated Qatar.

Endnotes / Sources

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