

# **BAHRAIN 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution declares Islam to be the official religion and sharia to be a principal source for legislation. It provides for freedom of conscience, the inviolability of places of worship, and freedom to perform religious rites. The constitution guarantees the right to express and publish opinions provided these do not infringe on the “fundamental beliefs of Islamic doctrine.” The law prohibits anti-Islamic publications and mandates imprisonment for “exposing the state’s official religion to offense and criticism.” In general, non-Muslim religious minorities including Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Baha’is, Buddhists, and Jews reported they could practice their religion openly without fear of interference from the government. According to press, the government continued to question, detain, and arrest Shia clerics and community members. Some reports stated a number of clerics were detained over the content of their sermons during the commemoration of Ashura in September; authorities released all of those detained without charge by October 30. Shia Muslims held processions to commemorate Ashura and Arbaeen throughout the country with limited involvement by the government. On November 4, the Court of Appeal, after overturning a previous acquittal, sentenced Sheikh Ali Salman, Secretary General of the dissolved, and largely Shia, opposition Wifaq political society, to life in prison on espionage charges for allegedly conspiring with Qatar to undermine the government in 2011. On November 13, authorities detained Ali Al Asheeri, a Shia former Wifaq member of parliament (MP), for social media posts that the government described as “incitement of non-participation in the elections.” In February the government provided input to the UN Human Rights Committee (UNHRC) regarding the country’s compliance with its ICCPR obligations, noting that the country’s constitution guaranteed freedom of conscience and religious belief, as well as freedom to build and access places of worship without discrimination. In November the UNHRC, in its final concluding observations on the country’s compliance with its International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) obligations, stated its concern about “reports members of the Shia community have been subjected to restrictions to their rights to worship and profess their religious beliefs” and “reports that the Shia population is underrepresented in political and public life.” On July 11, the government removed concrete barriers, police checkpoints, and barbed wire that had previously restricted entry into the predominantly Shia neighborhood of Diraz, but local Shia continued to state that authorities prevented nonresidents from leading Friday prayers. On June 12, the government enacted an amendment to the Exercising Political Rights Law, which

prohibited former members of Wifaq, as well as other banned political societies, from running as candidates in municipal and parliamentary elections. Based on reports it received, Amnesty International (AI) published a report in September stating Shia prisoners were vulnerable to intimidation, harassment, and ill-treatment, and denied access to needed medical care because of their religious and political affiliation. Shia community representatives said there was ongoing discrimination in government employment, education, and the justice system. In June the government inaugurated the King Hamad Center for Interfaith Dialogue and Coexistence and in July it announced its plan to establish an Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom and Coexistence. In June the Catholic Church held a groundbreaking ceremony for the construction of a cathedral to be built on land donated by the king.

Representatives of the Shia community reported the higher unemployment rate and lower socioeconomic status of Shia were exacerbated by continued discrimination against hiring of Shia in the private as well as the public sectors. Anti-Shia and anti-Sunni commentary appeared on social media, including allegations that some prominent former and current Shia political leaders were “traitors” and “Iranian servants.” According to non-Muslim religious groups, including Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Baha’is, Buddhist, and Jews, there was a high degree of tolerance within society for minority religious beliefs, traditions and houses of worship. Although there is no law that prevents individuals from converting from any religion to another, societal attitudes and behavior discouraged conversion from Islam.

The Secretary of State, Deputy Secretary of State, Ambassador, and embassy officers met with government officials to urge respect for freedom of expression; to ensure full inclusion of all Bahraini citizens in political, social, and economic opportunities; and to pursue reconciliation between the government and Shia communities. U.S. officials also continued to advocate for the government to pursue political reforms, which would take into consideration the needs of all citizens regardless of religious affiliation. The Ambassador and other embassy officers continued to meet regularly with religious leaders of a broad spectrum of faiths, representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and political groups to discuss their freedom of religion and freedom of expression as it relates to religious practices.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 1.4 million (July 2018 estimate). Of the total population, citizens number 677,000, according to the local government 2017 statistics, its most recent available estimate. According to 2017 U.S. estimates, Muslims make up 73.7 percent of the total population, Christians 9.3 percent, Jews 0.1 percent, and others 16.9 percent (Hindus, Baha'is, Sikhs, and Buddhists).

According to the government, the citizen population comprises approximately 45 percent of the total population. The government does not publish statistics regarding the sectarian breakdown between Shia and Sunni Muslims. Most estimates from NGOs state Shia constitute a majority (55 to 60 percent) of the citizen population. Local sources estimate 99 percent of citizens are Muslim, while Christians, Hindus, Baha'is, and Jews together constitute the remaining 1 percent. According to Jewish community members, there are approximately 36 Jewish citizens, from six families, in the country.

Most of the foreign residents are migrant workers from South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Arab countries. Local government estimates report approximately 51 percent of foreign residents are Muslim, 31 percent Hindus, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Sikhs, 17 percent Christians (primarily Roman Catholic, Protestant, Syrian Orthodox, and Mar Thoma from South India), and less than 1 percent Jewish.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

According to the constitution, Islam is the official religion and the state safeguards the country's Islamic heritage. The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, the inviolability of places of worship, the freedom to perform religious rites, and the freedom to hold religious parades and religious gatherings, "in accordance with the customs observed in the country." The constitution provides for the freedom to form associations as long as these do not infringe on the official religion or public order, and it prohibits discrimination based on religion or creed. All citizens have equal rights by law. According to the constitution, all persons are equal without discrimination on the grounds of gender, origin, language, or faith. The labor law prohibits discrimination in the public sector on grounds of religion or faith. The law also stipulates recourse through a complaint process to the Ministry of Labor and Social Development to legal bodies in the event of discrimination or dismissal in the work place on the basis of religion.

The constitution guarantees the right to express and publish opinions provided these do not infringe on the “fundamental beliefs of Islamic doctrine,” and do not prejudice the unity of the people, or arouse discord or sectarianism.

Parliament consists of an appointed upper house, the Shura (Consultative) Council, and the elected Council of Representatives (COR) lower house, each with 40 seats. The country holds parliamentary elections every four years. A 2012 constitutional amendment permits the king to dissolve the COR, but it requires that he first consult with the presidents of both of parliament’s upper and lower houses as well as the head of the Constitutional Court. The king also has the power to amend the constitution and to propose, ratify, and promulgate laws. The Shura Council has the power to overrule legislation by the lower house and the lower house has the authority to examine and pass legislation proposed by the king or cabinet.

The law prohibits anti-Islamic publications and broadcast media programs and mandates imprisonment of no less than six months for “exposing the state’s official religion to offense and criticism.”

Muslim religious groups must register with the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs (MOJIA) to operate. Sunni religious groups register with the ministry through the Sunni Waqf, while Shia religious groups register through the Jaafari (Shia) Waqf. The waqfs are endowment boards, which supervise, fund the work of, and perform a variety of activities related to mosques and prayer halls. Non-Muslim congregations and groups must register with the Ministry of Labor and Social Development (MOLSD) to operate. In order to register, a group must submit an official letter requesting registration; copies of minutes from the founders’ committee meeting; a detailed list of founders, including names, ages, nationalities, occupations, and addresses; and other information such as the group’s bylaws and bank account information. Religious groups also may need approval from the Ministry of Education (MOE), the Ministry of Information Affairs, or the Ministry of Interior (MOI), depending on the nature of the group’s intended activities. If any religious group organizes functions outside of its designated physical space without approval, it may be subject to government prosecution and a fine. The law prohibits activities falling outside of an organization’s charter. The penal code does not specifically address the activities of unregistered religious groups, but provides for the closing of any unlicensed branch of an international organization plus imprisonment of up to six months and fines of up to 50 Bahraini dinars (\$130) for the individuals responsible for setting up the branch.

According to the MOLSD's official website, 19 non-Muslim religious groups are registered with the MOLSD: the National Evangelical Church, Bahrain Malayalee Church of South India Parish, Word of Life International Church, St. Christopher's Cathedral and Awali Anglican Church, Full Gospel Church of Philadelphia, St. Mary and Anba Rewis Church (St. Mary's Indian Orthodox Cathedral), Jacobite Syrian Christian Association and St. Peter's Prayer Group (St. Peter's Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church), St. Mary's Orthodox Syrian Church, Sacred Heart Catholic Church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Church of Christ, Greek Orthodox Church, Pentecostal Church, Baps Shri Swaminarayan Mandir Bahrain (Hindu Temple), Indian Religious and Social Group (Hindu Temple), Spiritual Sikh Cultural and Social Group, St. Thomas Church Evangelical Church of Bahrain, Marthoma Parish, and the Anglican and Episcopal Church in Bahrain. Additionally, non-Muslim, nonregistered groups include the Baha'i, Buddhist, and Jewish communities.

The penal code calls for punishment of not more than one year's imprisonment or a fine of no more than 100 dinars (\$270) for offending one of the recognized religious groups or their practices, or for openly defaming a religious figure considered sacred to members of a particular group.

The law stipulates fines or imprisonment for insulting an institution, announcing false or malicious news, spreading rumors, encouraging others to show contempt for a different religious denomination or sect, illegally gathering, and advocating for a change of government, among other offenses. The Office of the Ombudsman addresses the rights of prisoners, including the right to practice their religion.

The MOJIA oversees the activities of both the Sunni Waqf and the Jaafari Waqf. The respective endowment boards supervise the activities of mosques and prayer halls, review and approve clerical appointments for religious sites under their purview, and fund expenses for the building and maintenance of religious sites. According to the government, since August, MOJIA no longer funds endowment board members' salaries. Endowment boards, like the remainder of MOJIA employees, now fall under the Civil Service Bureau, whose oversight during the year was changed to the crown prince-led Civil Service Council. Annually, the government allocates 2.7 million dinars (\$7.16 million) to each endowment board. Tithes, income from property rentals, and other private sources largely fund the remainder of the endowment boards' operations. The endowment boards may pay flat commissions and bonuses to preachers and other religious figures.

The Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (SCIA) oversees general religious activities taking place within the country, and reviews the parliament's draft legislation as well as the publication of Islamic studies school curricula and official religious texts. The council comprises a chairman, a deputy chairman, and 16 prominent religious scholars, eight Sunni and eight Shia, most of them prominent preachers or sharia judges. The king appoints council members for a four-year term. Independent from other government scholarship programs, the council offers university scholarships for advanced Islamic studies for low-income students. The SCIA reviews all legislation proposed by the parliament to ensure the draft law's compliance with sharia. The council also consults with other government entities before issuing permits to new Islamic societies or centers. The council is responsible for reviewing the content of Islamic programs aired or broadcast on official government media, such as the official television station and official radio programs. The council also organizes interfaith conferences and workshops.

The king has sole legal authority to allocate public land, including for religious purposes, although he may delegate this authority to government officials, including the prime minister. By law, construction of places of worship requires approvals from appropriate national and municipal authorities. The law permits non-Muslim houses of worship to display crosses or other religious symbols on the outside of their premises. Government entities involved in allocating building permits include the MOJIA for non-Islamic religious sites, either the Sunni Waqf or the Shia Waqf under the MOJIA for Islamic sites, the Survey and Restoration Directorate, and the Survey Department. The construction of a new mosque, whether Shia or Sunni, is based on a government determination of the need for a new mosque in the area.

The law regulates Islamic religious instruction at all levels of the educational system. The government funds public schools for grades 1-12; Islamic studies are mandatory for all Muslim students, and are optional for non-Muslims. Private schools must be registered with the government and, with a few exceptions (for example, a foreign-funded and foreign-operated school), are also required to provide Islamic religious education for Muslim students. Private schools wishing to provide non-Islamic religious education to non-Muslims must receive permission from the MOE. Outside of school hours, both Muslim and non-Muslim students engage in religious studies as their parents deem fit.

According to the MOE, no particular school of jurisprudence forms the basis of the Islamic studies portion of the public school curriculum. According to the MOE, in coordination with the SCIA, a team of experts routinely reviews and develops the

Islamic studies public school curriculum to emphasize shared Islamic values between different Sunni and Shia schools of thought, reject extremism, and promote tolerance and coexistence. According to the government, the SCIA provides financial assistance to the six registered *hawzas* (Shia seminaries); other *hawzas* choose to be privately funded. The government does not permit foreign donors to contribute to privately funded *hawzas*. There are no restrictions on religious studies abroad. The government also permits non-Muslim groups to offer religious instruction to their adherents.

According to the constitution, sharia forms a principal basis for legislation, although civil and criminal matters are governed by a civil code. With regard to family and personal status matters, the constitution states inheritance is a guaranteed right governed by sharia. It also guarantees the duties and status of women and their equality with men, according to sharia. The personal status law states either the Sunni or Shia interpretation of sharia with regard to family matters, including inheritance, child custody, marriage, and divorce, shall govern depending on the religious affiliation of the party. Mixed Sunni-Shia families may choose which court system will hear their case. The provisions of the law on personal status apply to both Shia and Sunni women, requiring a woman's consent for marriage and permitting women to include conditions in the marriage contract. Non-Muslims may marry in civil or religious ceremonies, and civil courts make decisions for them on matters such as divorce and child custody.

The government does not designate religious affiliation on national identity documents, including birth certificates. Applications for birth certificates and national identity documents, however, record a child's religion (either Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or Other), but not denomination. Hospital admission forms and school registration forms may also request information on an individual's religion.

The constitution says the state shall strive to strengthen ties with Islamic countries. It specifies the succession to the position of king is hereditary, passing from eldest son to eldest son. The royal family is Sunni.

The law prohibits individuals from being members of political societies or becoming involved in political activities while serving in a clerical role at a religious institution, including on a voluntary basis.

In June the king signed into law amendments to the Exercising Political Rights Law of 2002, which prohibits the candidacies of leaders and members of political societies dissolved by a final court order. The law excludes former members of

predominantly Shia Wifaq political society as well as other parties, whose membership is not predominantly Shia, including the Wa'ad political society. The new law also prohibits felons and anyone previously convicted and sentenced to more than six months in prison from running for office. On July 3, the king signed an amendment to the Law on Associations, Social and Cultural Clubs, Private Bodies Working in the Field of Youth and Sports, and Private Institutions that prevents members of dissolved opposition groups, such as Wifaq and Wa'ad, from serving on the board of directors of nongovernmental and civil society organizations, stipulating that an NGO board member must be able to continue to enjoy "the entirety of his civil and political rights."

By law, the government regulates and monitors the collection of money by religious and other organizations. Organizations wishing to collect money must first obtain authorization from the MOJIA.

The law guarantees inmates of correctional facilities the right to attend burials and receive condolences outside of prison.

The country is party to the ICCPR with reservations stating it interprets the covenant's provisions relating to freedom of religion, family rights, and equality between men and women before the law as "not affecting in any way" the prescriptions of sharia.

### **Government Practices**

Because religion and politics are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. The government continued to question, detain, and arrest Shia clerics and community members. The government continued to monitor and provide general guidance for the content of sermons and to bring charges against clerics who repeatedly spoke on unapproved topics. Authorities arrested Shia cleric Isa Al Mo'min on February 4 for "inciting hatred against the government" during a Friday sermon and sentenced him to three months in prison. International and local NGOs reported the police summoned more than 25 individuals, including clerics, in the lead-up to, as well as after, the September 20-21 Ashura commemoration, the most significant day of the Shia religious calendar. Based on reports it received, AI said that many of those detained were reportedly under investigation for inciting hatred against the regime and more than 15 clerics and lay assistants among them were "interrogated for the content of their sermons." The police held many individuals overnight; others were detained and released thereafter. According to local reports, of those



summoned, authorities detained nine for varying periods ranging from one day to over a month pending investigation. As of October 30, none remained in custody.

AI stated that prior to the November parliamentary elections, security forces carried out a series of arbitrary detentions of activists and religious figures suspected of supporting political opposition to the monarchy. On October 12, AI received reports that authorities detained approximately a dozen protestors in the village of Karrana and held them for approximately one month for unlawful assembly. On November 4, security forces entered approximately 10 private homes in the Shia majority town of Karbabad and detained 16 individuals, seven of them minors. In November AI received reports of the re-establishment of police checkpoints in the majority Shia village of Arad, the neighborhoods of al-Dair and Samahij, which have notable Shia concentrations, and the religiously mixed locality of Hamad Town. Several internal checkpoints and roadblocks remained in place in the mostly Shia town of Sanabis. On July 11, the government removed concrete barriers, barbed wire, and police checkpoints that had previously restricted entry into the predominantly Shia neighborhood of Diraz. Local Shia continued to state that authorities prevented nonresidents, including Shia clerics, from entering to attend or lead prayers at mosques in Diraz.

On November 4, an appeals court sentenced Ali Salman, former leader of Wifaq, and two associates to life in prison for conspiring with Qatar to undermine the government in 2011. The appeals court reversed a previous June criminal court acquittal following an appeal by the Office of the Public Prosecutor. Authorities had already imprisoned Salman on another charge of inciting hatred; he was due to be released in December after completion of his original four-year sentence. The government tried Salman's two co-defendants, former Wifaq MPs Hasan Ali Juma Sultan and Ali Mahdi Ali Al Aswad, in absentia.

According to local press, NGO, and social media reports, on November 13, authorities detained former Wifaq MP Ali Al Asheeri for a social media post in which he announced his intention to boycott the elections, saying, "I am a Bahraini citizen deprived of my political and civil rights so I and my family will boycott the elections." He was released from detention November 27, and charges were still pending at year's end. The Public Prosecution stated authorities were investigating Al-Asheeri for "incitement of non-participation in the elections."

On April 18, a court sentenced former MP Mohamed Khalid to three months in prison for a posting on social media that "defamed" a religious symbol revered by Shia.

In January Shia cleric Hussain al-Qassab lost his appeal of a suspended one-year sentence and a 100,000 dinar (\$265,000) fine for money laundering and collecting funds without a government license. In 2017, the High Criminal Court convicted prominent Shia cleric Isa Qassim, who employed Qassab, on the same charges, but he did not appeal them. Media identified Qassim as the leading Shia cleric in the country and his supporters reported his office had collected the money and spent the funds in accordance with Shia customs and obligations, and said the government had targeted him due to his prominent status in the Shia community. Although Qassim had been under de facto house arrest since June 2016 and had his citizenship revoked, the government facilitated Qassim's travel to London for medical treatment. At year's end Qassim was still undergoing treatment in London.

On October 29, the Supreme Court of Appeals upheld the 2017 sentence imposed by the Lower Criminal Court on former Wifaq MP Hasan Isa to 10 years in prison and a fine of 100,000 dinars (\$265,000) for helping to finance a terrorist bomb attack in July 2015 that killed two police officers. Isa denied involvement in the bombing, saying he had not given money to terrorists, but had distributed funds to poor families in his role as a religious leader of his neighborhood.

Several Shia clerics arrested in 2011 remained in prison at year's end. They had been associated with the political opposition and given sentences ranging from 15 years to life imprisonment on charges related to terrorist activity or inciting hatred. Some human rights NGOs considered them to be political prisoners.

On November 6, the MOJIA issued a notice to imams, muezzins, and preachers that candidates in the upcoming parliamentary elections were prohibited from holding any campaign-related activities in houses of worship or religious centers. On November 15, both the government-sponsored Sunni and Jaafari Waqf endowment boards called on citizens to participate in the upcoming municipal and parliamentary elections.

In November the UNHRC released its concluding observations on the country and its compliance with its ICCPR obligations. The government provided input to the UNHRC in February, indicating that the constitution guarantees freedom of conscience and of religious belief, that no law or custom discriminates against any group or religion, and the constitution "envisages freedom of worship and access to such places, without discrimination in favour of one group or religion over another." The UNHRC, in its report, stated its concern about reports that

“members of the Shia community have been subjected to restrictions of their rights to worship and profess their religious beliefs ....” The committee also expressed concern about “reports that the Shia population is underrepresented in political and public life, including in the National Assembly.” On freedom of religion, the committee was “concerned about the existence of practices that adversely affect the exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief enshrined in article 18 of the Covenant” and suggested the government “should decriminalize blasphemy and guarantee that all people within their territory can fully enjoy the right to freedom of conscience, religion or belief,” including efforts to ensure the Shia population is fairly represented in public and political spheres and protected from discrimination.

In a submission prepared in June for the UNHRC review, a U.S.-based NGO stated that “the government has “intensified restrictions on Shia religious and cultural rights since 2011.” The submission also stated that “security forces routinely employ violence to suppress the Shia community’s rights to free assembly, free association, free speech, and free cultural or religious expression.”

In December the king appointed Shia citizens to senior leadership positions, including cabinet members and members of the Shura council. Official statistics on the religious affiliation or sect of public employees, members of parliament, or ministers are not maintained by the government. However, according to informal estimates, the 40-member Shura Council included 18 Shia members, one Jewish member, and one Christian member, while the remaining 20 members were Sunni. Following the parliamentary elections in November and December, sources suggested that of 40 seats in the Council of Representatives, 25 were won by members identified as Sunnis and 15 identified as Shia. None of the current members of parliament ran on an explicitly sectarian platform. Five of the 24 cabinet members, including one of the five deputy prime ministers, were Shia.

According to local activists and social media reports, the government’s amendments to the Exercising Political Rights Law of 2002, prevented at least five individuals from registering as candidates in the parliamentary and municipal elections in October due their prior affiliation with Wifaq, the largely Shia political society that was dissolved in 2016, a government decision that was upheld by the court in 2017. Although the government stated it viewed the amendments as necessary to prevent lawbreakers from participating in elections, many members of the Shia community stated they viewed the law as an attempt to limit participation of opposition-oriented Shia politicians. AI pointed out that since members of Wifaq, which it described as the largest Shia opposition group in the country, were

prohibited from participating in elections, the new law “will have a de facto discriminatory effect on Shias’ political participation.” According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), this legislation effectively disqualified opposition candidates from participating in the elections. After the elections, an NGO noted that “the [historic] gerrymandering of electoral districts ... has diluted the influence of ... [the] Shia majority.”

According to the government, it generally permitted prisoners to practice their religion, but there were reports from Shia activists that authorities sometimes denied prisoners access to religious services and prayer time. The Office of the Ombudsman, which was criticized by at least one NGO for failing to fulfill its mandate, reported it had not received any complaints or requests for assistance on the rights of prisoners to practice their religion during the year. According to MOI, 10 inmates were permitted to attend funerals outside of the prison during the year. The government continued not to provide regular statistics on detainees. Based on reports it received, AI said Shia prisoners were vulnerable to intimidation, harassment, and ill treatment from prison guards, and denied access to needed medical care, because of their religion. Government officials continued to state the MOI, which supervised detention facilities, only prohibited practices when they violated prison safety rules, such as waving religious banners or organizing large-scale gatherings for religious ceremonies. The government reported that special rooms were available to prisoners for worship and prayer regardless of religious affiliation. The National Institute for Human Rights (NIHR), a government human rights organization, which has been criticized by a U.S.-based NGO for what it said was its lack of independence, stated that it had not received any cases of prisoners being subject to harassment or ill-treatment by prison guards due to their religious affiliation during the year.

In September, according to reports received by HRW, three female prisoners said prison officials assaulted them after they complained authorities denied them the right to participate in religious commemorations of Ashura. According to one of the women’s relatives, prison authorities later restricted the inmates’ access to family visits, phone calls, and time spent outside their cells. Following a prison visit, meetings with the detainees, and reviews of prison files, the NIHR issued a statement on October 1 that the claims of interference in religious practice were “incorrect and contrary to reality.” On October 4, the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy, an NGO based in the United Kingdom, said the detainees contacted them to dispute the NIHR’s statement.

The government reported no change from 2017 in the 452 licensed Sunni mosques and 91 Sunni community centers, and the number of licensed Shia places of worship remained at 608 mosques and 618 *ma'atams* (Shia prayer houses, sometimes called *husseiniyas* in other countries). The government reported it granted five permits during the year to build Sunni mosques and eight permits to build Shia mosques and *ma'atams*. The government stated that determining whether a mosque would be Sunni or Shia in new housing developments depended on the needs and demographics of the new residents.

The MOJIA continued to monitor clerics' adherence to a pledge of ethics it had created for individuals engaged in religious discourse. Preachers who diverged from the pledge were subject to censure or removal by authorities on the grounds their actions jeopardized national security. The MOJIA reported reviewing sermons submitted to the government on a weekly basis by preachers. The MOJIA reported regularly visiting mosques to ensure preacher's sermons were "moderate," avoided discussing controversial topics, did not incite violence, and did not use religious discourse to serve political purposes. The MOJIA also continued to announce how much money an adult should give on a voluntary basis to the poor on religious feast days. According to Shia community representatives, during Ashura, police again summoned some Shia chanters and preachers and had them sign pledges that they would avoid discussing politics from the pulpit.

The government continued to permit Shia groups to hold processions to commemorate Ashura and Arbaeen throughout the country, with the largest procession organized by a Shia community-led organization, the Manama Public Processions Commission. During the annual two-day public holiday for Ashura, most public schools and government offices were closed. Local press estimated the largest procession attracted 150,000-200,000 attendees in downtown Manama. The government permitted public reenactments of the martyrdom of Hussein and public marches in commemoration of Ashura. As in previous years, the MOI provided security for the processions, but again removed some Ashura flags, banners, and decorations from streets and private property in Shia villages but not at the large procession in Manama, according to Shia leaders. The government stated MOI personnel had removed the banners because they violated zoning restrictions or because they contained political messages.

The government continued to permit both registered and unregistered non-Muslim communities to maintain identifiable places of worship, hold religious gatherings, and display religious symbols. The MOI continued to provide security for large events held by religious communities, including non-Muslim ones. Security forces

stated they continued to monitor sermons, religious gatherings, and funerals to maintain peace and security.

Adherents of minority religious groups reported they were able to produce religious media and publications and distribute them in bookstores and churches, although the government did not permit publications that were perceived to criticize Islam. According to non-Muslim religious groups, the government did not interfere with religious observances and encouraged tolerance for minority religious beliefs and traditions.

There was no progress reported on the construction of a Coptic Orthodox church in Manama following the announcement in 2016 by the king that he would permit the construction of the church. In June government officials, diplomats, and religious leaders attended the ground breaking for the construction of a Catholic cathedral on land previously donated by the king. The cathedral, intended to serve as headquarters for the Catholic Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia, was scheduled to be completed by mid-2021. The Bahrain-based head of the Catholic Church's Northern Vicariate Bishop Camillo Ballin has resided in the country since 2011.

In March the MOJIA reported that it had concluded reconstruction to the extent feasible of 27 of the 30 mosques it had destroyed or damaged in 2011, in compliance with an independent fact-finding commission. Of the three remaining mosques, the government reported that one, in Salmabad, was reconstructed by local residents without a permit on an "illegal" site, despite the government's offer for an alternative site in the same neighborhood. According to the government, the second remaining mosque, in Hawrat Sanad, remained under evaluation because nine other Shia mosques already existed within close proximity. The government stated the third mosque, in Madinat Hamad, would likely be relocated. Some Shia stated they remained dissatisfied with three of the 27 reconstructed mosques because they had been rebuilt in different locations.

NGOs stated the government continued its disparate treatment of Shia versus Sunni individuals and stated this different treatment fueled perceptions among the Shia community of a justice system that was biased against them.

In contrast to previous years, there were no reports during the year of Sunnis or Shia accused of crimes having their names or pictures featured in local press prior to a conviction and often that information was omitted even after sentencing.

The government-run television station continued to air Friday sermons from the country's largest Sunni mosque, Al Fateh Mosque, but not any sermons from Shia mosques.

According to the law, Arab applicants with 15 years' residence and non-Arab applicants with 25 years' residence are eligible to apply for citizenship. The government stated that foreign residents applying for citizenship were not required to report their religious affiliation. Shia politicians and community activists, however, continued to say the government's naturalization and citizenship process favored Sunni over Shia applicants. They said the government continued to recruit Sunnis from other countries to join the security forces, granted them expedited naturalization, and provided them with public housing while excluding Shia citizens from those forces. According to Shia community activists, this continued recruitment and expedited naturalization of Sunnis represented an ongoing attempt to alter the demographic balance among the country's citizens.

According to Shia leaders and community activists, the government continued to provide Sunni citizens preference for government positions, including as teachers, and especially in the managerial ranks of the civil service and military. They also said Sunnis received preference for other government-related employment, especially in the managerial ranks of state-owned businesses. They continued to report few Shia citizens served in significant posts in the defense and internal security forces. According to Shia community members, senior civil service recruitment and promotion processes continued to favor Sunni candidates. Other community members complained educational, social, and municipal services in most Shia neighborhoods remained inferior to those in Sunni communities. The government stated it made efforts to support public schools in Shia and Sunni neighborhoods equally. The government repeated public assurances affirming a policy of nondiscrimination in employment, promotions, and the provision of social and educational services. The MOLSD reported it organized expositions, job fairs, professional guidance, and assistance to needy families in predominately Shia neighborhoods. The MOLSD, which has a supervisory role in implementing labor law in the civil sector, again said there were no reported cases of religious or sectarian discrimination during the year. Shia community activists again responded that they lacked confidence in the effectiveness of government institutions to address discrimination, so they did not utilize them.

Two public schools provided more in-depth religious instruction for students from elementary school through high school; the remainder of their curricula being consistent with the nonreligious curriculum in other public schools. The Jaafari

Institute provided religious instruction in Shia Islam. The Religious Institute provided education in Sunni Islam.

The University of Bahrain continued to offer degree programs in religious studies and Islamic jurisprudence for Shia and Sunni students. There were five registered institutes, publicly funded and overseen by the Sunni Waqf, offering religious education for Sunnis. There were several dozen *hawzas*, six of them registered and authorized by the SCIA.

Human rights activists reported discrimination against Shia in education continued. Activists said interview panels for university scholarships continued to ask about students' political views and family background. The government said its scholarships remained competitive. Rights activists said many top scoring Shia applicants continued to receive scholarship offers in less lucrative or less prestigious fields. The government reported students were offered funding in particular fields based on the student's grade point average. The government reported the flagship Crown Prince International Scholarship Program (CPISP) continued to have both Shia and Sunni representation, but it did not provide a statistical breakdown. A list of scholarship recipients' names, fields of study, and schools was published on the CPISP website. Some Shia business leaders reported that government officials had overturned decisions to deny scholarships to Shia students over concerns that the decisions had been biased and did not reflect student merit. There were continued reports of the MOE refusing to recognize the foreign degrees of some students, primarily those who pursued studies in China. Some activists said these refusals disproportionately affected Shia students.

On March 14, the government announced a fine ranging from 50 dinars (\$130) to 400 dinars (\$1,100) for defacing the country's passports. It stated that writing, tearing, or stamping a passport was illegal unless done by authorized immigration officials in Bahrain or overseas. The NIHR stated that the ban included any alterations done by ministries, embassies, hotels, banks, or tourism agencies. Often tourism agencies, hotels, and other individuals at overseas religious sites placed stickers or wrote on the passports. Former Shia MP Ali Al Ateesh said the law targeted citizens for visiting [Shia] religious sites in Iran and Iraq, while those with unofficial markings from other destinations were not held accountable. Other MPs said the new rule did not target sects, religious tours, individuals or countries.

NGOs reported the government continued to monitor closely the collection of funds by religious organizations, including charity donations. The NGOs said religious leaders and organizations not authorized to collect money, or whom the



government believed handled the money in improper ways, were potentially subject to legal action.

On July 26, at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom hosted by the Secretary of State in Washington, Minister of Foreign Affairs Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa delivered remarks highlighting that “religious violence, incitement to hatred, and sectarianism have no place in Bahraini society.” He announced the government planned to create a position of Ambassador at Large for Peace Coexistence and Religious Freedom to advocate for religious harmony and coexistence across the Middle East. The government had not filled the position at year’s end.

Press editorials and statements from government and religious leaders emphasized the importance of religious tolerance. In March the crown prince and foreign minister met with the president of the World Jewish Congress to discuss interfaith and religious tolerance in the country. In June the government inaugurated the King Hamad Center for Peaceful Coexistence, led by a Board of Trustees comprised of representatives of the country’s Sunni, Shia, Christian, Catholic, Baha’i, Hindu, and Buddhist communities. In November the Bahrain News Agency reported the minister of education inaugurated the King Hamad Chair in Interfaith Dialogue and Peaceful Co-Existence at Sapienza University in Rome, which according to local Bahraini reports would allow the university students to conduct scientific research and studies in the fields of tolerance and religious science. Local press featured photos of senior government officials visiting the Diwali festivities of several prominent Hindu families throughout the country.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

During the year, local press reported individuals allegedly associated with militant groups committed attacks on police, and some groups claiming responsibility used Shia religious terminology to justify their attacks. The government reported 22 police officers suffered injuries from such attacks during the year. Protestors using Molotov cocktails in one attack on police stated they were throwing “holy fire” to demand the ruling family “step down.”

Anti-Shia and anti-Sunni commentary appeared in social media. Posts stated that former Shia leaders were “traitors” and “Iranian servants,” used the hashtag “Iran Supports Sedition in Bahrain,” and displayed images of prominent Shia political figures Ali Salman and Isa Qassim.

Non-Muslim religious community leaders reported there continued to be some Muslims who changed their religious affiliation, despite ongoing societal pressure not to do so, but those who did so remained unwilling to speak publicly or privately to family or associates about their conversions out of fear of harassment or discrimination.

NGOs working on civil discourse and interfaith dialogue reported regional Sunni-Shia tensions and historical political divisions continued to have an economic effect. Shia representatives stated the persistent higher unemployment rate among their community, limited prospects for upward social mobility, and the lower socioeconomic status of Shia exacerbated by ongoing private sector discrimination against them, added to the tensions between the two communities. Because religion and political affiliation were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize these effects as being solely based on religious identity.

Christian community leaders stated that they continued to search for a suitable location for a new non-Muslim cemetery.

There were cremation facilities for the Hindu community. On March 12, however, the Southern Municipal Council announced it was considering banning traditional outdoor Hindu cremations due to environmental and health concerns. Hindu community leaders said they were not opposed to indoor incinerators since indoor cremations would be consistent with religious guidelines.

Several Hindu temples and Sikh temples operated throughout the country. The Shri Krishna Hindu Temple was reportedly over 200 years old and was occasionally visited by high-level government officials. The country was also home to a historic, although seldom used, Jewish synagogue. There were more than a dozen Christian churches, which included a 100-year old evangelical church and an 80-year old Catholic church. There was no registered Buddhist temple; however, some Buddhist groups met in private facilities.

Holiday foods, decorations, posters, and books continued to be widely available during major Christian and Hindu holidays, and Christmas trees and elaborate decorations remained prominent features in malls, restaurants, coffee shops, and hotels. The news media continued to print reports of non-Muslim religious holiday celebrations, including Christmas celebrations and Hindu festivals such as Diwali and Holi.

According to minority religious groups, there was a high degree of tolerance within society for minority religious beliefs and traditions, although societal attitudes and behavior discouraged conversion from Islam. Local news reports during the year featured activities of minority religious communities, including announcements of changes in leadership, Muslim bands performing at Christmas festivities, and sports events organized by the Sikh community.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The Secretary of State, Deputy Secretary of State, Ambassador, and embassy officers met with government officials to urge respect for freedom of expression, including the right of clerics and other religious leaders to speak and write freely; to ensure full inclusion of all citizens, including members of the Shia majority, in political, social, and economic opportunities; and to pursue reconciliation between the government and Shia communities. U.S. officials both publicly and in private meetings continued to advocate for the government to pursue political reforms that would take into consideration the needs of all citizens regardless of religious affiliation.

The Ambassador and other embassy officers continued to meet regularly with religious leaders from a broad spectrum of faiths, representatives of NGOs, and political groups to discuss freedom of religion and freedom of expression as it related to religious practices. The Ambassador and embassy officials visited various houses of worship and attended religious events throughout the year, including the observation of Ashura, Christmas, and Diwali. At these events, they discussed issues related to religious tolerance with participants and emphasized the U.S. government's commitment to religious freedom.

The embassy continued to sponsor the participation of religious leaders in exchange programs in the United States designed to promote religious tolerance and a better understanding of the right to practice one's faith as a fundamental human right and source of stability.

In July the U.S. Department of State designated Al Ashtar Brigades (AAB) as a foreign terrorist organization. AAB is an Iran-backed terrorist group that claimed responsibility for numerous terrorist attacks against security targets in Bahrain, and often used Shia religious terminology and symbols in justifying their attacks.