

Mandates of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights; the Special Rapporteur on minority issues and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

Ref.: AL QAT 1/2025
(Please use this reference in your reply)

23 June 2025

Excellency,

We have the honour to address you in our capacities as Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights; Special Rapporteur on minority issues and Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 51/8, 55/5, 52/5 and 58/5.

In this connection, we would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government information we have received concerning the alleged arbitrary arrest and detention of Mr. Remy Rowhani and the deportation and blacklisting of Mr. Wahid Bahji, which appear to be part of a broader and disturbing pattern of disparate treatment of the Baha'i minority in Qatar and discrimination against individuals based on their religion or belief.

Concerns at the targeting of members of the Baha'i religious minority have been raised by Special Procedures mandate holders in a joint communication on 16 August 2019 (AL QAT 1/2019). We thank your Excellency's Government for the response sent to this communication, but remain concerned that the violations continue.

According to the information received:

Context

For over 80 years, the Government has consistently refused to recognise the Baha'i community in Qatar or even to designate a governmental intermediary to liaise with the community on its basic and essential functioning. This has caused many challenges for the Baha'i citizens and residents of that country, especially for their efforts to appeal or intercede against the pattern of disparate treatment and discrimination they increasingly face. Over the decades, individual Baha'is have reportedly been subjected to, inter alia, deportations, blacklisting, termination of residency permits, the refusal of certificates of good conduct, the undue termination of public sector employment, sudden refusals of residency and denials of family reunification requests, purely on account of their faith. The following two cases are the most recent examples of this disturbing pattern.

Mr. Remy Rowhani

On 28 April 2025, Remy Rowhani, a 71-year-old Qatari citizen, who serves as Chairperson of the Assembly of the Baha'is of Qatar and was previously the Director of the International Chamber of Commerce Middle East and North Africa regional office, was summoned by the State Security Criminal

Investigation Department for investigation. Mr. Rowhani left his home at approximately 10 a.m. At about 1 p.m. he called his wife and informed her that he would be arrested because he refused to sign a paper, and that his detention was in relation to an X social media account representing the Bahá'í community of Qatar. The account was created 5 years ago and shared posts celebrating Qatari holidays and promoting values such as honesty and service to others.

Mr. Rowhani is being held in custody at the Criminal Investigation Department in Duhail, Qatar. Mr. Rowhani's wife and daughter went to the Department to inquire about him, but they were informed that no one was allowed to see him or speak to him and that they could return at 7 a.m. the following day to see if it might be possible to visit him. At 5 p.m. on the same day, Mr. Rowhani's daughter received a call from the Department asking her to bring her father's medication and some extra clothing for him, as he would not be released that night. Mr. Rowhani's daughter and wife both returned in the morning, as requested, accompanied by Mr. Rowhani's lawyer; however, they were denied to visit him.

After being denied visits by his family and lawyer, on 1 May 2025, Mr. Rowhani's wife and daughter were finally permitted to visit him and speak to him behind a window and through a phone. During the visit, Mr. Rowhani was summoned back to receive a video call from the Deputy Prosecutor who informed him that he was arrested under three charges based on complaints made against him by the Ministry of Endowment and Islamic Affairs. Mr. Rowhani remembered and recalled two of these charges to his wife and daughter, notably "promoting the ideology of a deviant sect" and "inciting public opinion." Mr. Rowhani did not recall the third charge, and the officials would not repeat it to him. The Deputy Prosecutor also informed Mr. Rowhani that the allegations were considered a state security matter, as cybercrimes. Mr. Rowhani was initially denied access to his lawyer.

On 4 May 2025, Mr. Rowhani's custody was extended for one month, and he was denied bail. When Mr. Rowhani's lawyer appealed the initial one-month pre-trial detention, he received a copy of the court charges. According to this document, which was issued by the Supreme Judiciary Council - First Instance, the allegation against Mr. Rowhani related to "disseminating news, photos or video or audio recording related to the sanctity of people's private or family life, even if the same is true". The document also stated that the alleged offence relates to article 8 of Law 14 of the 2014 Promulgating the Cybercrime Prevention Law. These charges carry a maximum sentence of three years in prison and/or a fine of QR 100,000 (US\$ 27,465).

Mr. Rowhani's pre-trial detention was scheduled to conclude on 5 June 2025. On that day, his lawyer appeared before the Public Prosecution and was informed that the case had been transferred from the Court of Appeal to the Court of First Instance (Criminal Court), indicating that the investigation phase had concluded. When the trial date was set for 18 June 2025, Mr. Rowhani's lawyer formally requested to receive the documents that have been filed for his client's case, but he did not receive any such documents.

On 15 June, Mr. Rowhani's lawyer contacted the authorities to request additional documentation in order to better understand the charges and the evidence against his client, and to adequately prepare for his upcoming hearing. However, he was informed that all relevant materials would only be provided on the day of the hearing itself.

On 18 June, Mr. Rowhani's case was called before the court. His lawyer requested to review the documentation containing the information and evidence backing the allegations made against his client. He also requested that Mr. Rowhani be temporarily released owing to his health condition, under whatever guarantee the court deemed appropriate. Both requests were denied. During the trial, the judge asked Mr. Rowhani, "Did you advocate a path/religious methodology that contradicts Islam?" to which Mr. Rowhani replied, "No". Mr. Rowhani's hearing was very brief, and his case was subsequently adjourned. Mr. Rowhani's lawyer was not given the opportunity to defend his client, nor was he granted access to any documentation stating the details of the charges against his client. Mr. Rowhani was returned to the same prison, where he remains in pre-trial detention. The case has now been delayed until 6 August 2025.

Previous detention periods

On 29 April 2021, Mr. Rowhani was formally charged for having collected contributions and held funds on behalf of the Baha'i community of Qatar without the permission that the Qatari authorities themselves had refused to issue him. Crucially, at the time of the alleged offense, the actions in question were not illegal under Qatari law. It is further reported that at no point has any evidence been presented for the misdemeanours of which Mr. Rowhani is accused. He was sentenced to pay a fine equivalent to US\$ 27,000 and six months' imprisonment for charges of illegally collecting funds, a charge which he has consistently denied. Court documents state that he was summoned to court but refused to attend, a claim he also denies noting that he was never summoned.

It is reported that like any other religious community, the raising of private voluntary contributions for community and charitable works is an inherent component of the manifestations of religion or belief and part of established human rights norms. The refusal of the Qatari government to recognise the Baha'i community, or to establish a liaison to facilitate its basic functioning, meant that there was no way for small personal financial donations to be received or disbursed formally (unlike every other religious community in Qatar). As part of his duties as the Chairperson of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Qatar, Mr. Rowhani oversaw the collection of such contributions within the Baha'i community. He did so with the full knowledge of the Qatari authorities who never issued him a permit.

On appeal, on 30 May 2022, the Qatari Court of Cassation, the highest court in the country's judicial system, upheld the conviction but reduced the sentencing to one month imprisonment and a fine equivalent to approximately US\$ 13,700. After his sentencing, Mr. Rowhani sought clarification on whether and how the

sentence would be carried out. He was unable to secure any written confirmation from Qatari officials but was reportedly given a verbal assurance by a supportive embassy in Qatar that the sentence would not be carried out.

Two and a half years later, in late November 2024, Mr. Rowhani noted that his access to the standard Ministry of Interior telephone app, METRASH2, was blocked (this application enables Qatari citizens and residents to access a range of services from the Ministry through the use of their mobile phones). Upon enquiry, he was told verbally that the 2022 conviction from the Court of Cassation had been reopened and that he might be called to report for the execution of the sentence.

A month later, Mr. Rowhani was due to travel for a short holiday. The day before travelling, on 22 December 2024, he received verbal assurances by the immigration authorities at Hamad International Airport in Doha that there was no impediment to his travel. However, on 23 December 2024, he was arrested at Doha Airport and placed in unsanitary detention conditions which caused significant health problems. His arrest and detention was based on the 2021 charge against him for having collected contributions and held funds on behalf of the Baha'i community of Qatar without a permit. Mr. Rowhani was released on 30 January 2025, after serving his one-month sentence. He was also told that he would be under surveillance for three years following his release.

Mr. Wahid Bahji

In January 2025, Qatari authorities reportedly issued a deportation order for Wahid Bahji, a long-term resident of Qatar and a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is in Qatar, without justification. This order came as a surprise to Mr. Bahji, who had never had any legal issues or other issues with the government. He was born and raised in Qatar and had never resided elsewhere, other than short periods of study in the UK and Canada, after which he established his own optical business in Qatar and founded a family.

On 8 January 2025, Mr. Bahji was summoned to the Immigration Department, where a police officer informed him that he was to be deported for “disrupting public order.” The officer also informed him that he had one week to leave the country, that he must present his flight ticket and passport, and that he was blacklisted from Qatar and would not be able to return. When Mr. Bahji inquired as to why he was being deported from the only country he had ever known, the officer in charge told him that their office only executed orders, and they were not privy to the reasons behind decisions. The officer in charge reportedly cited “immense pressure from above” to deport Mr. Bahji in particular.

The deportation notice that Mr. Bahji received stated that it was for issues related to the “public good”; however, on seeking further information about the reasoning for this notice even senior authorities in the Department of Public Good expressed surprise to Mr. Bahji that he had been issued a deportation notice. Other well-placed friends of Mr. Bahji's in various security offices advised him that he was being deported because he was loved by many people, and the authorities were concerned about a member of the Bahá'í Faith being so

respected in the country.

Mr. Bahji was asked to bring a guarantor who would be responsible for ensuring that he would leave the country, which he provided. Mr. Bahji continued to request weekly extensions, and he was instructed to submit a leniency request to the Office of the Minister of the Interior. Mr. Bahji submitted this request in person to the Minister's office with his residency sponsor, but the office declined to receive the letter.

In late February, an influential Qatari friend intervened on Mr. Bahji's behalf, and he was given until 26 March 2025 to leave the country. His written request to the Ministry of Interior to reconsider the deportation order received no response. It is reported that the Ministry of Interior's communication with Mr. Bahji about the deportation was entirely verbal. Mr. Bahji left Qatar on 22 March 2025 and was told by officials that he was blacklisted, barring him from re-entry. He has not been given any document, nor a stamp in his passport, to prove that he has been deported from Qatar. It is reported that Mr. Bahji's case follows a series of deportations and blacklisting of Baha'is of various nationalities – British, Malaysian, American, and many others – by Qatari authorities for over 20 years.

While we do not wish to prejudge the accuracy of these allegations, we remain concerned at the disparate treatment of the Bahá'í minority and what appears to be a broader and disturbing pattern of discrimination against individuals based on their religion or belief. We are seriously concerned at the alleged arbitrary arrest and detention of Mr. Remy Rowhani. We are also concerned at the deportation and blacklisting of Mr. Wahid Bahji and others, which appear to be based on their adherence to a minority religion.

In connection with the above alleged facts and concerns, please refer to the **Annex on Reference to international human rights law** attached to this letter which cites international human rights instruments and standards relevant to these allegations.

As it is our responsibility, under the mandates provided to us by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to our attention, we would be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please provide any additional information and/or comment(s) you may have on the above-mentioned allegations.
2. Please provide the factual and legal grounds for the arrest and detention of Mr. Remy Rowhani, as well as updated information concerning his case and measures adopted to ensure that he can communicate with his counsel.
3. Please provide information on the factual and legal grounds for the deportation and blacklisting of Mr. Wahid Bahji and others and explain how these measures are compatible with international human rights standards.

4. Please indicate what measures are taken to ensure that persons belonging to religious minorities, including Baha'i followers, can freely and without discrimination exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief.

This communication and any response received from your Excellency's Government will be made public via the communications reporting [website](#) within 60 days. They will also subsequently be made available in the usual report to be presented to the Human Rights Council.

While awaiting a reply, we urge that all necessary interim measures be taken to halt the alleged violations and prevent their re-occurrence and in the event that the investigations support or suggest the allegations to be correct, to ensure the accountability of any person(s) responsible for the alleged violations.

We would like to inform your Excellency's Government that after having transmitted the information contained in the present communication to the Government, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention may also transmit the case through its regular procedure in order to render an opinion on whether the deprivation of liberty was arbitrary or not. The present communication in no way prejudices any opinion the Working Group may render. The Government is required to respond separately to the allegation letter and the regular procedure.

We may publicly express our concerns in the near future as, in our view, the information upon which the press release will be based is sufficiently reliable to indicate a matter warranting immediate attention. We also believe that the wider public should be alerted to the potential implications of the above-mentioned allegations. The press release will indicate that we have been in contact with your Excellency's Government's to clarify the issue/s in question.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration.

Matthew Gillett
Vice-Chair of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention

Alexandra Xanthaki
Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights

Nicolas Levrat
Special Rapporteur on minority issues

Nazila Ghanea
Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

Annex

Reference to international human rights law

In connection with above alleged facts and concerns, we would like to appeal to your Excellency's Government to take all necessary measures to respect and ensure the right not to be subject to discrimination on the basis of religion by any State, institution, group of persons, or person as outlined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), acceded to by Qatar on 21 May 2018, and article 2 of the United Nations 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (A/RES/36/55).

The ICCPR, and in particular articles 9, 14, 18, 19, 21, 22, 26 and 27, read alone and in conjunction with article 2(3) provide for the right to liberty and security of person and the protection against arbitrary arrest or detention, the right to a fair trial, freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of association and of peaceful assembly, the principle of non-discrimination and the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

Article 9 of the ICCPR enshrines the right to liberty and security of person and establishing in particular that no one shall be deprived of his or her liberty except on such grounds and in accordance with such procedure as are established by law as well as the right to legal assistance from the moment of detention. Article 9(4) also entitles anyone detained to challenge the legality of such detention before a judicial authority. In its general comment No. 35, the Human Rights Committee has found that arrest or detention as punishment for the legitimate exercise of the rights as guaranteed by the Covenant is arbitrary, including freedom of opinion and expression (art. 19), freedom of assembly (art. 21), freedom of association (art. 22) and freedom of religion or belief (art. 18). It has further stated that arrest or detention on discriminatory grounds in violation of article 2, paragraph 1, article 3 or article 26 is also in principle arbitrary. Furthermore, article 14 of the ICCPR upholds the right to a fair trial and equality of all persons before the courts and tribunals.

The right to religious practices and manifestations is provided by article 18(1) of the ICCPR which stresses that “[e]veryone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include 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.” General comment No. 22 of the Human Rights Committee further explains that “[t]he freedom to manifest religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching encompasses a broad range of acts. The concept of worship extends to ritual and ceremonial acts giving direct expression to belief, as well as various practices integral to such acts, including the building of places of worship [...] the display of symbols [...] In addition, the practice and teaching of religion or belief includes acts integral to the conduct by religious groups of their basic affairs, such as freedom to choose their religious leaders, priests and teachers, the freedom to establish seminaries or religious schools and the freedom to prepare and distribute religious texts or publications.” (CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4, para. 4).

In addition, while the manifestation of religion or belief may be restricted as per article 18(3) of the ICCPR, to protect public safety, order, health, morals and the

fundamental rights and freedoms of others, any such limitation must fulfil a number of obligatory criteria of legality, proportionality and necessity, including being non-discriminatory in intent or effect and constitute the least restrictive measure.

Article 19 of the ICCPR guarantees the right of everyone to freedom of opinion and expression, which includes “freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice”.

In its general comment No. 34, the Human Rights Committee stated that States parties to the ICCPR are required to guarantee the right to freedom of expression, including “political discourse, commentary on one's own and on public affairs, canvassing, discussion of human rights, journalism, cultural and artistic expression, teaching, and religious discourse” (CCPR/C/GC/34, para. 11). The Committee further asserts that there is a duty of States to put in place effective measures to protect against attacks aimed at silencing those exercising their right to freedom of expression (para. 23).

Any restriction on the right to freedom of expression must be compatible with the requirements set out in article 19(3) ICCPR. Under these requirements, restrictions must (i) be provided by law; (ii) pursue one of the legitimate aims for restriction, which are the respect of the rights or reputations of others and the protection of national security or of public order (*ordre public*), or of public health or morals; and (iii) be necessary and proportionate for those objectives. The State has the burden of proof to demonstrate that any such restrictions are compatible with the Covenant and that restrictions must be “the least intrusive instrument among those which might achieve their protective function”. (CCPR/C/GC/34, para. 34 and 35).

The Human Rights Committee also found that restrictions of the right to freedom of opinion and expression that a government seeks to justify on grounds of national security and public order should adhere to the principles of necessity and proportionality, be designed and implemented in a way that respects the universality of human rights and the principle of non-discrimination, and should not be used to prosecute human rights defenders. With regard to the laws under which the victims have been prosecuted, it is established in paragraph 25 of the General Comment that a norm, to be characterized as a “law”, must be formulated with sufficient precision to enable an individual to regulate his or her conduct accordingly. A law may not confer unfettered discretion for the restriction of freedom of expression on those charged with its execution. Laws must provide sufficient guidance to those charged with their execution to enable them to ascertain what sorts of expression are properly restricted and what sorts are not (CCPR/C/GC/34).

Human Rights Council resolution 24/5 “reminds States of their obligation to respect and fully protect the rights of all individuals to assemble peacefully and associate freely, online as well as offline, including in the context of elections and including persons espousing minority or dissenting views or beliefs, human rights defenders, trade unionists and others, including migrants, seeking to exercise or to promote these rights, and to take all necessary measures to ensure that any restrictions of the free exercise of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association are in accordance with their obligations under international human rights law (OP2)”

The 1981 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (A/RES/36/55) states in its article 2(1) that: "[n]o one shall be subject to discrimination by any State, institution, group of persons, or person on grounds of religion or other belief." According to article 4(1), "[a]ll States shall take effective measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief in the recognition, exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms [...]" Furthermore, article 4(2) states that "[a]ll States shall make all efforts to enact or rescind legislation where necessary to prohibit any such discrimination, and to take all appropriate measures to combat intolerance on the grounds of religion or other beliefs in this matter. According to articles 6(d) and (e), the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief includes also the freedom "to write, issue and disseminate relevant publications in these areas", and the freedom "to teach a religion or belief in places suitable for these purposes".

The Human Rights Committee in its general comment No. 22, paragraph 2, raised concern over "any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reason, including the fact that they are newly established, or represent religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility on the part of a predominant religious community."

Recognizing that those individuals affected are members of religious minorities in Qatar, the international standards regarding the protection of the rights of persons belonging to religious minorities, in particular to article 27 of the ICCPR, guarantees minorities, inter alia, the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion. Further, article 1.1 of the 1992 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic calls on States to protect the existence of religious minorities within their territories and to encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity. Article 2 provides for the effective participation of minorities in cultural, religious, social, economic and public life, as well as in decision-making processes on matters affecting them, whereas article 4 establishes that States shall take measures to ensure that persons belonging to minorities may exercise fully and effectively all their human rights and fundamental freedoms without any discrimination and in full equality before the law.

The 1992 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, adopted in General Assembly resolution 47/135, refers to the obligation of States to protect the existence and the identity of minorities within their territories and to adopt measures to that end (article 1) as well as to adopt the required measures to ensure that persons belonging to minorities can exercise their human rights without discrimination (article 4). Article 2 further establishes that persons belonging to minorities have the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, and to use their own language, in private and in public, freely, without any interference or any form of discrimination and provides for the effective participation of minorities in cultural, religious, social, economic and public life, as well as in decision-making processes on matters affecting them.

Furthermore, the recommendations of the sixth session of the Forum on Minority Issues on “Guaranteeing the rights of religious minorities” (A/HRC/25/66) and in particular recommendation 17, calls on States to ensure that “there is no discriminatory treatment in regard to the legal and administrative recognition of all religious and belief groups. Any registration and administrative procedures, including those relating to the property and the functioning of places of worship and other religious-based institutions, should be conducted according to non-discrimination standards. International standards do not allow non-recognition of religious or belief groups to result in denial of their rights. Such standards require an inclusive approach to be taken”.