

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

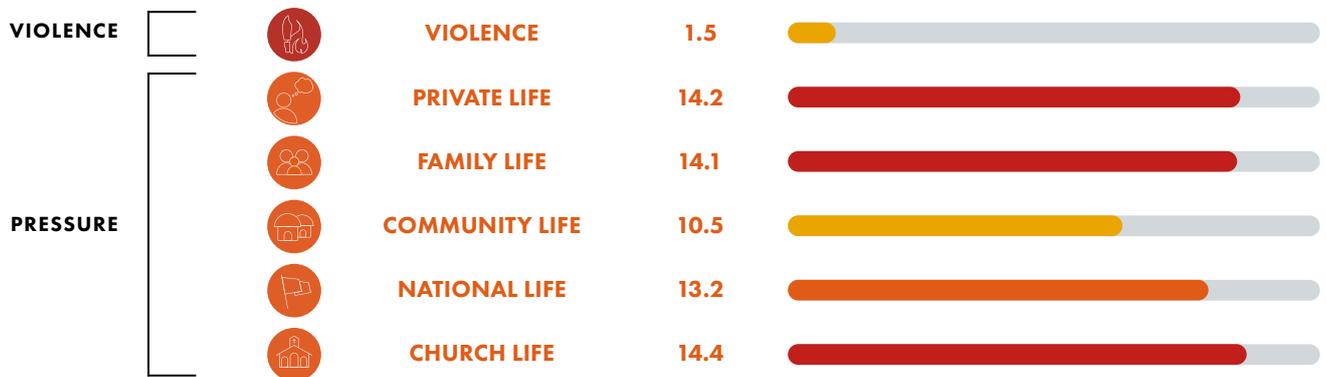
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
34

Qatar



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

Christians in Qatar are primarily expatriates and tend to be migrant workers. Poor living and work conditions are further exacerbated by discrimination, which, although not primarily faith-related, affects thousands of Christians. A few converts from Islam to Christianity form the other group of Christians in Qatar. They face extreme pressure from Muslim families and community members. Conversion from Islam cannot be officially recognized, causing legal troubles and loss of status, custody of children, and property. Both indigenous and migrant converts risk discrimination, harassment, and police monitoring.

Quick facts

LEADER

Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani

POPULATION

2,980,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

409,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Absolute monarchy



Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	409,000	13.7
Muslims	2,354,000	79.0
Hindus	93,200	3.1
Agnostics	63,300	2.1

Source²

Once poor, Qatar's exploitation of oil and gas fields since the 1940s has resulted in a prosperous nation. Qatar is an absolute monarchy ruled by the al-Thani family. However, in a major development, 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. We expect them to focus mainly on the key interests enshrined in their constitutions, including opposing labor reform for migrant workers ([AGSIW, 7 October 2021](#)).

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. That said, Qatar's wealth has allowed it to play an active role in the Arab Spring abroad, supporting Islamist militants

and groups, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood, which has raised tensions with its neighbors, most notably Saudi Arabia. Of note is Qatar's hosting of the Al-Jazeera media network, which has been an engine of the Arab Spring movement, serving as a mouthpiece for opposition leaders and insurgents. Qatar is also trying to become a major regional player with its airline and the hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

The Christian presence in the country has been growing with the development of the gas and oil industry. 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, while accepting that giving the Christian community some freedom is in Qatar's best interest.

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

¹ Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

² Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

they face family and societal pressure, while expatriate converts to Christianity experience similar pressures as in their home countries, as they are often living 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 the home, or subject to so-called “honor” killings. Qatari converts are legally restricted from marrying a non-Muslim, and face 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.

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community / networks
- Denied custody of children
- Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Travel bans/restrictions on movement
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

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 may lose their jobs. They may face further physical and psychological trauma and family expulsion.

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

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	34	68
2022	18	74
2021	29	67
2020	27	66
2019	38	62

Average pressure on Christians, especially converts from Islam to Christianity, remains at an extremely high level. The decrease in points in comparison to last year is mainly due to no churches being closed this year. Many previously closed villa house-churches were not allowed to re-open, though, which has made it difficult for the affected Christian communities to gather and encourage one another. Monitoring and surveillance continued to be very pervasive. Culturally, converts continue to face limitations, restrictions, and persecution from all angles: the government, society, and their own families.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- During the WWL 2023 reporting period, at least one incident was reported in which the contracts of expatriate Christians were terminated due to accusations of proselytism. They subsequently were banned from the country. Due to security concerns, no further details can be published.
- Violent incidents against Christians are rarely reported. However, although not primarily faith-related, it is estimated that thousands of expatriate Christians face abuse. According to a report by Amnesty International – AI (AI, “All Work No Pay”, 2019), despite promises to improve labor conditions, thousands of migrant workers still suffer from labor abuses. In an earlier report (AI, “My Sleep Is My Break”, 2014), AI highlighted practices of (sexual) abuse of especially female migrant workers, many of whom are Christian.

WWL Year	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted	Christians forced to marry	Christians physically or mentally abused
2023	0	10*	0	10*
2022	100	10*	1	10*

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 marriage. 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. Security 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 to gather for worship, emphasizing the lack of sufficient church space at the religious complex.

International obligations & rights violated

Qatar has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in 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

Only Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are legally recognized as religions in Qatar. According to the US State Department's [2021 International Religious Freedom report](#), only Sunni and Shia Muslims and eight Christian denominations are registered as official religious groups. However, 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. IRFR 2021 also reported: "In March [2021], the Baha'i International Community (BIC) said it was "extremely concerned" by "systematic attempts over many years" by the government to blacklist and deport Baha'is, in particular, a lifelong resident of the country whose residency permit renewal was refused in January on what the community described as 'baseless charges". He left the country in August.



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: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
