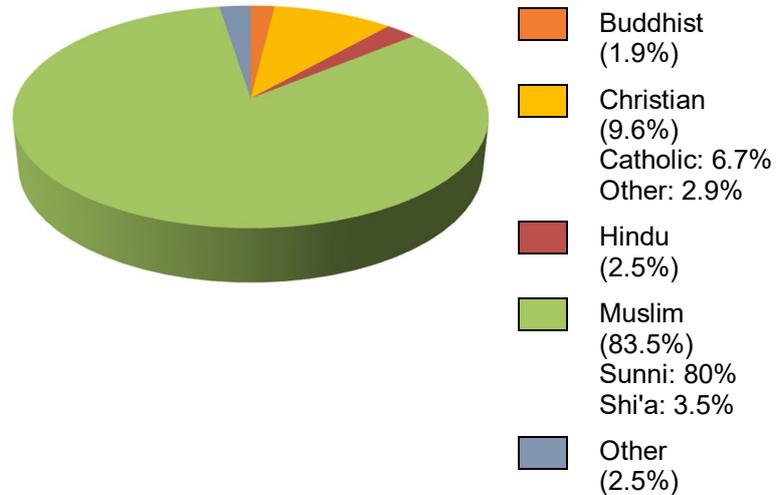


QATAR



Area:	Population:	Political system:	Major Language(s):
11 437 km ²	1.19 million	Autocracy ¹	Arabic, English

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 Shi'a 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 Shi'a 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 to establish places of worship. The state tolerates them 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 or communities, physical violence or even honour killing if their faith is discovered."² Most Qatari Muslims convert to Christianity abroad and never return for fear of their safety.

According to article 1 of the constitution "Islam is its 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."

Also, "Qatar's Law 11, of 2004, incorporated the traditional punishments of Islamic law for various offenses, including apostasy. Article 1 of the Law states that: 'the provisions of Islamic law for the following offenses are applied if the defendant or victim is a Muslim: 1. The hudud offenses related to theft, banditry, adultery, defamation, alcohol consumption, and apostasy. 2. The offenses of retaliation (qisas) and blood money (diyah).' While apostasy is one of the offenses subject to the death penalty, Qatar has not executed anyone for this offense since its independence in 1971. Qatar also criminalises proselytising. Under article 257, any individual who establishes in order to proselytise may be punished with a term of imprisonment of up to seven years. The government typically deports suspected proselytisers instead of initiating legal proceedings. The law also stipulates two years imprisonment and a fine of up to QR10,000 (US\$2,746) for anyone possessing written or recorded materials or items that support or promote missionary activity."³

Blasphemy against Islam, Christianity or Judaism is punishable by up to seven years in prison.⁴

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."⁵ This tallies with the description 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, with Qatar hosting an annual Conference on interfaith dialogue.⁶

Before this, in August 2014, the Foreign Minister Khaled al-Attiyah had condemned the so-called Islamic State's "barbaric" murder of U.S. journalist James Foley and flatly rejected accusations that the country had given financial support to the militant group. His comments came shortly after the German government apologised for remarks by a minister accusing Qatar of financing Islamic State militants. In a report describing such comments as ill-informed, Minister Attiyah released a statement saying: "Qatar does not support extremist groups, including ISIS, in any way... We are repelled by their views, their violent methods and their ambitions."⁷

In December 2014 a Christian couple were acquitted of child murder. Matt and Grace Huang "an Asian-American couple, were held in a Qatar jail following the death of their adopted Ghanaian daughter". Mr Huang, who has been accused of starving his disabled daughter to harvest her organs, stated that the case was caused "by ethnic misunderstanding, by religious misunderstanding".⁸

In June 2015 Qatar approved the construction of its first Evangelical church. After seven years of petitioning, authorities approved the project which was being driven forwards by Beda Robles a Filipino expat living in the country and backed by the Evangelical Churches Alliance Qatar. There are about 1,200 Evangelicals in Qatar.⁹ The new building will be located in Mesaimeer's religious complex, next to Our Lady of the Rosary Catholic Church.

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.¹⁰ There were thousands of people for Christmas services at the Complex in Mesaimeer in December 2015.¹¹

In May 2015 an Indian man was surrounded and attacked by hundreds of men at a shopping mall in Qatar after a rumour spread he had written an “anti-Islamic” post on Facebook.¹²

Qatar’s mosques have been used as platforms by hardline clerics. In March 2015 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 Shi’as.”¹³

Some 615 expats in Qatar became Muslim during the month of Ramadan, according to the Qatar News Agency, which cited figures released by the Qatar Guest Center and Sheikh Eid Charity Association. “Qatar regularly announces conversions to Islam, which can number in the thousands” each year. The conversions may be to do with easy access to information about the state religion but some groups have suggested that it may also be motivated because by social and economic benefits.¹⁴

In February 2016 the 12th Doha interfaith Conference on “Spiritual and Intellectual Safety in the Light Religious Doctrines” was attended by “Muslim, Christian, Jewish leaders, alongside academics” and other specialists in interfaith relations. The opening speech by Hassan Lahdan Saqr Al-Mohannadi, the Minister of Justice of the state of Qatar, “stressed a commitment to the brotherhood of the divine religions”, and encouraged “cooperation among the followers of these” monotheistic “religions in the search for peace, love and stability”. It also warned against radical and terrorist “speech which promotes hatred and bigotry”.¹⁵

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.”¹⁶

Prospects for Religious Freedom

Qatar remains a highly conservative Muslim country with restrictions of religious freedom at both a state and society level. 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.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy_Index

² Open Doors <http://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/worldwatch/qatar.php>

³ <http://www.loc.gov/law/help/apostasy/#qatar>

⁴ [religious-law-prison-for-blasphemy-severe-sexual-inequality-qatars-human-rights-review](http://www.avona.org/qatar/qatar_about.htm#.Vs9P6p0weM9)

⁵ http://www.avona.org/qatar/qatar_about.htm#.Vs9P6p0weM9

⁶ <http://www.mofa.gov.qa/en/SiteServices/MediaCenter/News/Pages/News20150310230952.aspx>

⁷ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-qatar-idUSKBN0GN0JK20140823>

⁸ <http://national.deseretnews.com/article/2921/christian-couple-acquitted-of-child-murder-in-qatar-head-home-to-us.html>

⁹ http://evangelicalfocus.com/world/769/Qatar_approves_construction_of_its_first_evangelical_church;

See also: <http://dohanews.co/evangelical-alliance-churches-qatar-breaks-ground-on-new-building/>

¹⁰ <http://dohanews.co/qatar-churches-close-car-parks-to-congregants-over-security-concerns/>

¹¹ <http://dohanews.co/thousands-qatars-christians-flock-church-christmas-photos/>

¹² <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3081210/Terrifying-moment-man-surrounded-attacked-HUNDREDS-men-shopping-mall-Qatar-rumour-spread-written-anti-Islamic-post-Facebook.html>

¹³ <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/02/19/qatar-s-a-us-ally-against-isis-so-why-s-it-cheerleading-the-bad-guys.html>

¹⁴ <http://dohanews.co/more-than-600-people-convert-to-islam-in-qatar-during-ramadan/>

¹⁵ http://www.dicid.org/english/news_website_details.php?id=169

¹⁶ Gulf Times, 5th June 2016 'Qatar reiterates rejection of violent extremism' <http://www.gulf-times.com/story/496907/Qatar-reiterates-rejection-of-violent-extremism>