

# **Under the Spotlight**

# **The Rights of Religious Minorities in Qatar**

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## Introduction:

Almost all countries worldwide have ethnic and religious minorities in their demographics, but how these countries deal with minorities differs from one country to another. While some countries work to promote and protect the rights of minorities, others pursue systematic policies of racial discrimination against them to strengthen and prove superiority of the majority. To this end, they adopt policies and procedures that involve gross violations of basic human rights, including the right to life, liberty, and personal security, the right to physical integrity, the right to property and education, and the right to freedom of religion, belief, opinion, expression and peaceful assembly, and other basic human political, civil, economic, social, and cultural rights.

Qatar is one of the states in the world where persons belonging to religious minorities, including Christians and Baha'is, are subjected to multiple patterns of oppression, persecution, discrimination, and violations of basic human rights, including the right to physical integrity, the right to freedom of religion and belief, access to places of worship and religious sites, the right to express religious beliefs, and employment. Individuals belonging to religious groups in Qatar face multiple violations and challenges to their integration into society, including violations and challenges related to religious cleansing policies, exposure to sexual and physical assaults and mental abuse, and denial of leadership positions; including the presidency of universities, ministerial portfolios, and jobs that are sensitive to national security, such as the security services and the education sector. As well as their exposure to expulsion and forced deportation, restrictions imposed on building and opening places of worship, restrictions imposed on religious expression and display of religious symbols, discrimination in employment, attacks on cemeteries and places of worship, and challenges in accessing religious education or access to adequate housing.

In this context, the Qatari authorities do not allow religious minorities to build their own places of worship, allow them only to rely on their own housing for religious gatherings; prohibit them from publicly displaying religious symbols, such as crosses or religious clothing; and deny them - particularly Baha'is - access to Certificates of good conduct necessary for employment, and for obtaining or renewing residency permits, and blacklisting them in preparation for forcible expulsion and denial of re-entry into the country, which constitutes a pattern of religious cleansing.

This report aims to shed light on the reality of minority rights in Qatar; it analyzes the factors that lead to persecution and repression; explores laws, policies, practices related to minority rights in Qatar, and the challenges they face in obtaining their basic rights. This report consists of four main axes; the first handles the concept of minorities and their rights in accordance with international laws and covenants; the second axis addresses the religious demographics in Qatar; the third axis deals with the legal framework governing religious freedom and the rights of minorities in Qatar; and finally, the fourth axis highlights the challenges facing religious minorities in Qatar.

The methodology adopted in this report was based on the use of reliable sources, academic research, and testimonies and confessions of organizations, groups, and individuals belonging to religious minority groups in Qatar, in order to analyze legislation, policies, and practices related to minority rights in Qatar; document the current situation of minorities in Qatar; and make recommendations to improve this position.

### **Axis I: Concept of Minorities and their Rights in Accordance with International Laws and Conventions**

The concept of minorities refers to human groups with racial, religious, or national features and characteristics that are different from those in the majority society. Each minority enjoys common national, ethnic, or religious characteristics among its members. The concept of a minority takes different names a community, class, denomination, Millah, division, or group and other designations that indicate the roots and origins of the minority. Although minorities have different patterns and types such as ethnic, religious, linguistic, sectarian, tribal, regional, cultural, political, and economic minority, the ethnic and religious minority is the most visible type of minority in the world, and behind it lies most of the conflicts that arise in different countries of the world between minority and majority<sup>1</sup>.

In view of the systematic persecution, marginalization, and discrimination suffered by minorities around the world, international human rights law has attached great importance to the rights of minorities and sought to include and secure their rights in a number of international human rights treaties and covenants, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR); the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial

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<sup>1</sup> مفهوم الاقليات، الموسوعة العربية، المجلد الثالث، ص 87، الرابط: <https://bit.ly/40b2qOh>

Discrimination (CERD), to ensure that individuals belonging to minority groups can fully enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms without discrimination or persecution.

Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) didn't include clear reference to the rights of minorities, its 30 articles indirectly included some references that promote the rights of all people, groups, and sects, including minorities in their various forms. In this context, Article 1 of UDHR states that all people are born free and equal in dignity and rights; Article II states that everyone is entitled to all the freedoms listed in this Declaration without distinction of any kind such as race, color, sex, language, religion; Article VII also affirmed that "all people are equal before the law and have the right to enjoy equal protection without any discrimination, and they all have the right to equal protection against any discrimination that violates the provisions of this Declaration<sup>2</sup>."

In addition, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights is one of the most prominent international covenants that have established different types of minority rights, as the Covenant recognized for the first time the legal existence of minorities and established their full enjoyment of their cultural, linguistic, and religious rights, such as the right to profess religion, perform religious rites, and use their own language, which is considered an important international precedent in UN instruments. In this context, Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights stipulates that "in States where ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right to enjoy their own culture, or to profess their religion, practice their rites, or use their language, in association with other members of their community<sup>3</sup>."

Furthermore, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination obligated the state parties to combat racial discrimination in all its forms, including discrimination against minorities. This agreement called on the state parties in Article II to take effective measures to eliminate racial discrimination in all its forms and to promote understanding among all Races and ethnic groups and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights recognized in Article 2 of it the right of everyone to enjoy the economic, social, and cultural rights specified in the Covenant, such as the right to work, education, and health without any kind of discrimination<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://bit.ly/43CGDcf> المادة رقم 1 و 2 و 7 من الإعلان العالمي لحقوق الإنسان، لإطلاع على كامل مواد الإعلان أنظر الرابط التالي:

<sup>3</sup> <https://bit.ly/3ootCMA> المادة 27 من العهد الدولي الخاص بالحقوق المدنية والسياسية، لإطلاع على كامل مواد العهد أنظر الرابط التالي:

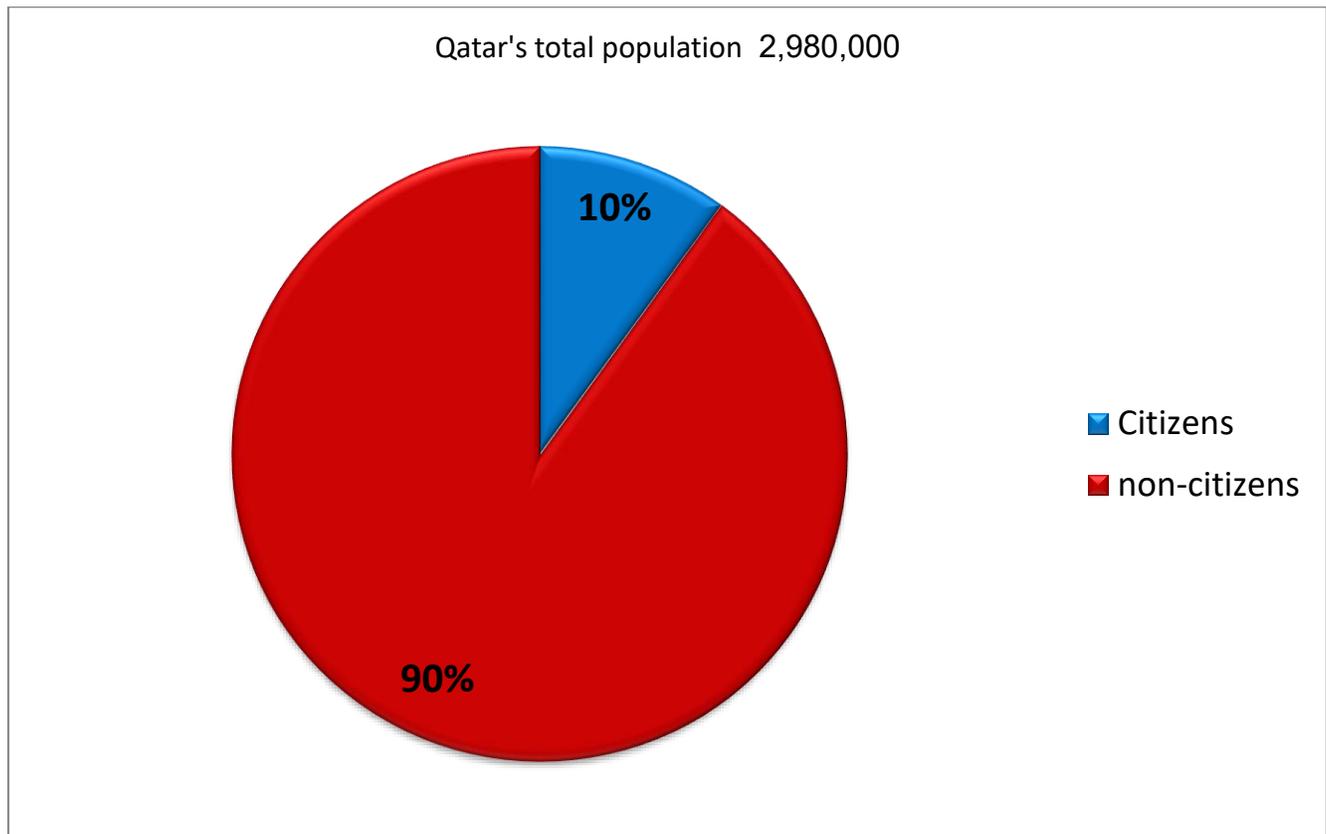
<sup>4</sup> <https://bit.ly/3L3klCh> المادة 2 من العهد الدولي الخاص بالحقوق الاقتصادية والاجتماعية والثقافية، لإطلاع على كامل مواد العهد أنظر الرابط التالي:

The Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, which was adopted in 1992, contained obligations on States to guarantee respect for the rights of minorities, as it recognized for the first time the collective identity of minorities and not only the rights of individuals under its banner. It stipulated in its article I states shall protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories and create the conditions for the promotion of this identity, with the need for States to adopt appropriate legislative measures to achieve those targets<sup>5</sup>. It can be said that this Declaration is the first legal framework that explicitly obliges states to respect the legal existence of minorities and their collective identity.

## Axis II: Religious Demographics in Qatar

Population in Qatar, according to 2023 statistics is estimated to be 2,980,000. Expatriates (non-citizens) constitute about 90 percent of the total population in Qatar, while Qatari citizens account for 10 percent of Qatar's total population.

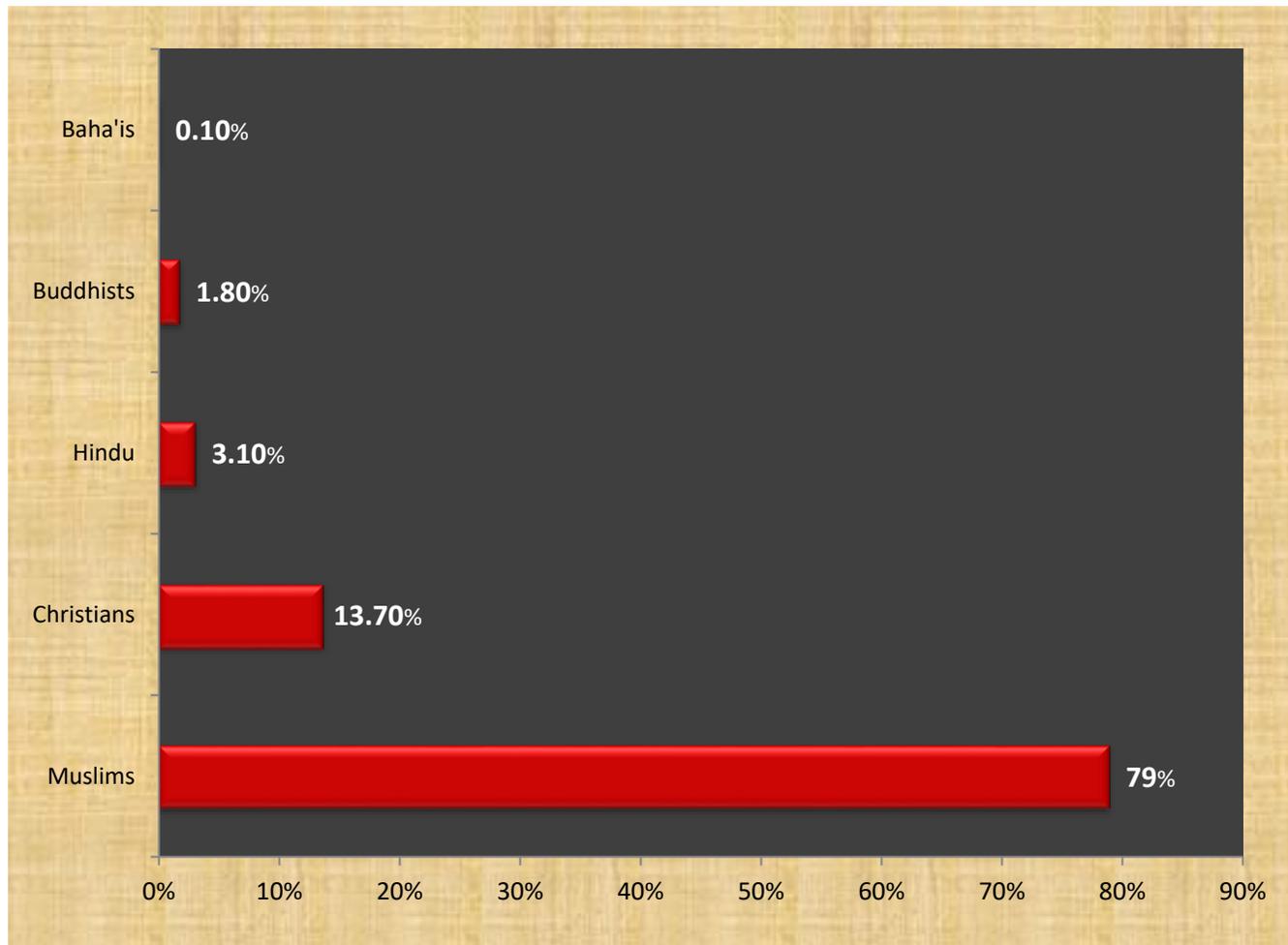
Figure I: Demographics in Qatar



الإعلان بشأن حقوق الأشخاص المنتمين إلى أقليات قومية أو إثنية وإلى أقليات دينية ولغوية، جامعة منيسوتا، مكتبة حقوق الإنسان، الرابط: <https://bit.ly/3KNj7cS>

Most of the population in Qatar are Muslims, and their percentage of the total population in Qatar according to the latest statistics they account for 79 % of the total population in Qatar (90 % are Sunni Muslims and 10 % are Shia Muslims). In addition to the prevailing Muslim majority in Qatar, there are a number of other minorities and religious communities, respectively, are Christians with a percentage of the total population in Qatar about 13.7 %, divided into eight recognized official denominations; Hindus with a percentage of the total population in Qatar 3.1%; Buddhists, who account for 1.8 percent of the total population in Qatar; and the Baha'is, who account for 0.1 percent of the total population in Qatar. In addition to the previous religious sects, Qatar includes atheists, who account for 0.1 percent of the total population of Qatar and religious neutrals with a percentage of 2.1 percent<sup>6</sup>.

**Figure II: Distribution of Religious Minorities in Qatar**



<sup>6</sup> Qatar: Full Country Dossier, Open Doors International: World Watch Research, January 2023, link: <https://bit.ly/41foEjN>

Of all the religious denominations in Qatar, Sunni and Shia Muslims and eight Christian sects are the only registered religious groups. The rest of the religious communities are not recognized in Qatar. The vast majority of the population in Qatar profess the Islamic religion, while the Christian minority, consisting of eight denominations, ranks as follows: Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Egyptian Copts, Maronites, Evangelical Protestants, and multi-denominational Christian churches. While Qatar's Muslim community is made up of Qatari Muslims and Muslim expatriates from Muslim countries, Qatar's Christian community is made up of some converts to Islam, as well as expatriate Christians who are mostly migrant workers. Hindu followers from India and Nepal come almost exclusively, and Buddhists from Southeast Asia.

### **Axis III: Legal Framework Governing Religious Freedom and Minority Rights in Qatar**

Contrary to international charters and laws that are devoted to ensuring that individuals belonging to minority groups can fully enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms without discrimination or persecution Qatar's legal framework includes many provisions and texts that violate the rights of minorities in Qatar and impede their ability to integrate into society. Qatar's Constitution and law enshrine unfair discrimination against persons belonging to religious minorities and impede their enjoyment of their fundamental human rights, in particular the right to freedom of religion and belief and to manifest religious rites.

In this context, the Constitution in Qatar stipulates that Islam is the religion of the state and that Islamic law is the main source of legislation. Whoever holds the position of Emir - Head of State - is required to be Muslim. These provisions deprive individuals belonging to religious minority groups of the right to hold senior leadership positions in the State, including the position of Emir.

Furthermore, the law defines the conversion from Islam to any other religion as apostasy, an illegal activity punishable by the death penalty according to the law, although there have been no recorded penalties for apostasy since Qatar's independence in 1971. The law also restricts the public worship of religious minorities, doesn't allow non-Muslims to worship in public, it forbids providing formal religious education to non-Muslims in public schools, and prohibits religious minorities from publicly declaring religious services or displaying religious symbols such as putting crosses in the open air where they are visible to the public. It provides that individuals,

including those belonging to religious minorities who eat or drink during daylight hours during Ramadan, are liable to a fine of \$820, or imprisonment for three months, or both.

Moreover, proselytizing or attempting to convert Muslims to other religions is prohibited by law in Qatar. In this regard, Qatari law criminalizes proselytizing to any religion other than Islam in all its forms, whether in the framework of organized group activities or an individual framework and provides for a penalty up to 10 years if anyone is involved in organized proselytizing activities, up to 7 years if individual proselytizing is committed, and the law imposes a two-year prison sentence and a fine of up to \$2,700 for possession of written or recorded material or materials that support, promote, or encourage missionary activity. The law requires religious groups to obtain permission from the authorities to practice religious activities and provides for the deportation of members of religious groups that engage in illegal worship activities or that are practiced without permission from the authorities<sup>7</sup>.

#### **Axis IV: Challenges Facing Religious Minorities in Qatar**

Religious minorities in Qatar, especially Christians and Baha'is face multiple violations and challenges that impede their enjoyment of their basic human rights and impede their integration into society, including violations and challenges related to religious cleansing policies, and denial of leadership positions, including the presidency of universities, ministerial portfolios, and functions that are sensitive to national security and security services. In addition to being subjected to expulsion and forced deportation, restrictions on the construction of places of worship, restrictions on religious expression, discrimination in employment, attacks on cemeteries and places of worship, difficulties in finding decent work and challenges in accessing religious education or obtaining adequate housing, we can summarize these challenges as follows:

##### **1. Policies of Expulsion, Deportation, and Religious Cleansing**

The Qatari authorities have systematically removed and expelled individuals belonging to religious minority communities, particularly Baha'is and Christians from Qatar, which constitutes a pattern of religious cleansing. Over many years, the Qatari authorities have made systematic attempts to remove Baha'is from Qatar by blacklisting and deporting them; and denying them work permits even after receiving employment offers from Qatari companies; as well as refusing to renew their residence permits and visas despite

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<sup>7</sup> 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Qatar, US department of state, JUNE 2, 2022, link: <https://bit.ly/3UPcCuP>

receiving employer bail under Qatar's sponsorship system, which forced entire families to leave the country.

For example, in January 2021, the Qatari authorities refused to renew the residency visa of the prominent Baha'i man, Omid Seioshansian, whose family has lived in Qatar since the 1950s. Qatari authorities attributed the reasons for the non-renewal of Omid Siochancian's residence visa to the existence of criminal and national security charges against him but didn't specify these charges, despite international appeals, Omid Siochansian was forced to leave Qatar for India in August 2021<sup>8</sup>.

The Qatari authorities followed the same approach against Christians, as they continued over the past years to deport and expel Christians and force them to leave the country for allegedly engaging in religious proselytizing. For example, between September 2021 and October 2022 the Qatari authorities forced at least two expatriate Christians to leave the country after allegedly engaging in religious proselytizing<sup>9</sup>. Systematic expulsions and forced deportations of Qatari authorities against members of minority religious communities, particularly Baha 'is and Christians residing in Qatar, are a pattern of religious cleansing through which the Qatari Government aims to cleanse the country of different minority religious communities.

## **2. Attacking Places of Worship and Cemeteries**

Places of worship, cemeteries, and buildings belonging to religious minority communities in Qatar are exposed to repeated and systematic attacks for reasons related to religion. For many years, Christian churches, buildings, and cemeteries in Qatar have been subjected to looting, damage, shelling, confiscation, destruction, burning, and closure by both Qatari authorities and members of Qatari society. Among (5110) assaults on churches, cemeteries, and other Christian buildings around the world during the year 2021, more than 100 systematic attacks took place on places of worship, cemeteries, and Christian buildings in Qatar, making Qatar ranked fifth globally in the attack on Christian Buildings and Churches Index 2022 according to the Open Doors classification for 2022<sup>10</sup>.

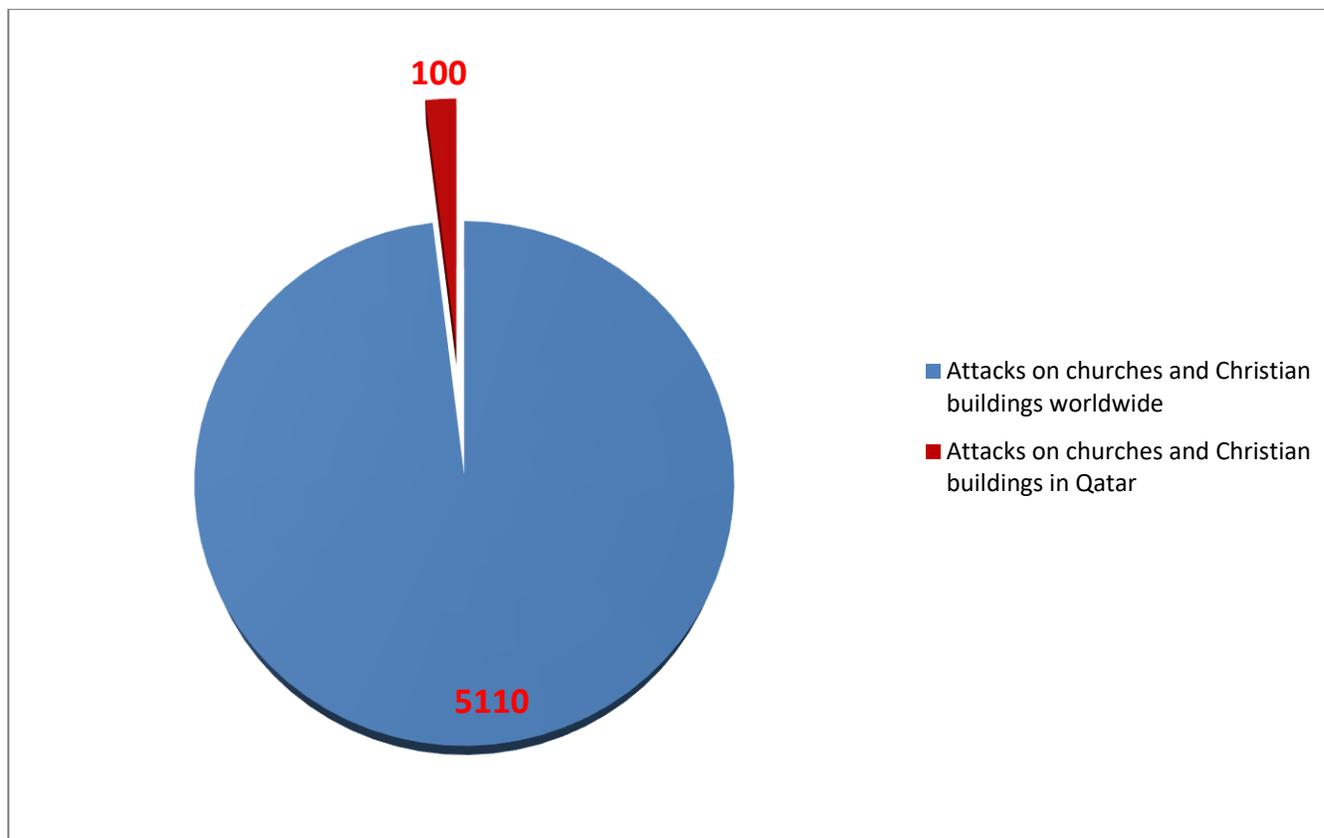
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<sup>8</sup> INCREASING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM RESTRICTIONS ON BAHA'IS IN QATAR, UNITED STATES COMMISSION on INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, FACTSHEET, June 2022, link: <https://bit.ly/41kZwYC>

<sup>9</sup> Qatar: Full Country Dossier, Previous reference

<sup>10</sup> Qatar: Full Country Dossier, Open Doors International: World Watch Research, January 2022, link: <https://bit.ly/43Wq6cy>

**Figure 3: Number of attacks on churches and Christian buildings in Qatar in 2021**



### **3. Discrimination and Exploitation in the Recruitment Process**

Individuals belonging to religious minority communities in Qatar face systemic discrimination in the hiring process, are exposed to exploitation and abuse in private sector jobs; face extensive restrictions in public sector employment; are deprived of leadership positions including university presidents and ministerial portfolios; and they are prohibited from working in jobs considered sensitive to national security, such as the security services and the education sector, despite having worked for many decades in the medical sector, banking, engineering, sports, entrepreneurship, oil and gas, crafts, health and safety, and the arts.

In this context, the Baha'i community in Qatar indicated that had been denied certificates of good conduct for employment, although they did nothing wrong, which led to their denial of work and integration in other aspects of life. Reports from minority Christian communities in Qatar, particularly migrant workers, have also indicated that thousands of them have been subjected to exploitation and abuse, very long hours of

forced labor in inhumane and dangerous conditions and wage theft by companies and employers in Qatar<sup>11</sup>.

#### **4. Restrictions on Building and Opening Places of Worship and Displaying Religious Symbols**

The Qatari authorities impose widespread restrictions on building and opening places of worship and displaying religious symbols for religious minorities in the country, including Christians, Baha'is, and Hindus, as Qatari law requires followers of religious minorities to obtain a special permit from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to open and build all their religious buildings, however, obtaining such a permit is very difficult for non-Muslims. Therefore, religious minorities are forced to worship in private homes or some licensed compounds, religious minorities in Qatar are not allowed to display their religious symbols in public places including parks or public buildings, and they are prohibited from wearing religious clothing, jewelry, or any other symbols that may be considered promote their religion.

During the year 2022, for example, reports and statements from religious minority groups in Qatar indicated that Qatari authorities did not allow the reopening of domestic churches that were closed during the period of Coronavirus, However, the Christian minority in Qatar was forced to perform prayers in private homes because official churches in Qatar didn't accommodate Christian worshipers, and the same reports indicated that the Qatari authorities did not allow unregistered religious groups to obtain a place of worship, The same reports also indicated that the Qatari authorities did not allow unregistered religious groups to obtain a place of worship even though over the past years the Qatari authorities have undertaken to consider applications from unregistered religious groups for a place of worship if they apply for registration, but they did not abide by these commitments and unregistered religious groups remained unable to establish and open their own places of worship, including Baha'is, Hindus and Buddhists. Qatari authorities have also been preventing official and registered church complexes in Qatar, including the Mesaimmer religious complex, from using Christian symbols such as crosses, towers, and statues or displaying them on the outside of church buildings<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> End blacklisting and discrimination of Baha'is, Qatar's Emir told, just weeks before World Cup, Bahá'í International Community, 16 September 2022, link: <https://bit.ly/414Uy2d>

<sup>12</sup> Qatar: Full Country Dossier, Open Doors International: World Watch Research, January 2023, link: <https://bit.ly/41foEjN>

## 5. Sexual, Physical and Mental Abuse

Religious minorities in Qatar are exposed to a wide range of sexual and physical attacks, mental abuse and other bad societal practices based on religion. Although it is difficult to monitor acts of sexual, physical violence, and mental abuse based on religion in Qatar, However, these practices have been widely committed over the past years. In this context, reports from religious minority communities in Qatar indicated rape and sexual harassment of members of religious groups and forced marriage, and physical and mental abuse, including beatings and death threats, for reasons related to religion.

### Sexual and physical assault and mental abuse against Christians 2021-2022<sup>13</sup>

Type of assault/abuse	2021	2022
Rape and sexual harassment	10	10
Forced marriage	0	1
Physical and mental abuse	10	10

During the years 2021 and 2022, for example, individuals belonging to the Christian minority in Qatar were subjected to more than 20 cases of rape and sexual harassment for reasons related to their religious affiliation. In addition to one case of forced marriage of non-religious Christians, and more than 20 cases of physical and mental abuse, including beatings and death threats against Christians on religious grounds.

### Conclusions & Recommendations:

In conclusion, individuals belonging to religious minority communities in Qatar, including Christians, Baha'is, Hindus and Buddhists, are subjected to multiple patterns of repression, persecution, discrimination and violations of fundamental human rights, including the right to physical integrity, the right to freedom of religion and belief and access to places of worship and religious sites, expression of religious beliefs, and employment. Individuals belonging to religious groups in Qatar face multiple violations and challenges to their integration into society, including violations and challenges related to religious cleansing; Sexual, physical, and mental abuse; denial of leadership positions, including the chairmanship of universities, ministerial portfolios, and functions

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

that are sensitive to national security, such as the security apparatus and the education sector; In addition to being subjected to expulsion and forced deportation; restrictions on the construction and opening of places of worship, on religious expression, manifestation of religious symbols, and discrimination in employment and attacks on cemeteries and places of worship.

In light of the above, Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights recommends to the Qatari authorities the following:

- ☞ Amending or repealing legislation and laws that discriminate against persons belonging to religious minorities.
- ☞ Ending the policies of expulsion, forcible deportation, and religious cleansing of individuals belonging to religious minority communities, particularly Baha'is and Christians.
- ☞ Working to stop the systematic attacks and assaults on places of worship and cemeteries of religious minorities.
- ☞ Ending all forms of discrimination and exploitation to which persons belonging to religious minorities are exposed in the recruitment process, and allowing them to assume leadership and public sector positions on an equal footing.
- ☞ Ending all restrictions imposed on building and opening houses of worship and displaying religious symbols for religious minorities in the country.
- ☞ Working to stop sexual and physical assault, mental abuse and other bad societal practices based on religion to which persons belonging to religious minorities are subjected.