

KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in Bahrain trended positive in some areas but remained the same in others. Bahrain continued its significant efforts to promote international religious freedom and interreligious understanding through the announcement of an Ambassador-at-Large for Peaceful Coexistence and Religious Freedom and the opening of the King Hamad Global Center for Interfaith Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence. Non-Muslim religious communities continued to be able to practice their faith freely, both publicly and privately. In addition, the Shi'a Muslim community generally enjoyed freedom of worship throughout the country. At the same time, a USCIRF visit to Bahrain in March 2019 found that the government continued its discrimination and repression of the Shi'a Muslim community on the basis of their religious identity in certain areas. In 2018, the government arrested

some Shi'a Muslim clerics during Ashura religious observances, allegedly for "inciting hatred." In the November 2018 local and parliamentary elections, some Shi'a Bahraini candidates were prevented from participating, and several party leaders were arrested or remained in jail. Some human rights defenders who advocated for greater religious freedom remained in prison. Furthermore, discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in government employment and some public and social services also continued, even though Bahrain's laws affirm principles of nondiscrimination.

In 2019, USCIRF places Bahrain on its Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" standard for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Urge the Bahraini government to clarify the terms and enforcement of the 2016 amendment to article 5 of the 2005 Political Society Law, which prohibits religious figures from "inciting hatred," and repeal articles 309 and 310 of Bahrain's Penal Code that impose fines and jail time for blasphemy;
- Work with the Bahraini government to continue to implement reforms consistent with the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report—specifically recommendation 1724a relating to censorship of beliefs and recommendation 1722d relating to holding prisoners incognito—and urge it to conduct and make public an annual progress report;
- Press the Bahraini government to enforce existing laws, including Royal Decree 36 of 2012 and Royal Decree 95 of 2018, prohibiting employment discrimination on the basis of sectarian affiliation;
- Continue to train security officials, prosecutors, and judges to better address sectarian violence and incitement by enhancing programs that promote sectarian reconciliation, support the rule of law, and counter violent extremism—such as ongoing community policing initiatives; and
- Press Bahrain's government to ensure freedom of religion and reduce sectarian incitement by passing the bill pending in the Ministerial Committee for Social Services, Communication and Media, providing accountability for past abuses against the Shi'a Muslim community, and unconditionally releasing prisoners of conscience and religious freedom advocates.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Kingdom of Bahrain

GOVERNMENT

Constitutional Monarchy

POPULATION

1,442,659

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Registered religious organizations represent Sunni and Shi'a Islam, as well as Christianity (including Catholic, Evangelical, Anglican, Seventh-day Adventist, Syrian Orthodox, Malankara Orthodox, and Indian Orthodox churches), Hinduism, the Baha'i faith, Buddhism, and Judaism

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

70% Muslim (60% Shi'a, 35–40% Sunni)

14.5% Christian

9.8% Hindu

2.5% Buddhist

0.6% Jewish

2.6% Other (including Folk Religions, Unaffiliated, Sikhs, and Baha'is)

*Estimates compiled from the U.S. State Department and CIA World Factbook

BACKGROUND

According to Bahrain's constitution, Islam is the religion of the state and Shari'ah is a principal source for legislation. The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, the inviolability of places of worship, and freedom to perform religious rites. Of the country's population of approximately 1.4 million, slightly less than half are Bahraini citizens, with a small majority comprising expatriate workers, primarily from South and Southeast Asia. The majority of Bahraini citizens are Shi'a Muslims.

In recent years, Bahraini authorities have cited increased efforts by Iran to expand its influence in the country as the reason for heightened government concern about subversive activity by Iranian-backed Shi'a militants. While Iran's support for such activities in Bahrain has been documented widely, the Bahraini government has sometimes used this pretext to crack down on some Shi'a opposition leaders, clerics, and activists without substantiating charges of subversion or criminal activity.

In 2011, Bahraini citizens protested in public spaces, including Pearl Roundabout in Manama, calling for political reforms. While the government

initially allowed these protests to take place, it eventually cracked down with the assistance of Saudi Arabia, killing scores of protestors, demolishing dozens of Shi'a mosques, and destroying Pearl Roundabout itself. In June 2011, Bahrain's king established the BICI to investigate these events. The BICI released its report to the king in a live televised event in November 2011 along with a set of 26 recommendations. Bahrain's government committed to implementing these reforms, and announced full implementation in 2016. However, a June 2016 U.S. Department of State [assessment](#) of this implementation challenged that conclusion and noted that "more work remains to be done."

Since then, the government has continued its crackdown on political opposition, prosecuting Bahrainis whose beliefs differ from the government's position. In March 2018, Bahrain's Ministry of Interior threatened punishment against those who criticized the government online despite a BICI report recommendation to "consider relaxing censorship" and "provide opposition groups with an adequate voice." Activist Ebrahim Sharif was summoned by the public prosecutor in December 2018 for a tweet urging Sudanese president Omar Bashir to leave office

amid protests. Also, in December, Bahrain's Court of Cassation upheld the conviction and five-year prison sentence of human rights defender Nabeel Rajab for tweeting in opposition to the Saudi military campaign in Yemen, which Bahrain's government supports, and accusing Bahrain's prison authorities of torture. During USCIRF's March 2019 visit after the reporting period, Bahrain's government did not grant the USCIRF delegation a request to visit Rajab in prison; he has in the past advocated for religious freedom in the country as head of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights. Bahrain also has not yet enacted a draft law that would curb incitement to violence, hatred, and sectarianism; by the end of the reporting period, the bill had been referred to the Ministerial Committee for Social Services, Communication and Media, which is expected to be introduced for debate in parliament.

Article 169 of Bahrain's Penal Code imposes up to two years' imprisonment and a fine for publishing "falsified" or "untrue" reports, and states that laws on freedom of expression must be "compatible with values of a democratic society." Such broad language, subject to varying interpretations, increases the likelihood of infringement on freedom of expression, including religious expression. Furthermore, articles 309 and 310 of the Penal Code criminalize insulting a recognized religious community, its rituals, or religious symbols—with a term of imprisonment up to one year or a fine not exceeding \$265 (100 Bahraini dinars). Despite charges and convictions in previous years, there were no known convictions during the reporting period.

On November 24, 2018, Bahrain held parliamentary and municipal council elections. While Shi'a Muslim candidates faced barriers to participating, six women were elected to parliament, as well as Bahrain's first woman parliament speaker, Fouzia Zainal. Jewish member of parliament Nancy Khedouri was also appointed vice president of the parliament's Foreign Affairs, Defense, and National Security Committee.

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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2018

Positive Developments

In July 2018, at the State Department [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#), Bahraini foreign minister Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa announced the

creation of an Ambassador-at-Large for Peaceful Coexistence and Religious Freedom, though this position had not been filled by the end of the reporting period. As part of its "This Is Bahrain" public diplomacy initiative run by

the Bahrain Federation of Expatriate Associations under the patronage of King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, Bahrain endowed a chair in interfaith dialogue and coexistence at Sapienza University in Rome, Italy, in November 2018. It also continued to support the King Hamad Global Center for Interfaith Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence, which hosts interreligious dialogues, conferences, and events related to religious freedom and peaceful coexistence. The Center also announced plans to create a Museum of Tolerance in Manama. During 2018, Bahrain's crown prince also hosted a delegation from the Syrian Orthodox Church and highlighted the country's commitment to religious tolerance. Throughout the year, Bahrain's government engaged proactively and constructively with USCIRF on religious freedom issues, including during a visit to the kingdom in March 2019 where USCIRF met with civil society leaders, government officials, and His Highness Sheikh Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa, and attended the 200th anniversary celebration of Bahrain's Hindu community.

In addition, internal accountability institutions created in response to recommendations from the 2011 BICI report—including the Special Investigations Unit, National Institute for Human Rights, Ombudsman's Office, and High Commission on Prisoners and Detainees—continued to follow up on complaints of abuse and mistreatment to the extent permitted by law. For example, an Ombudsman's Office investigation led to the reopening of a death penalty case that was retried in early 2019, just after the reporting period.

Treatment of Shi'a Muslims

In 2018, Bahrain's government continued its targeting of some Shi'a Muslims in the country. While government officials discouraged sectarian language in media outlets, progovernment and private media at times used inflammatory, sectarian rhetoric. Sheikh Isa Qasim, Bahrain's leading Shi'a cleric, had his citizenship revoked by administrative order in June 2016; such orders are usually unappealable, but past removals of citizenship required a royal decree or an order from the Ministry of Interior, both of which are subject to an extra layer of appeals. Nevertheless, Sheikh Qasim was granted a temporary passport in 2018 to travel to London for medical treatment following almost two years under house arrest. Shortly after the reporting period, upon completion of his medical treatment in London, Sheikh Qasim continued on to Iraq and Iran. He remained in Iran at the time of this report and visited the shrine of the leader of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Sheikh Qasim subsequently released statements from within Iran criticizing the Bahraini government. Bahraini officials have claimed the latter visit constituted evidence of their longtime accusation that Sheikh Qasim supports Iran's alleged political activities in the kingdom. Bahraini opposition leaders have differing views on Sheikh Qasim's apparent exile in Iran, some noting that Sheikh Qasim also visited a number of Shi'a shrines in both Iraq and Iran.

Bahrain also continued to arrest and detain Shi'a clerics on the basis of their religious identity. Shi'a cleric Sayyed Adnan al-Sayed Hashim was arrested in Diraz in January 2018 and held incognito for two weeks. This arrest contravened the BICI report's recommendation not to detain individuals "without access to the outside world for more than two or three days." A Bahraini appeals court also upheld a verdict against the imam of the Shi'a al-Kheif mosque, Sheikh Isa al-Moemen, for "inciting hatred" in a July 2017 sermon. Moemen served a three-month sentence and was released in May 2018. In September 2018, during Ashura, three Shi'a clerics—Sheikh Yassin al-Harami, Sheikh Hani al-Bana', and Sheikh Mohammed al-Sahlawi—were arrested for

allegedly "encouraging acts of terrorism" and "inciting hatred against the regime"; according to groups that monitor religious freedom in Bahrain, these charges were unsubstantiated. In November 2018, Bahrain's Ministry of Interior arrested leading Shi'a cleric Sheikh Khalid Fadhil al-Zaki during security raids in Shakhura and Abu Saiba and held him until mid-December 2018.

As in previous years, in September 2018 Bahraini security officials clamped down on peaceful Shi'a Muslim religious rituals during Ashura observances. While Bahrain is the only Gulf state to recognize Ashura as a public holiday, authorities restricted celebrations in some areas. More than 15 Shi'a clerics, chanters, and lay assistants reportedly were summoned and interrogated over their sermons. Bahraini authorities claimed 13 preachers were arrested in 2018 for violating sermon laws, seven of whom were Sunni Muslim and six of whom were Shi'a Muslim, and that all offenders were suspended from preaching. Bahraini security forces destroyed banners and signs advertising Ashura rituals claiming that the displaying of banners across streets posed a safety hazard. In April 2018, Bahrain's Ministry of Interior demolished a temporary building meant to replace the Shi'a Imam al-Askari mosque in Hamad Town, northern Bahrain, for the second time and without prior notice, claiming it was subject to demolition under the Building Regulations Code Law No. 13 of 1977 and the Road Works Law No. 2 of 1996. In August, the Ministry of Interior demolished the fence and the foundation marking the outline of the al-Alawiyat mosque in al-Zinj, which had been destroyed in 2011. Since 2011, Bahraini authorities have [destroyed more than 38 mosques](#) and Shi'a religious institutions. The Bahraini government has stated that the mosques it destroyed did not comply with safety and zoning laws, and that a small number of mosque destructions in a country with 608

places of Shi'a worship is not evidence of a religious freedom violation.

Members of Bahrain's Shi'a Muslim community reportedly still cannot serve in the active military, only in administrative

positions, and there are no Shi'a Muslims in the upper levels of the Bahraini government security apparatus,

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including the military and police, with the exception of a Shi'a Muslim who holds the rank of brigadier general. Many Shi'a public sector employees who were dismissed from their jobs because of participating in the 2011 protests were reinstated in lower-level jobs, positions outside of their specialty, or positions without actual responsibilities. The Bahraini government continued to deny any discrimination against the Shi'a Muslim community in government employment, and has asserted there has been progress to diversify the military and security apparatus, for example, by recruiting from all segments of society—including the Shi'a Muslim community—into its community policing program. Activists informed USCIRF during its March 2019 visit that the government refused to track the exclusion of Shi'a Muslims from employment in the military and government on the grounds that keeping such records would be a violation of privacy. Several activists noted that while there is no formal hiring discrimination against Shi'a Muslims, many employers ask questions that indirectly reveal an applicant's religious affiliation. Bahraini government officials noted that members of the royal family have intervened when cases of discrimination were brought to their attention.

Discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in the November Elections

The Bahraini government continued its discrimination against Shi'a electoral candidates in 2018. No candidates were allowed to run from the Shi'a al-Wefaq party, which the government dissolved in 2016 after accusing it of providing “a nourishing environment for terrorism, extremism, and violence.” A 2016 amendment by King Al Khalifa to Law 14 of 2002 banned anyone who had received a prison sentence of six months or longer from participating in elections, disqualifying hundreds of Shi'a activists and opposition figures who had previously protested mistreatment. Ahead of the elections, Sheikh Ali Salman, the former secretary-general of the banned al-Wefaq party, and Sheikh Hassan Sultan, a senior Shi'a cleric, were sentenced to life in prison on

spurious national security charges. Ali Salman had his sentence extended from four years to life in prison three weeks before the elections took place. Prior to the elections, Bahraini authorities arrested former Shi'a al-Wefaq parliament minister Ali Rashed al-Asheeri for a tweet expressing his intent to boycott the November 2018 elections.

In 2016, King Al Khalifa amended a 2005 law banning religious parties from political participation to also preclude anyone engaged in politics from giving religious speeches, sermons, or spiritual guidance.

Bahrain's government continued to use this amendment to prevent Shi'a Muslim religious figures from running for and holding political office, while allowing Sunni religious figures to do so. In the 2018 elections, six candidates affiliated with

the Sunni Salafist Asalah Islamic Society ran for office, three of whom were elected to parliament. Candidates linked to the Muslim Brotherhood-backed Al Menbar Islamic Society also ran, but did not win any seats.

Treatment of Non-Muslims

Approximately half of the expatriate workers in Bahrain are non-Muslim. The government officially recognizes 19 religious entities, including more than a dozen Christian denominations, a tiny Jewish community, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Baha'is. Generally speaking, these communities are able to publicly and privately practice their faiths without interference or limitation. Bahrain hosts the Arabian Peninsula's only intact synagogue and the seat of the Catholic Vicarate of Northern Arabia, which includes Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. In March 2019, after the reporting period, USCIRF participated in a celebration of the 200th anniversary of the Hindu community in Bahrain at the Hindu Temple in Manama (the oldest in the Gulf) with Prince Abdullah bin Hamad Al Khalifa and Bahrain's Foreign Minister Khalid bin Ahmad Al Khalifa. Prince Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa also hosted USCIRF and dignitaries for a reception at his reception hall (*majles*) to commemorate the event.

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Christians in Bahrain comprise 14.5 percent of the population and are generally free to practice their faith. There are several churches representing Catholic, Anglican, Evangelical, Orthodox, and nondenominational communities, among others. A third Catholic church under construction, Our Lady of Arabia, will be the largest Catholic church in the Gulf region upon its completion, scheduled for 2021. However, two letters written to the Bahraini royal court in 2018 requesting new land for a Christian cemetery have not been returned. In addition, since only umbrella Christian organizations are formally registered with the government, several congregations that meet under the auspices of these organizations have had their assets frozen because they are not formally registered. Some of these congregations waited months for these issues to be resolved so that they could spend money on salaries and programs.

U.S. POLICY

U.S.-Bahraini relations are based on shared geopolitical concerns, including the regional influence of Iran and security cooperation to combat extremism. Bahrain, a longstanding U.S. ally in the region, has hosted a U.S. naval presence since 1946 and is home to more than 8,300 members of the U.S. armed services, mostly affiliated with the Fifth Fleet of the United States Navy. In 2002, the United States designated Bahrain as a major non-North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally, allowing the country access to defense research cooperation and purchase of certain otherwise-restricted U.S. arms. Bahrain and the United States cooperate on regional security, counterterrorism, and counter-smuggling operations. The United States has also assisted Bahrain in implementing a version of the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) program that targets extremism. Economically, Bahrain and the United States also benefit from the 2006 [U.S.-Bahrain Free Trade Agreement](#), which in recent years has generated nearly \$2 billion annually.

The 2011 BICI report has provided the major framework in recent years for U.S. assessments of progress on human rights reforms in Bahrain. In both 2013 and 2016, Congress directed the secretary of state to submit an assessment of Bahrain's progress in implementing the BICI report's 26 recommendations, including a description of specific steps taken and an assessment

of compliance with each recommendation. The State Department produced two such reports, most recently in 2016. Both found that while the Bahraini government had made some progress, it had not achieved full implementation of the report's recommendations, particularly relating to the independence and accountability of investigative bodies and promotion of national reconciliation. The 2016 report noted progress in rebuilding demolished Shi'a mosques and in implementing tolerance in school curricula. However, it cautioned that "more work needs to be done" for Bahrain to fully implement the recommendations outlined in the report.

The Trump administration has prioritized a close defense relationship with Bahrain in order to counter Iran's influence in the region and attempts to destabilize Bahrain. In July 2018, the State Department [designated](#) the al-Ashtar Brigades (AAB) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, citing material support provided to the group by Iran. In August 2018, the State Department [sanctioned](#) AAB's leader, Qassim Ali Ahmed, as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. In September 2018, the State Department announced the potential sale of rocket launchers to Bahrain worth \$300 million; the sale was approved in November.

In July 2018, Bahrain participated in the State Department's International Religious Freedom Ministerial, where it announced the creation of an Ambassador-at-Large for Peaceful Coexistence and Religious Freedom. Then Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis [visited](#) Bahrain in March 2018 and returned for a meeting later in October 2018. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo visited Bahrain in early 2019 and [discussed](#) "religious coexistence and freedom of religion" with Bahrain's king, crown prince, and foreign minister. State Department officials have emphasized freedom of religious expression for Shi'a clerics and prisoners in conversations with Bahraini officials, and continue to advocate for reforms that take into consideration the needs of all citizens regardless of religious affiliation.

INDIVIDUAL VIEWS OF COMMISSIONER JOHNNIE MOORE

Respectfully, I do not personally believe that Bahrain any longer meets the threshold of Tier 2 status when one compares it to other countries that obviously do meet

that threshold. One needs only to consider the amount and types of progress the kingdom has made in such a short period of time on the basis of direct engagement with the religious freedom community and I do believe the religious freedom community has had a tendency to underestimate the legitimate security questions the kingdom has long faced given its location and the sad role religion has played in regional conflict. Bahrain's level of substantive engagement with the religious freedom community is beyond compare with any other country cited on this list. They have gone so far as to change laws and policy resulting in some of the progress cited in this report, established a regional center to promote peaceful coexistence, and the king's own Bahrain Declaration for Religious Freedom was the first-ever such document in the Arab world to clearly endorse "choice" as it relates to determining one's religion, written by an Arab monarch, nonetheless. Of course, there remain certain questions which merit continued engagement, which this report cites, but I could not bring myself to compare this country to others on Tier 2, based upon my personal experience.