

WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

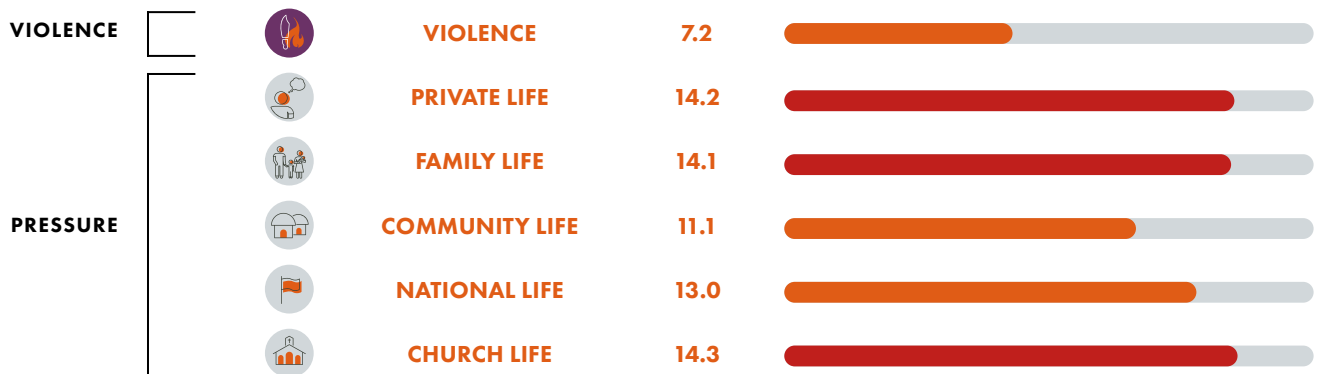
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
18

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).¹ Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

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, affect thousands of Christians. A small number of 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.

¹World Watch Research measures pressure across all spheres of life as well as violence (full methodology [here](#) – password: freedom).

Quick facts

LEADER

Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani

POPULATION

2,840,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

372,000 (13.1%)²

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Absolute Monarchy



Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	372,000	13.1
Muslims	2,266,000	79.8
Hindus	86,100	3.0
Agnostics	60,000	2.1

Source³

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. For the first time in its history, Qatar held elections for the new Shura council, with 30 elected and 15 appointed members. The elections were organized via tribal lines, resulting in the election of known businessmen and former government officials. It is to be expected that they will mainly focus on the key interests of their constitutions, including opposing reform of labor rights for migrant workers. The state distributes its wealth generously, which has largely resulted in absence of much of the social and economic discontent which 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. Finally 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.

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 what sort of community the Christians belong to. 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 are often living within their own national or ethnic communities.

²Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

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Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

Workers from Asia and Africa are treated badly, independently of their religion. If such 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 Christians cannot attend services to practice their faith. 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 the 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 to recant their Christian faith from family members, employers and the local community.

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. Therefore, 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. House maids 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. It is usually male Christians who 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 further face 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 government
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution score out of 100
2022	18	73.85
2021	29	67.39
2020	27	66.30
2019	38	62.12
2018	27	63.42

The main reason for the sharp rise of seven points in WWL 2022 is a strong increase in violence score from 1.5 to 7.2. The violence went up as a result of the closure of the majority of the villa churches in Qatar. Church space in the only religious complex is clearly insufficient to accommodate the (expatriate) Christian community, and this was exacerbated when the Qatari government decided not to allow the majority of villa churches to reopen following the COVID-19 pandemic. While expatriate Christians in Qatar enjoy limited freedom to practice their beliefs, converts from Islam to Christianity remain under very high pressure from the Qatari government and Qatari society in particular.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- During the WWL 2022 reporting period, church communities gathering in villas did not receive permission to reopen after COVID-19 measures eased. In combination with an ongoing lack of sufficient church space at the only religious complex in Qatar, thousands of expatriate Christians were denied worship while mosques and malls reopened.
- During the WWL 2022 reporting period, at least one incident was reported in which expatriate Christians were interrogated and deported due to accusations of proselytism. Due to security concerns, no further details can be published.
- Violent incidents against Christians are rarely reported. However, it is estimated that thousands of expatriate Christians face abuse. According to a report by Amnesty International ('All Work No Pay', 2019), despite promises to improve labor conditions, thousands of migrant workers still suffer from labor abuses. In an earlier report ('My Sleep Is My Break', 2014), Amnesty International highlighted practices of (sexual) abuse of female migrant workers, especially, many of whom are Christian.

WWL Year	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians detained	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted	Christians physically or mentally abused
2022	100	1	10	10
2021	0	0	10	10

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - see [here](#) for full results. 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 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 proselytism, 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 opposed 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 viewed 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 the 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 parents' 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 and, according to the US State Department's [2020 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.



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: © 2021 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- 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 2022 ranking and reports, can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
