

Status of Human Rights in Qatar for the 47th Session of the Universal Periodic Review

Introduction

1. The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ) is an international, non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights around the world. The ECLJ also holds Special Consultative status before the United Nations Economic and Social Council. This report discusses the status of human rights in the State of Qatar (Qatar) for the 47th session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

Background

2. Qatar is a country located in the Middle East and borders the Persian Gulf. It has a population of approximately 2.7 million people.¹ The country is predominately Muslim, with approximately 67.7% of the population identifying as Muslim, 13.8% as Christian, 13.8% as Hindu, 3.1% as Buddhist, and 1.6% as other.² The vast majority of Christians in Qatar are expatriates and migrants.³ In its 2024 World Watch List, Open Doors ranked Qatar as the 40th worst country for Christians.⁴ This ranking stems from the fact that Christians are at risk of being deported or prosecuted simply for telling others about Jesus.⁵

3. Qatar's previous review was held on May 15, 2019.⁶ As a result of the review, Qatar received 270 recommendations, 178 of which Qatar supported.⁷ It was recommended by Norway, and supported by Qatar, that the government "[t]ake measures to remove existing restrictions on the free exercise of freedom of religion and belief of its citizens."⁸ It was further recommended by Oman, and supported by Qatar, that the government "[f]urther promote dialogue between civilizations and the coexistence of different religions and cultures."⁹ It was recommended by Nigeria, and supported by Qatar, that the government "[s]cale up its efforts in combating trafficking, and protect the rights of victims of human trafficking."¹⁰ Additionally, it was recommended by Uganda, and supported by Qatar, that the government "[c]ontinue strengthening measures to promote and protect the human rights of migrants, including by abolishing the confiscation of passports from migrant workers and

¹ WORLDOMETER, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/qatar-population/> (last visited Mar. 1, 2023).

² John Duke Anthony et al., *Qatar*, BRITANNICA (Feb. 28, 2024), <https://www.britannica.com/place/Qatar>.

³ *Qatar*, OPEN DOORS, <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/qatar/> (last visited Feb. 18, 2024).

⁴ *World Watch List 2024*, <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/> OPEN DOORS, (last visited Feb. 18, 2024).

⁵ *Qatar*, *supra* note 3.

⁶ *Universal Periodic Review Second Cycle – Qatar*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/qa-index> (last visited Oct. 24, 2023).

⁷ *Qatar Infographic*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session33/QA/Qatar.pdf> (last visited Oct. 24, 2023).

⁸ OHCHR, UPR of Qatar (3rd Cycle -33rd Session): Thematic List of Recommendations, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session33/QA/UPR33_Qatar_Matrix_E.docx (last visited Oct. 24, 2023).

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

enforcing the law abolishing kafalah.”¹¹

Legal Framework

Religious Persecution

4. Article 1 of the Constitution of Qatar establishes Islam as its official religion and states that “Islamic Law is the main source of its legislations.”¹² Article 50 of the Constitution states that “[t]he freedom to worship is guaranteed to all, according to the law and the requirements to protect the public order and public morals.”¹³

5. Article 1 of Law No. 11 of 2004 Issuing the Penal Code states that Sharia law shall apply for the crime of apostasy.¹⁴ Further, under Article 256, any insulting speech against Islam or its prophets is punishable by up to seven years imprisonment.¹⁵

6. Additionally, under Article 257, opposing or challenging the tenets of Islam or promoting another religion is punishable by up to ten years imprisonment.¹⁶

7. Moreover, Qatar only recognizes eight Christian denominations: Roman Catholic, Anglican, Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Coptic, Maronite, Evangelical Protestant, and Inter-Denominational Christian.¹⁷ Unregistered churches are illegal in Qatar.¹⁸

8. Qatar is also a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).¹⁹ Under Article 18 of the ICCPR:

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.²⁰

Human Trafficking

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² CONSTITUTION OF QATAR (2003) art. 1, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Qatar_2003.

¹³ *Id.* art. 50.

¹⁴ Law No. 11 of 2004 Issuing the Penal Code art. 1, [https://www.qfcra.com/en-us/AML%20Law%20and%20Legislation/Law%20No.%20\(11\)%20of%202004%20\(Penal%20Code%20of%20Qatar\).pdf](https://www.qfcra.com/en-us/AML%20Law%20and%20Legislation/Law%20No.%20(11)%20of%202004%20(Penal%20Code%20of%20Qatar).pdf).

¹⁵ *Id.* art. 256.

¹⁶ *Id.* art. 257.

¹⁷ *Qatar: Full Country Dossier*, OPEN DOORS (Jan. 2023), <https://www.opendoors.org/persecution/reports/Full-Country-Dossier-Qatar-2023.pdf>.

¹⁸ Mariam Fam, *At “Church City,” a Taste of Catholic Life in Qatar*, THE HILL (Dec. 15, 2022), <https://thehill.com/homenews/ap/ap-top-headlines/ap-at-church-city-a-taste-of-catholic-life-in-qatar/>.

¹⁹ *Ratification Status for Qatar*, OHCHR, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=140&Lang=EN (last visited Oct. 24, 2023).

²⁰ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights art. 18, *adopted* Dec. 16, 1966, 999 U.N.T.S. 171, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>.

9. Under Article 14 of Qatari Law No. 15 of Year 2011 on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings, those convicted of human trafficking “shall be punished by imprisonment for a period not exceeding seven (7) years and a fine not exceeding two hundred fifty thousand (250,000) Riyals.”²¹

10. Additionally, under Article 8 of the ICCPR, “[n]o one shall be held in slavery; slavery and the slave-trade in all their forms shall be prohibited. No one shall be held in servitude.”²²

11. Qatar is also a party to the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.²³ Under Article 9, Section 1 of this Protocol:

1. States Parties shall establish comprehensive policies, programmes and other measures:

(a) To prevent and combat trafficking in persons; and

(b) To protect victims of trafficking in persons, especially women and children, from revictimization.²⁴

Religious Persecution

12. In Qatar, there are essentially two different types of Christians. The vast majority of Christians in Qatar are migrant workers from other countries.²⁵ While these Christians face discrimination and the government monitors their churches, they are generally freer to worship.²⁶ The second type of Christians in Qatar are Qatari citizens who mostly have converted from Islam.²⁷ These Christians are likely to face extreme persecution from their family and communities. Female Christian converts are often subjected to house arrest and denied access to outside communication.²⁸

13. Life for these Qatari Christians is even more difficult as conversion from Islam is often seen as a betrayal of one’s culture and family.²⁹ Additionally, the act of apostasy is illegal and is governed by Sharia law.³⁰ This means that, in Qatar, leaving Islam is punishable

²¹ Qatari Law No. (15) of Year 2011 On Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings art. 14, <https://antislaverylaw.ac.uk/country/qatar/>.

²² ICCPR art. 8, *supra* note 20.

²³ *Chapter XVIII Penal Matters: 12. a Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime*, UNITED NATIONS TREATY COLLECTION, https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XVIII-12-a&chapter=18 (Oct. 24, 2023, 9:15 AM).

²⁴ Protocol to Prevent Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime art. 9 § 1, *adopted* on Nov. 15, 2000, 2237 U.N.T.S. 319, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons>.

²⁵ *Qatar*, *supra* note 3.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Qatar: Full Country Dossier*, *supra* note 17.

²⁹ Dan Hart, *As World Cup Opens, Qatar’s Religious Violations Come Under Scrutiny*, THE WASHINGTON STAND (Nov. 21, 2022), <https://washingtonstand.com/news/as-world-cup-opens-qatars-religious-freedom-violations-come-under-scrutiny>.

³⁰ *Qatar*, HUMANISTS INTERNATIONAL (Oct. 7, 2021), <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/asia-western-asia/qatar/>.

by death. However, no enforcement of this punishment has been recorded since 1971.³¹ Because apostasy is illegal, converting from Islam cannot be officially recognized and causes problems for individuals such as loss of status, and can result in legal issues regarding property and domestic matters.³² Because of this, Qatari Christians keep their faith a secret in order to avoid persecution from their family and community.³³

14. In Qatar, religious activities and the distributing of Bibles are permitted to take place within the confines of the Qatar Religious Complex.³⁴ This complex currently consists of six different churches: Roman Catholic, Anglican, Syrian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, and an inter-denominational church for Indian expatriates.³⁵ While religious leaders are generally free to preach without censorship to their congregations, there are still some activities that religious clergy are prohibited from carrying out. For example, priests are only allowed to conduct marriages between two Christians but are prohibited from carrying out marriages between a Christian and a Muslim.³⁶ Further, priests are prohibited from reaching out and evangelizing to non-Christians.³⁷ As Father Charbel Mhaana explained, “[i]t is not possible to preach or grant the sacrament of baptism to the descendants of non-Christians or to convert from one religion to another.”³⁸

15. Even though the government has allowed some churches to be built and has provided Christians with an area to practice their faith, it is not adequate and cannot accommodate all of the Christians in Qatar.³⁹ The Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia estimates that there are between 200,000 and 300,000 Catholics who live in Qatar as migrant workers mostly from the Philippines and India.⁴⁰ Due to employment rules, many of these migrants are prevented from attending mass and, even if they could, churches lack the capacity to accommodate all those wishing to attend.⁴¹ Many times, incidents of violence against Christians go unreported. This is because Christian migrants are afraid that if they report they will lose their job.⁴² Further, the government also restricts the number of priests allowed in the country, which further prevents the ability of the Church to minister to the country’s Christian population.⁴³

16. Qatari law prohibits proselytizing and sharing one’s faith with Muslims. This can even extend to Christians who are simply wearing religious symbols, such as a cross.⁴⁴ Since Qatar’s last UPR, there has been at least one incident of Christian expatriates being deported because they were accused of proselytizing.⁴⁵ Leading up to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, the executive director for In Defense of Christians, an international human rights advocacy

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Qatar: Full Country Dossier*, *supra* note 17.

³³ *Qatar*, *supra* note 3.

³⁴ *Qatar: Full Country Dossier*, *supra* note 17.

³⁵ Courtney Mares, *In Qatar, “Churches are Considered Embassies”*, THE B.C. CATHOLIC (Nov. 30, 2022), <https://bccatholic.ca/news/world/in-qatar-churches-are-considered-embassies>.

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² *Qatar: Full Country Dossier*, OPEN DOORS (2024), https://www.opendoors.org/persecution/reports/Qatar-Full_Country_Dossier-ODI-2024.pdf.

⁴³ Mares, *supra* note 35.

⁴⁴ Ian M. Giatti, *Qatar World Cup: What Christians Should Know Before Traveling to the Islamic Country*, THE CHRISTIAN POST (Nov. 22, 2022), <https://www.christianpost.com/news/what-christians-should-know-about-traveling-to-world-cup-in-qatar.html>.

⁴⁵ *Qatar: Full Country Dossier*, *supra* note 42.

group, warned those traveling to Qatar that, “[w]hile the practice of Christianity is nominally allowed, there is to be no outward expression of any faith other than Islam” and that “[p]roselytizing any faith other than Islam is strictly prohibited and could carry a heavy penalty” as severe as death, although that remains unlikely.”⁴⁶

17. Qatar’s laws on proselytizing and apostasy are problematic and are in contravention of international human rights documents such as the ICCPR and the UDHR. Banning apostasy directly violates the freedom recognized in Article 18 of the ICCPR, which states that everyone has the “freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.”⁴⁷ Further, Qatar’s banning acts of proselytizing or promoting other religions also directly contradicts the ICCPR which enshrines the right “to manifest [] religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.”⁴⁸ Many religions, such as Christianity, call on their adherents to go out in public and peacefully share their faith with others. Criminalizing such acts infringes on the ability for individuals to manifest their religion or belief.

18. Qatar wants to appear to the world that it is open to Western ideals of liberty and freedom to integrate itself into international financial markets.⁴⁹ These efforts can be seen through its hosting of the World Cup in 2022. Fatma Al-Nuaimi, the communications director for the local organizing committee, shared that she hoped this event would change the perception people have of Qatar.⁵⁰ However, human rights organizations have noted that no meaningful human rights changes have been made in the wake of the World Cup.⁵¹ For Qatar to truly be open and welcoming to the rest of the world, it has to embrace one of the most fundamental human rights, the freedom of religion.

Human Trafficking

19. Qatar’s heavy reliance on foreign labor creates an environment that is extremely conducive to human trafficking.⁵² In fact, the majority of Qatar’s population are foreign nationals whom human traffickers exploit for forced labor and sexual abuse.⁵³ Many of Qatar’s migrant workers come from Southern, Eastern, and Southeastern Asia and Africa and enter Qatar through recruiting agencies.⁵⁴ However, once in the country, many victims have their movement restricted, have their payments withheld, their passports confiscated, and suffer abuse and threats of deportation.⁵⁵ It is estimated that more than 174,000 domestic workers are currently employed in private households in Qatar. The women mainly come from South Asia and provide childcare, cooking, and cleaning services.⁵⁶

⁴⁶ Giatti, *supra* note 44.

⁴⁷ ICCPR art. 18, *supra* note 20.

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ See Eddie Pells, *Qatar’s World Cup Denounced for “Washing” Country’s Image*, AP (Nov. 16, 2022), <https://apnews.com/article/eileen-gu-roman-abramovich-sports-soccer-business-cc0594f123b85bc5d4cc404c4ba6fb37e>.

⁵⁰ Kevin Baxter, *Qatar Excited to Welcome and Show World its Transformation During World Cup*, LOS ANGELES TIMES (Feb. 15, 2022), <https://www.latimes.com/sports/soccer/story/2022-02-15/qatar-excited-to-welcome-and-show-world-its-transformation-during-world-cup>.

⁵¹ *Qatar*, *supra* note 3.

⁵² *Qatar*, ORGANIZED CRIME INDEX, <https://ocindex.net/country/qatar> (last visited Oct. 26, 2023).

⁵³ *Id.*

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ *Qatar: Reality Check: The State of Migrant Workers’ Rights with Four Years to go until the Qatar 2022 World Cup*, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde22/9758/2019/en/>.

20. Qatar’s use of the Kafala or “sponsorship” system makes it easy for human traffickers to exploit migrants who are seeking employment opportunities.⁵⁷ This system allows individuals and companies in Qatar to partner with recruiting agencies to bring in foreign nationals.⁵⁸ Once the foreign nationals arrive in Qatar, their passports and other identifying documents are then given to the employer.⁵⁹ Given their lack of access to identifying documents, migrants are easily exploitable as they face barriers to reporting abuse or terminating their contracts.⁶⁰ Further, individuals who flee their jobs, even when facing abuse, risk being imprisoned or deported.⁶¹

21. The government is not able to effectively investigate and prosecute cases of human trafficking. Between 2022-2023, only seven cases of human trafficking were brought before the courts.⁶² To address Qatar’s shortcomings in prosecuting human traffickers, the Permanent Representative of the State of Qatar to the United Nations, Sheikha Alia Ahmed bin Saif Al-Thani, stressed the need for creating a strategy that is victim-centered and focuses on the prosecution of human traffickers.⁶³ Hindering Qatar’s efforts to combat trafficking is the lack of a national referral mechanism, which can be used by authorities to identify victims and ensure victims get the assistance they need.⁶⁴ Further, because many of the victims are foreigners, they lack knowledge of the laws and do not know how to report their situation to authorities.⁶⁵

22. In 2023, Qatar’s Ministry of Labour and Saudi Arabia’s Human Rights Commission signed a memorandum of understanding during the Government Forum to Combat Trafficking in Persons which was held in Doha, Qatar.⁶⁶ The purpose of this memorandum is to strengthen collaborative efforts between the two countries and enhance activities and programs in order to combat human trafficking.⁶⁷ The two countries will also exchange effective practices relating to judicial, legislative, procedural, and administrative experiences to more effectively combat and prevent human trafficking.⁶⁸

⁵⁷ See Madhri Yehiya, *The Kafala System Part II: Sex Trafficking and the Abuse of Female Migrant Workers*, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS REVIEW (Apr. 29, 2022), <https://www.irreview.org/articles/the-kafala-system-part-ii-sex-trafficking-and-the-abuse-of-female-migrant-workers>.

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ *Id.*

⁶¹ Kali Robinson, *What is the Kafala System*, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS (Nov. 18, 2022), <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-kafala-system#:~:text=Domestic%20workers%2C%20usually%20women%2C%20face,even%20in%20cases%20of%20rape>.

⁶² *National Report for Combatting Human Trafficking*, MINISTRY OF LABOUR STATE OF QATAR, [https://www.mol.gov.qa/admin/Publications/National%20Report%20for%20Combating%20Human%20Trafficking%202022\(NEW\).pdf](https://www.mol.gov.qa/admin/Publications/National%20Report%20for%20Combating%20Human%20Trafficking%202022(NEW).pdf).

⁶³ *Qatar’s Permanent Mission Hosts Event on Combatting Child Trafficking in Sports*, MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS (Sep, 29, 2022), <https://mofa.gov.qa/en/all-mofa-news/details/1444/03/03/qatar%27s-permanent-mission-hosts-event-on-combating-child-trafficking-in-sports>.

⁶⁴ *Qatar*, *supra* note 52.

⁶⁵ *Id.*

⁶⁶ Nathanael Gemechu, *Qatar and Saudi Arabia Join Forces to Combat Human Trafficking in Region*, DOHA NEWS (May 17, 2023), <https://dohanews.co/qatar-and-saudi-arabia-join-forces-to-combat-human-trafficking-in-region/>.

⁶⁷ *Id.*

⁶⁸ *Id.*

23. In February 2023, nineteen individuals were arrested in Qatar for illegally smuggling, housing, and employing domestic workers.⁶⁹ The suspects were referred to authorities for further legal action.⁷⁰

24. In February 2022, authorities from the Search and Follow-up Department at the General Directorate of Passports arrested three individuals for trafficking, sheltering, and employing domestic workers.⁷¹ The suspects confessed to authorities that they used ads on social media to lure their victims.⁷²

25. In December 2021, an African national was arrested for smuggling female workers in Qatar.⁷³ Authorities found that he was housing fifteen women who were being used in domestic service.⁷⁴ When authorities interrogated the human trafficker, the suspect confessed to luring the women with promises of work in private houses.⁷⁵

26. In 2020, Qatar implemented reforms to help protect workers by eliminating one of the key provisions of the kafala system.⁷⁶ Under the new reforms, migrant workers will be permitted to seek other jobs before their contract is up and can do so without obtaining permission from their employer.⁷⁷ Previously, migrant workers needed consent from their employer to change jobs, which was easily exploitable by human traffickers.⁷⁸

27. Qatar has an obligation under the ICCPR to ensure that “[n]o one shall be held in slavery.”⁷⁹ Further under the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, Qatar must work to both prevent human trafficking and protect victims of human trafficking.⁸⁰ Qatar is failing to uphold its obligations under these fundamental human rights documents which call for States Parties to protect victims from being held in slavery and prevent human trafficking. Qatar’s reliance on foreign labor and the use of the Kafala system has instead created an environment in which human trafficking can flourish.

Recommendations

28. Qatar must reform its laws to protect religious freedom for all its citizens. It is imperative that Qatar’s laws conform to international standards which call for the freedom of everyone to peacefully and publicly practice a religion of their choosing. Further, Qatar must

⁶⁹ Menatalla Ibrahim, *Qatar Arrests 19 for Illegally Sheltering Workers Illegally*, DOHA NEWS (Feb. 16, 2023), <https://dohanews.co/qatar-arrests-19-for-illegally-sheltering-workers/#:~:text=A%20group%20of%2019%20people,of%20Passports%2C%20the%20statement%20confirmed.>

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ *Officials Arrest Three for Trafficking, Sheltering and Employing Domestic Workers*, THE PENINSULA (Feb. 17, 2022), <https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/17/02/2022/officials-arrest-three-for-trafficking,-sheltering-and-employing-domestic-workers>.

⁷² *Id.*

⁷³ Hala Abdallah, *Man Arrested in Qatar for Human Trafficking*, DOHA NEWS (Dec. 28, 2021), <https://dohanews.co/man-arrested-in-qatar-for-human-smuggling/>.

⁷⁴ *Id.*

⁷⁵ *Id.*

⁷⁶ *Qatar: Significant Labor and Kafala Reforms*, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (Sep. 24, 2020), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/24/qatar-significant-labor-and-kafala-reforms>.

⁷⁷ *Id.*

⁷⁸ *Id.*

⁷⁹ ICCPR art. 8, *supra* note 20.

⁸⁰ Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime art. 9 § 1, *supra* note 24.

allow for churches to be built in order to accommodate all believers.

29. Qatar must also do more to prevent human trafficking and protect the victims. Qatar's current system of utilizing foreign labor makes it easy for human traffickers to exploit individuals from poor countries. Additionally, the government must create a national referral mechanism to identify victims of human trafficking and provide them with assistance. Further, Qatar must commit to thoroughly and effectively investigate and prosecute all cases of human trafficking.