

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

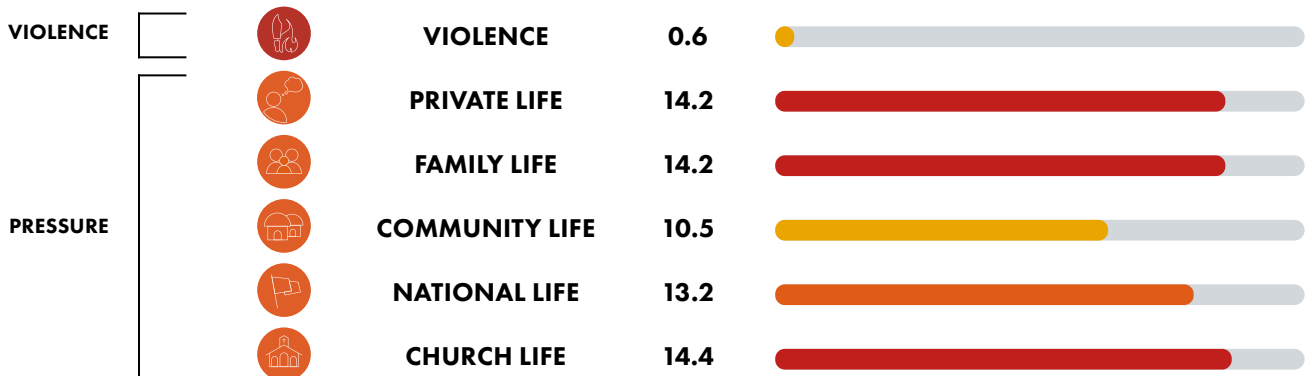
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

QATAR

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
40



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

There are two categories of Christians in Qatar. The largest group - the community of expatriate Christians - is made up of Christian migrant workers. Proselytizing Muslims is strictly forbidden and can lead to prosecution and deportation. However, large worship events have been allowed in the past. A major issue remains the lack of sufficient church space since only a select number of churches have been allowed to establish buildings at the official Religious Complex outside the capital, Doha. Many migrant workers have to live and work in poor conditions, while their Christian faith adds to their vulnerability. The other group consists of converts from Islam to Christianity. Converts with Qatari citizenship face very high pressure from their Muslim families. Converts from a migrant background are primarily controlled by the social environment they live in. Often, the social norms of their home countries apply to them rather than Qatari cultural norms. Both indigenous and migrant converts risk discrimination, harassment and police monitoring. Moreover, a change of faith (away from Islam) is not officially recognized and is likely to lead to legal problems in personal status and property matters. There are hardly ever reports of Christians being killed, imprisoned or harmed for their faith, because the number of converts is low and they keep their faith secret.

Quick facts

LEADER

Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani

POPULATION

3,029,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

414,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Absolute Monarchy



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Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	414,000	13.7
Muslims	2,399,000	79.2
Hindus	92,200	3.0
Agnostics	63,600	2.1

Source²

Once poor, Qatar's exploitation of oil and gas fields since the 1940s has resulted in a prosperous nation. The country is an absolute monarchy ruled by the al-Thani family. However, in a major development, the first-ever legislative elections were held in October 2021 for the new Shura council, with 30 elected and 15 appointed members. The elections were organized along tribal lines, resulting in the election of known businessmen and former government officials. The state distributes its wealth generously, which has largely resulted in the absence of much of the social and economic discontent that has characterized the region since the beginning of the Arab Spring.

The Christian presence in the country has been growing since the start of the development of the gas and oil industry in the 1970s and the subsequent influx

of expatriate workers. Although expatriate Christians have enjoyed a limited level of religious freedom, it took until 2007 before the [first church](#) was inaugurated in the strictly monitored "religious complex" just outside Doha. The Qatari government considers Christianity a foreign influence, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regulating churches in the country.

According to Middle East Concern (MEC Qatar profile): "The constitution of Qatar enshrines Islam as the religion of the State and Islamic law as a main source of legislation...It guarantees freedom of religious practice provided that public order and morality are maintained. The Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are legally recognized. Under applicable Islamic law, Muslims are effectively prohibited from changing their religion. Non-Islamic proselytism is strictly prohibited and is punishable by prison sentences ... – though in recent years the government has preferred to deport without legal proceedings those suspected of proselytising."

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Qatar, p. 10): "The Mesaimeer Religious Complex, also known as "Church City" and located on government-owned land, continued to provide worship space for the eight registered Christian denominations.... Citizens of the country and other Muslims were not allowed to attend these services. Representatives of the CCSC [Christian Church Steering Committee] stated there was overcrowding in seven buildings in the complex, and noted difficulties with parking, access, and time-sharing."

¹ Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

² Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Qataris are a homogeneous group with strong family ties, actively trying to uphold their Islamic norms by protecting themselves against modernization and Westernization. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is seen as betrayal and can lead to high levels of family and societal pressure, including ostracization, forced marriage and physical violence.

Although not primarily faith-related, it is very likely that many Christian expatriates experience (sexual) abuse, especially female domestic workers. The treatment of Christians in Qatar is not so much based on their faith, as on their skin color and ethnic background.

How the situation varies by region

Qatar is a very small country, with the capital Doha being the center of all activities. The risks faced by Christians, and especially by converts from Islam to Christianity, depend on their community. Local converts from Islam endure the most persecution as they face family and societal pressure, while expatriate converts to Christianity experience similar pressures as in their home countries, as they often live within their own national or ethnic communities.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

Workers from Asia and Africa are treated badly, independently of their religion. If workers are Christian, this can add to their vulnerability, and they can be put under pressure to become Muslims. Overcrowding at existing churches and government refusal to allow expansion means many cannot attend services to practice their faith, while using residential spaces for worship has become difficult.

Historical Christian communities

Historical Christian communities are included in the expatriate category.

Converts to Christianity

Converts to Christianity with a Muslim background experience severe rights violations. Within the context of Arab tribalism, conversion is seen not only as a betrayal of the faith, but also of the family, clan, and Arab ethno-

national identity. Considered apostates, a crime punishable by law in Qatar, converts face discrimination and harassment from society and even risk death. Converts, both indigenous and foreign, face high pressure from family members, employers, and the local community to recant their Christian faith.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Non-traditional Christian communities are included in the expatriate category.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression

Qatari government policy and culture are dictated by strict adherence to Wahhabi Islam and Sharia law. Converts from Islam to Christianity are, by their very nature, second-class citizens who risk the loss of economic support, family security, and legal protection on account of their Christian faith.

Clan oppression

Tribalism still plays a huge role in Qatari society. Religion is highly connected to family identity. Leaving Islam is interpreted as betraying one's family. In general, families put strong social pressure on converts to make them return to Islam. In many cases, converts are alienated from their families.

Dictatorial paranoia

Qatar is an absolute monarchy, ruled by the Emir. While the government has created a welfare state with many financial benefits for Qatari nationals, it expects obedience in return and does not allow any political opposition. The government makes it a priority to keep the country distinctly Islamic, especially due to the low number of nationals compared to the very high number of expatriates. Although expatriate Christians are relatively free to practice their faith, the government monitors all activities. The country is well-policed and expatriates must behave carefully as they can easily be expelled from the country.

How are men and women differently affected?

Women

Restrictions on women’s rights due to Sharia and the cultural Wahhabi interpretation of Islam make women vulnerable. If their conversion is discovered, female converts risk ostracization, house arrest and being cut off from all means of communication. They may further be harshly beaten, expelled from their homes or subject to so-called “honor” killings. Qatari converts are legally restricted from marrying a non-Muslim and risk forced marriage to a Muslim as a corrective measure. Housemaids working in Qatar, many of whom are Christians, often face sexual harassment or slave-like treatment.

Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied custody of children
- Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Travel bans/restrictions on movement
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – sexual

Men

Besides official restrictions on non-Islamic religious expression, Christians try to keep a low profile by self-censoring. Usually, male Christians come under public scrutiny, since it is men who are visible in the public sphere and at the forefront of interaction with the authorities. Converts risk domestic pressure; if discovered, families can threaten the removal of their wife and children. Christian men often become isolated; they are cut off from the Christian community, and converts may lose their jobs. They may further face physical and psychological trauma and family expulsion.

Male typical pressure points:

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- False charges
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	40	67
2023	34	68
2022	18	74
2021	29	67
2020	27	66

The fall in the violence score (from 1.5 points to 0.6) was the main reason for the 1-point drop in overall score. Converts both from an indigenous and migrant background experience the most difficulty in living out their faith.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- Qatari converts from Islam to Christianity face high levels of pressure, especially from their family members. In recent years, Christians involved in missionary activity among Qatari citizens or non-Christian expatriates residing in the country have been deported.
- Violent incidents against Christians are rarely reported. Incidents where Christian migrant workers are targeted probably go unreported because it is in nobody’s interest to make details public; the victim wants to keep his or her job and other actors (like the government) are not interested in recording such occurrences. Secondly, it is sometimes difficult to discern whether or not a case of mistreatment has been due to a worker’s Christian faith. However, it is estimated that thousands of expatriate Christians face abuse. According to a recent report by [Amnesty International](#) - AI (AI, “Why do you want to rest”, 2020), thousands of migrant workers still suffer from labor abuses despite initiatives and laws to improve labor conditions. As highlighted in an [earlier report](#) (AI, “My Sleep Is My Break”, 2014), (sexual) abuse of female migrant workers, many of whom are Christian, is common.

WWL Year	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians detained	Christians killed
2024	0	10*	0	0
2023	0	10*	0	0

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.*

Private life

Private practice of the Christian faith is made difficult due to social, economic and legal pressures for converts from Islam to Christianity. Public practice of Christianity is illegal. Doing so can be interpreted as either criticism of Islam or proselytization, both of which risk severe legal penalties such as prison or deportation. Furthermore, social deviance from Islam by revealing one’s Christian faith can result in public harassment or loss of economic opportunity. This is especially true of expatriate low-skill laborers, such as construction workers.

Family life

Raising and maintaining a Christian family for converts to Christianity is difficult due to high social pressure. Since there is no recognition of conversion from Islam to Christianity, the state refuses to recognize Christian ceremonies such as the marriage of converts from Islam to Christianity. Children of parents who have converted to Christianity cannot be exempted from Islamic education. Finally, all families are beholden to Sharia law, which can result in the forced separation of children from family members for those who convert to Christianity.



Community life

Qatari society is dominated by adherence to Wahhabism, a fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic faith and Sharia law. As such, local communities and authorities can quickly become hostile to those viewed as “foreign” or in opposition to Islam. Expatriate Christians face harassment and discrimination on the basis of ethnic and religious differences from wider Qatari society.

National life

Qatar’s government is fundamentally Islamic and dictatorial, and its legal system is rooted in Sharia law. Therefore, the government has a vested interest in halting Christian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), censoring public Christian displays of faith

and arresting and deporting those they view as criticizing Islam or the State.

Church life

Qatar’s first church was cautiously opened in 2008 marking a large step forward for the growing community of expatriate workers, mainly from South Asia and the Philippines. However, the opening was surrounded by controversy, with many Qatari nationals opposing an officially Christian building in a Muslim country. Police patrols monitor the complex constantly, both to ensure Christians abide by regulations and to maintain peace. Due to regulations, it is increasingly becoming difficult to use villas outside the church complex to gather for worship.

International obligations & rights violated

Qatar has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
3. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
5. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Qatar is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christians face restrictions in employment in the public sector and experience discrimination in the private sector (ICCPR Arts. 25 and 26, and ICESCR Art. 6)
- Christian converts are ostracized and faced with opposition by their families and threatened with divorce and loss of child custody (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian children are harassed because of their parent’s faith (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christians face harassment and violence if they talk about their faith or engage in proselytization (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)

Situation of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Qatar), the only registered religious groups are Sunni and Shia Muslims and eight Christian denominations (p.4). Although other religious communities such as the sizeable expatriate Hindu and Buddhist communities have no official recognition, their gatherings are generally tolerated and there are several unofficial Hindu temples in the country. However, “representatives of the Hindu community expressed concern that the government had not granted permission to open new places of worship.” (p.9). According to the NGO Bahai International Community: “In recent decades the Bahai community has suffered instances of discrimination, restrictions and human rights violations. The cumulative effect of these acts has now become untenable because they threaten the viability of the community.”

Open Doors in Qatar

Open Doors raises prayer support for the believers / church in the Arabian Peninsula.



About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
