



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET INCREASING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM RESTRICTIONS ON BAHA'IS IN QATAR

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To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

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Introduction

Qatar's Baha'i community faces limitations on freedom of religion or belief that are becoming increasingly systematic. The Qatari government has not renewed visas for many members of the small Baha'i community, despite these members having lived peacefully in Qatar for decades. Plans for a new Baha'i cemetery have stalled, and for unclear reasons, a Baha'i man has been charged with financial crimes over his handling of money for the Baha'i community. In March 2022, the Baha'i International Community [raised concerns](#) that Qatar's Baha'i community is "at risk of being eradicated from the country" should these restrictions persist long-term. Social media accounts linked to Iran's government are actively encouraging these restrictions on Baha'is.

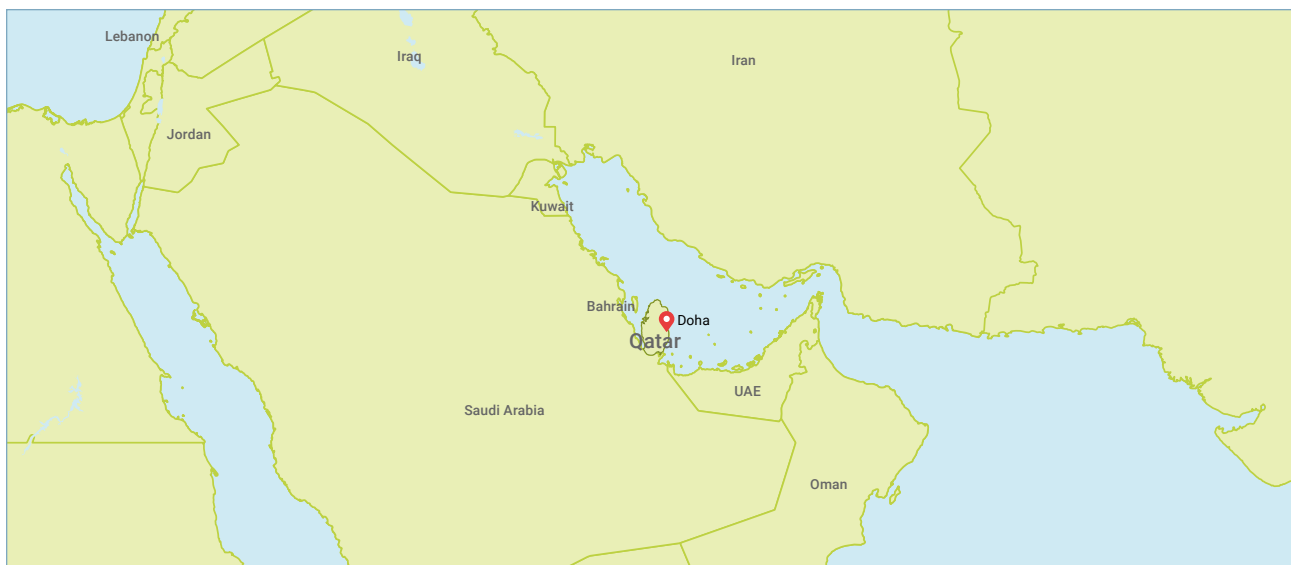
This factsheet highlights factors in Qatar that may constitute [systematic and ongoing](#) restrictions on freedom of religion or belief as guaranteed by the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), which Qatar [acceded to](#) in 2018.

Background

Qatar is a monarchy on the Arabian Peninsula. The country's legislative body is the Shura Council, which has some authority over budgets and weighs in on legal matters. The first [legislative elections](#) in Qatar, for 30 of the Council's 45 seats, took place in October 2021.

Qatar's [population](#) is about 2.5 million, [90%](#) of whom are expatriates. Of the full 2.5 million, 65.2% of Qataris are Muslim, of whom 95% are [Sunni](#). The country is also home to Hindus (15.9% of the population), Christians (13.7%) including eight registered denominations, Buddhists (3.8%), and several other small communities, including Jews, Baha'is, and members of folk religions.

Qatar's [constitution](#) stipulates that Islam is the official religion and that Shari'a is "a main source" of legislation. Article 35 bans discrimination based on religion, and article 50 guarantees freedom of worship subject to the maintenance of "public order and morality." Qatar has also hosted international conferences to promote religious tolerance, including a regular meeting hosted by the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue ([DICID](#)). The government-approved Maysameer Religious Complex hosts several officially recognized Christian congregations, though several buildings in the complex suffer from overcrowding during services. Hindus gather privately to worship, but Qatar's government has not [granted](#) Hindus new places to worship in recent years. Qatar has also made some [recent improvements](#) in the content of its official textbooks, removing some religiously intolerant passages but retaining others.



Current Issues Facing Baha'is

The Baha'i community in Qatar, which has existed since the 1940s, numbers between 200 and 300 members. More than 30 nationalities are represented in the community, including a Baha'i family whose members are also citizens of Qatar. In the 1980s, a Baha'i woman became one of Qatar's first female university graduates, earning her degree at the American University of Beirut. Throughout the 1990s, several Baha'i women graduated from Qatar University but were denied government employment on the basis of their faith. Since then, several members of the community have been [denied](#) employment in Qatar on the basis of their faith, and have since left the country.

In recent years, Qatar has [escalated](#) its blacklisting and non-renewal of Baha'i residency visas to include leading members of the community. In January 2021, Qatar's government [denied](#) the renewal of a residency visa to a prominent Baha'i man, Omid Seioshansian, whose family has lived in Qatar since the 1950s. Qatari authorities suggested there were national security charges against him but have not specified these charges. Despite international [appeals](#), Omid Seioshansian was forced to leave Qatar for India in August 2021. His brother, Baher Seioshansian, had already been forced to leave Qatar after [receiving](#) a deportation order from the Ministry of Interior in 2005. The order came weeks after receiving a security clearance from Qatari police to work in Qatar. After appeals to reconsider his deportation order failed, Baher Seioshansian resettled in the United States in 2007.

In other cases, Qatar's government has not [renewed](#) residency permits for Baha'is even though they have the sponsorship of an employer under the country's *kefala* (sponsorship) system. It has also [denied](#) residency permits to the spouses of Baha'is living in Qatar, forcing entire families to leave the country.

Baha'is have also faced [charges](#) related to the handling of the community's finances. In April 2021, a Qatari court tried the chairman of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Qatar, Remy Rowhani, in absentia and without notice on charges of violating Law No. 15 of 2014 Regulating Charitable Activities. He was sentenced to prison time and a large fine in June 2021, but the punishment was reduced at a hearing later in June, from six months to one month in prison and 100,000 Qatari Rial (about \$27,500) to 50,000 Rial (about \$13,700). On May 30, 2022, Qatar's Court of Cassation [confirmed](#) Rouhani's sentence.

The Baha'i community has had a [cemetery](#) in Qatar since 1953. In 1974, the community relocated remains from the cemetery's original location to a new site in the Thumama district of Doha following the announcement of government plans to construct a new road where the existing cemetery was located. In 2009, the Doha municipality bulldozed and dug up Baha'i graves until it was ordered to stop by the Emir. Several remains were moved and reinterred together. In the process of returning these remains to the cemetery in Thumama, the identity of some of them was lost.

After the al-Rayyan Municipality stopped construction of a new cemetery site in 2010, authorities identified a new site at Wadi Aba Salil in al-Wakra Municipality in 2015. However, the government has not granted permission for construction to begin, nor to use permanently the current site in Thumama.

Baha'i institutions have raised concerns that, taken collectively, these issues may lead to the *elimination* of Qatar's Baha'i community, and have noted a *resemblance* to the recent persecution of Baha'is in Iran, which maintains diplomatic relations with Qatar.

U.S. Policy on Qatar

The United States and Qatar have had diplomatic relations since 1972. Following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in July 2021, Qatar *accepted* tens of thousands of Afghan refugees as part of an agreement with the United States. *Regional and bilateral issues* are key topics at U.S.-Qatar high-level meetings. In January 2022, President Joseph R. Biden met Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamed Al Thani at the White House. Shortly thereafter, in March 2022, the White House *designated* Qatar a major non-NATO ally, creating important opportunities for Qatar to expand its defense relationship with the United States. Qatar has also played a *mediating* role in U.S.-Iran talks regarding a re-entry to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Conclusion

Qatar's Baha'i community has come under pressure in recent years. The inability to renew residency visas, obtain assurances about cemeteries, and manage community finances without intervention appears to constitute systematic restrictions on freedom of religion or belief in Qatar. Given the small size of Qatar's Baha'i community, these restrictions are of elevated concern.

In support of the U.S.-Qatar relationship, the U.S. Senate should vote as soon as possible on the nomination of a new U.S. ambassador to Qatar. Having this position filled enables the United States to continue to work effectively in collaboration with Qatari government officials, including to address religious freedom issues in Qatar.



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