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## **"I was expelled for life from Qatar because I was a Baha'i"**

### ***A Baha'i deported in 2015 denied entry in the country to attend the Football World Cup in November 2022***

European Times (09.12.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3UJUW2b> - During the conference organized on 6 December by Dutch MEP Bert-Jan Ruissen under the title "**Qatar: Addressing the limitations of religious freedom for Bahá'ís and Christians,**" a Baha'i (\*) testified about his deportation from the country in 2015:

"My wife, a Qatari citizen, and I moved to Qatar from Kuwait in 1979. My wife, who was brought up in Qatar, wanted to be back where her family lived and had been serving the community since moving there in the early 50s.

I started teaching English language in a national oil and gas company. Later on, I moved to other jobs, all involved with training and development of Qatari nationals. I lived there very happily for 35 years until I was expelled in May 2015.

Our three children all went to government schools and are fluent in Arabic. Although they studied in British universities, they all chose to return to Qatar where they had been raised and where their friends were.

We were all well integrated but despite this, I was ordered to leave in May 2015. No official reason was ever presented to me for such a decision but I believe it was due to my activities as a Baha'i.

### ***Freedom of expression and proselytism***

Indeed, we, as Baha'is, do not hide or deny our religion and share with anyone interested, the principles and teachings of our faith. Our activities are mainly educational, aimed at a process of spiritual and moral education that builds capacity to serve the community and thus work for the betterment of the world. Our activities are very transparent and open to anyone, regardless of race, religion and nationality, who wants to benefit from them.

My understanding is that such activities have been misinterpreted by the authorities as proselytism, which is forbidden by law in Qatar.

In the Baha'i faith, imposing one's belief on others, using any form of intimidation or offering material inducements to conversion is forbidden. However, everybody is welcome to join in Baha'i activities and the community if they wish.

When a Baha'i shares his or her belief with another person, the act is not an attempt to convince or otherwise prove a particular point. It is the expression of the sincere desire to engage in meaningful conversation about fundamental issues of existence, to seek the truth, to remove misconceptions and to foster unity. Baha'u'llah tells us that "The well-being of mankind, its peace and security are attainable unless and until its unity is firmly established."

### ***How my deportation was planned behind the scenes***

In September 2013, my employers applied for the renewal of my resident permit which was due to expire in November. I was told that they had been unable to complete the renewal due to "problems with the system." My employers continued regular follow up but each time was told to "wait."

In March 2014, my employers had to terminate my work contract as the administrative issue had been left without any solution. I contacted the British Embassy but they told they were unable to assist. I approached a lawyer who told me that law firms had been instructed not to take on cases related to security.

In April 2014, the Ministry of Interior told me that my departure was being treated as deportation under instruction from the State Security with no reason given. I appealed the decision and approached the National Human Rights Committee. I reported to the Immigration Department every week for several months as I was told.

In March 2015, The Immigration Department informed me that there would be **no written response to my appeal** and the security authorities had considered **my presence was "not in the interest of the state."**

I was expelled on 24 May 2015. My wife remained in Qatar with our children to take care of her own elderly parents.

### ***Banned from Qatar for life***

It is important to mention that when I lived in Qatar, other Baha'is were expelled from the country and many of our youth were denied employment opportunities. These young people, many of whom were born and raised in Qatar and knew no other home, had no other choice but to leave. Some, who subsequently attempted to return, were denied entry and were blacklisted.

In December 2015 and August 2016, I applied for a visitor visa through Qatar Airways but both applications were rejected because they had not been approved by the security authorities.

On 17 November 2016, I was denied entry in the country when transiting at Hamad International Airport.

In September 2022, my daughter approached the British Embassy asking them to request, on compassionate grounds, a visit for me as my wife had been diagnosed with cancer. The application was denied.

In October 2022, as Qatar had openly declared that all were welcome to attend the World Cup, I applied for a Hayya card which required to enter the country and attend the football matches. My application was twice rejected.

(\*) HRWF withholds his name for security reasons for his family.

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## **In the shadow of the Football World Cup, a forgotten issue: the situation of the Baha'is**

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

European Times (09.12.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3UJUW2b> - In the shadow of the Football World Cup in Qatar, voices of non-Muslims have been heard and listened to at the European Parliament at a conference organized on 6 December by Dutch MEP Bert-Jan Ruissen under the title **"Qatar: Addressing the limitations of religious freedom for Bahá'ís and Christians."**

This initiative of MEP Bert-Jan Ruissen, a member of the EP Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief, was a followup of the resolution of the European Parliament on the "Situation of human rights in the context of the FIFA football world cup in Qatar" adopted on 24 November last plenary session. On that occasion, the Parliament called "on the Qatari authorities to ensure respect for the human rights of all persons attending the 2022 World Cup, including international guests and those living in the country, including for their freedom of religion and belief."

During the conference, the situation of the Baha'is was addressed by Rachel Bayani from the office of the Baha'i International Community in Brussels. Here is a large excerpt of her intervention:

"Baha'is have lived in Qatar for almost 80 years. They are a very diverse community with members of Qatari citizenship or from other nationalities. They all consider Qatar their home.

Nevertheless, the community has suffered instances of discrimination and human rights violations over many decades. The cumulative effect of these acts has now become untenable because they threaten the very viability of the community. Over the decades, and more intensely in recent years, Bahá'ís in Qatar have approached the Qatari authorities directly and with an open hand to seek remedy in areas where the State falls short of its obligations. Although various assurances and promises have periodically been given, they have not materialised.

### ***Baha'is forced to leave the country***

More and more Bahá'ís have been forced to leave the country. The human rights violations they suffer are of various types, ranging from surveillance, the harassment of school children and students, the bulldozing of a Baha'i cemetery, violations in the employment sector and the sudden termination of work contracts, the non-recognition of personal status or marriage laws, the impossibility of family reunification, the refusal of a

residency permit or the blacklisting for 'security' reasons because of their religious affiliation.

In some cases, Bahá'ís resident in the country for generations are simply instructed to leave with no explanation whatsoever, are deported or have been refused permission to re-enter the country. Baha'í leadership positions are targeted with for instance the Chair of the National Assembly of the Baha'í of Qatar who is a Qatari national having recently been presented with a court ruling sentencing him in absentia to a period of imprisonment and a fine, and this clearly because of his religion.

In the employment sector, Bahá'ís are systematically denied 'certificates of good conduct' needed for employment. This is a clearance to be obtained from state security. Baha'ís are being refused these certificates though they have not committed any crime or misdemeanour. There is no transparency to the clearance process nor any right or means of appeal. Because employment is the key to residency, many families have lost their residency, and ultimately had to leave the country.

These problems, characterised as incidental by the authorities, and even presumed to be so by the Bahá'ís themselves, gradually took the form of a pattern that was impossible to ignore or explain away.

### ***The Baha'í community being invisibly and noiselessly suffocated***

The Baha'í community knows all too well what it looks like when a country wants to extinguish an entire community. We have the example of Iran and how it systematically carries out its effort to slowly suffocate a community economically, socially and intellectually. One of the characteristics of that strategy is to proceed in a very calculated manner with the purpose to evade international attention.

The Baha'í community in Qatar counts in the low hundreds today. If it were not for the discrimination and the fact that many were forced to leave the country, the Baha'í community would today be much larger. So it is the survival of the community that is at stake.

His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani, the Emir of Qatar, said during his address to the United Nations General Assembly some weeks ago that the State of Qatar wanted to celebrate our common humanity, no matter how diverse our religions and nationalities may be. The Baha'í International Community welcomes these noble sentiments. And we thank His Highness for sharing them with the world. We look forward to a time when these words become reality with respect to the Baha'í community living in Qatar."

And MEP Bert-Jan Ruissen concluded by saying "*I call on Qatar to uphold the rights of the Baha'í community and to ensure that Baha'ís are no longer expelled from the country or forced to leave.*"

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## **In the shadow of the Football World Cup, a forgotten issue: the situation of Christians**

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

The European Times (08.12.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3Y620Jc> - In the shadow of the Football World Cup in Qatar, voices of non-Muslims have been heard and listened to at the European Parliament at a conference organized on 6 December by Dutch MEP Bert-Jan Ruissen under the title "**Qatar: Addressing the limitations of religious freedom for Bahá'ís and Christians.**"

This initiative of MEP Bert-Jan Ruissen, a member of the EP Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief, was a followup of the resolution of the European Parliament on the "Situation of human rights in the context of the FIFA football world cup in Qatar" adopted on 24 November last plenary session. On that occasion, the Parliament called "on the Qatari authorities to ensure respect for the human rights of all persons attending the 2022 World Cup, including international guests and those living in the country, including for their freedom of religion and belief."

The situation of the Christian community was addressed by Anastasia Hartman from Open Doors. Here is a large excerpt of her intervention:

"When we speak about Qatar, there are two distinct groups of Christian believers in the country and, consequently, two sets of challenges and limitations of religious freedom.

First, the indigenous Qataris, converts from Islam to Christianity, who find it, if not impossible, extremely difficult to practice their faith as they may face prosecution, oftentimes marginalization and pressure from society and family due to their conversion.

### ***Apostasy and blasphemy, criminal offences punishable by law***

Ninety percent of Qataris are Sunni Muslims. According to Qatar's interpretation and application of Sharia law, apostasy is a criminal offence punishable by death. The Penal Code also mentions as criminal offences "misinterpreting" the Quran, offending Islam or insulting any of the prophets.

It follows that Muslims in Qatar do not enjoy their inherent right and liberty to change their religion or belief, which is an important component of freedom of religion as enshrined in Art 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, a binding treaty to which Qatar is a signatory. By its nature, in no circumstances, including laws, can this inherent right to change one's religion be justifiably violated or broken.

But it is not only about the written law. Due to the huge influence of tribalism in the Qatari society, conversion from Islam is also seen as betraying one's family and family's honor.

Converts from Islam to Christianity and other religions are forced to hide their faith and keep their meetings secret to avoid dire consequences of either being prosecuted or suffer social stigma, police monitoring or intimidation.

### ***Christian migrant workers, freedom of association and freedom of assembly***

In Qatar, there is also a growing expatriate community of Christian believers (consisting primarily of foreign migrant workers), towards whom Qatar has been relatively lenient and has even provided land to build churches.

Expatriate Christians are permitted to worship within the confines of the Religious Complex located on government-owned land provided their community is registered but only nine Christian denominations have gained registration.

The Mesaymeer Religious Compound created by the father of the current Emir was a gesture by the Qatari government to promote interreligious dialogue and we note with praise that such a step was made.

There are, however, certain issues. First, this complex is strictly monitored, there are ID checks at the entrance and no Muslim background visitor can enter its premises and therefore attend non-Muslim worship. Second, the complex is too small to accommodate Qatar's growing non-Muslim expatriate community.

At Open Doors, we know of about 100 Evangelical communities that used to gather in villas in pre-pandemic times but were "temporarily" closed by the government due to COVID-19 restrictions. They are still awaiting permission to reopen even though mosques and other establishments have been allowed to operate and the World Cup is hosting huge crowds of visitors from all over the world.

Unregistered religious groups are restricted from lawfully worshiping in private spaces. They have ended up in a registration limbo. It is extremely difficult to officially establish new communities or use non-designated buildings like hotels or event halls for religious gatherings.

We genuinely ask the Qatari government what they need to allow people to worship in other places?"

### ***Recommendations***

In her conclusions, Anastasia Hartman insisted on the need for a constructive dialogue with the Qatari authorities and prioritized a number of issues that should be advocated, such as:

- First, taking into account the limited capacity of the Religious Complex in Doha, to ask the Qatari government to grant freedom of worship to Christian communities, whether they are registered or not, and to permit free access to all Qataris and expats to Christian places of worship.
- Second, to ask the Qatari authorities to develop initiatives at the local level for educating the wider population on the value of religious tolerance and inter-religious harmony.

On the same lines, she called upon the EU to address its human rights concerns, including religious freedom, to Qatar through its diplomatic and political channels, to use all the opportunities for a meaningful engagement, an open and constructive dialogue.

She also recommended that MEPs ask written questions to the Commission and meet with Qatar's ambassadors in their respective countries.

### **Conclusion of MEP Bert-Jan Ruissen**

MEP Bert-Jan Ruissen concluded the event by saying "It was very impressive to hear the personal testimonies of church leaders that were expelled by Qatar for not hiding their Christian and Baha'i faith. This strengthens my belief that the EU should step up its activities for freedom of belief, also in Qatar. As EU member states do a lot of business with Qatar, the EU should not close its eyes for the lack of freedom for Christians and other non-Muslim religions. The EU should start a constructive dialogue with Qatar: anyone should be free to practice his religion and to express his beliefs."

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## **Qatar's Emir asked to restore rights of Baha'is: Statement of the Baha'i International Community**

Bahá'í International Community News (24.10.2022)- <https://bit.ly/3z1NAdr> - His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani, the Emir of Qatar, said during his address to the United Nations General Assembly a month ago that the State of Qatar wanted to overcome obstacles, extend a hand of friendship, build bridges of understanding and celebrate our common humanity, no matter how diverse our religions and nationalities may be.

The Baha'i International Community welcomes these noble sentiments. And we thank His Highness for sharing them with the world. We have, since his address, looked forward to a time when these words become reality with respect to the Baha'i community living in Qatar.

Baha'is have lived in Qatar for almost 80 years and, though a small community, they have contributed to society, business, industry, medicine, education, and the arts. The Baha'is in Qatar consider it their home and have always been loyal citizens known for their honesty and sincere love for their country.

But in recent decades a growing number of Baha'is have been blacklisted, denied the renewal of their residency permits or the "certificates of good conduct" essential for employment, and barred from working in certain sectors. In many cases, individual Baha'is have been forced to separate from their families and to leave the country, despite their families having lived in Qatar for many generations.

The persistent pattern of discrimination against Baha'is in Qatar is of growing international concern. The previous United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, expressed his worry at the "precarious situation" of the Baha'is in Qatar. And the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has noted the situation "may constitute systematic and ongoing restrictions on freedom of religion or belief".

Qatar made a commitment to protect the rights of all to believe, and to manifest their beliefs, when it acceded in 2018 to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Baha'is in the country have therefore sought resolution and redress from the Government – on many occasions – but no response has been given to their appeals for the respect of their dignity and rights.

Last month, representatives of the Baha'i communities of Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States, [delivered a letter](#) to His Highness, the Emir, calling on him to restore the rights of the Baha'is in his diverse and beautiful country. The fact that the Baha'is in these countries took this step speaks to the urgency of the moment: if the Emir does not intervene then yet another religious minority will soon be eliminated from a Middle Eastern country.

His Highness's words at the United Nations suggests that he too believes people of all backgrounds, which must include the Baha'is, have the right to live in their homes, and to practice their beliefs in freedom and security. We now appeal to him to let his deeds give weight to his words by protecting the Baha'is from discrimination, welcoming home those who have been expelled, and by freeing these innocent people to live their lives and to serve the country they love.

*Photo: A statement by the Baha'i International Community has asked Qatar's Emir to protect the Baha'is in his country from discrimination*