

BAHRAIN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Bahrain remained similar to previous years, trending positive in some areas but remaining the same in others. The government generally continued to allow freedom of worship for religious minorities. In November, the King Hamad Global Centre for Peaceful Coexistence hosted a conference on [education and tolerance](#), and in December it hosted the Arabian [International Religious Freedom Roundtable](#), which USCIRF attended. At the same time, Bahrain continued its ongoing and systematic discrimination against some Shi'a Muslims on the basis of their religious identity. While they are generally free to worship, Shi'a Bahrainis have long faced difficulties in an array of areas, including employment, political representation, freedom of expression, promotion within the military, and mosque construction. In 2019, Bahraini authorities interrogated religious leaders about their sermons and restricted Shi'a prisoners' religious practice. Some laws premised on protecting Bahraini security lack clarity to ensure they cannot be used to target Shi'a Muslims, and laws restricting speech on social media have the effect of encouraging self-censorship among Shi'a Muslims in particular.

One of Bahrain's most troubling instruments of discrimination has been collective citizenship revocations. In April 2019, Bahrain [stripped citizenship](#) en masse from 138 Shi'a Muslims in a single trial based on alleged [links to Iran](#). Since 2012, the government has applied this punitive measure to more than [990 Bahrainis](#), the vast majority of whom are Shi'a Muslims. United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet [expressed alarm](#) over the mass revocation. Bahraini authorities also have deported

some of those individuals as security threats, but have not always substantiated such claims. Following international pressure, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa [reinstated citizenship](#) to 550 Bahrainis in late April. This mass reinstatement, while undoubtedly a positive development, indicates that there were insufficient threats to justify the revocations in hundreds of cases.

Bahrain is the only Gulf country to recognize the Shi'a Muslim commemoration of Ashura as a government holiday. In 2019, the government showed some improvement in allowing Shi'a Muslims to observe Ashura publicly, including deploying social service police rather than riot police to keep order, holding [meetings](#) between government officials and the heads of matams (ritual mourning spaces), and refraining from using tear gas and other violent measures like in previous years. However, during the Ashura season, the government [summoned](#) at least 20 [religious leaders](#) regarding the content of their sermons and prayers, and it restricted Ashura ritual processions to designated areas. Government officials also warned against speech during the holiday that would harm civic peace or disturb the social fabric.

In August 2019, 600 inmates at Jaw and Dry Dock prisons began a hunger strike. Shi'a prisoners participating in the strike demanded, among other things, their right to practice religious rituals. While intervention from Bahrain's National Institute for Human Rights (NIHR) alleviated some restrictions, others remained in place. Certain prisoners remained prohibited from commemorating Ashura altogether, including Hajer Mansoor, the mother-in-law of Bahraini dissident Sayed al-Wadaei, who also was denied access to religious materials.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Bahrain on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
 - Publish an updated assessment of Bahrain's compliance with the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report, with particular focus on recommendation 1724a, relating to censorship of beliefs, and recommendation 1722d, relating to the detention of prisoners incognito; and
 - Continue to provide guidance and training for Bahrain's security services to prepare for Ashura observances in ways that protect observers' religious freedom rights and minimize the potential for the outbreak of violence.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Continue to conduct periodic fact-finding missions and congressional delegation trips to Bahrain to assess religious freedom conditions there; and
 - Highlight in religious freedom and human rights-related hearings and other official proceedings Bahrain's treatment of Shi'a Muslims.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Commissioner delegation visit:** Manama in March 2019
- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Bahrain in 2019](#)

Background

According to Bahrain's constitution, Islam is the religion of the state and Shari'a 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. Bahraini authorities have cited Iran's ongoing efforts 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 has been documented widely, the Bahraini government has sometimes used this pretext to crack down on Shi'a opposition leaders, clerics, and activists, without consistently substantiating charges of subversion or terrorist 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 and other Gulf states, killing scores of protestors, demolishing dozens of Shi'a mosques, and destroying the roundabout itself. In June 2011, King Hamad established the BICI to investigate these events; the commission released its report along with a set of 26 recommendations in a live televised event in November 2011. Bahrain's government committed to implementing those reforms, and it announced full implementation in 2016. However, a June 2016 State Department assessment challenged that conclusion and noted that "more work remains to be done."

Treatment of Non-Muslims

Bahrain's treatment of non-Muslim minorities is generally respectful of their freedom of worship. 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 small Jewish community, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Baha'is. In June 2019, the first [Jewish prayer service](#) held in a synagogue in Bahrain in over 70 years took place on the sidelines of the American "Peace to Prosperity" conference hosted in Manama. Christians in Bahrain comprise 14.5 percent of the population. There are several churches representing Catholic, Anglican, Evangelical, Orthodox, and nondenominational communities, among others. Bahrain hosts the seat of the Catholic Vicariate of Northern Arabia, which includes Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. 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.

Ashura in Bahrain 2019

Ahead of Ashura in 2019, Interior Minister General Rashid bin Abdullah Al Khalifa [met](#) with the heads of matams before the holiday, and on September 3 said that Bahrain would respect freedom of worship. Head of General Security Major General Tariq bin Hassan al-Hassan also visited local police officials to ensure proper preparations for Ashura processions. Bahrain allowed traditional Ashura processions

in 2019 and, unlike previous years, did not use tear gas or other violent forms of crowd control. However, security forces [summoned multiple clerics](#) over the content of their religious sermons. In at least [17 cases](#), Bahraini security officials removed religious banners and signs associated with the observance of Ashura.

Treatment of Shi'a Bahrainis in Prison

Shi'a Bahrainis who advocate for greater freedom of religion in Bahrain, including activist Nabeel Rajab, have been thrown in prison for criticizing government policy on social media. In August 2019, 600 prisoners at Jaw and Dry Dock prisons joined a hunger strike to appeal for better treatment. Among their demands was the [right to participate](#) in religious rituals and to be housed near prisoners with the same religious affiliation in order to better facilitate group prayer. Following [intervention](#) by Bahrain's National Institute for Human Rights (NIHR), prison officials doubled the allotted time for prisoners' Ashura observance. However, prisoners in [Isa Town Prison](#) and Jaw Prison were allegedly prohibited from commemorating Ashura in groups, and prison authorities—who appealed to security concerns regarding large prisoner gatherings—restricted the times in which they were allowed to conduct their commemorations. Shi'a prisoners also were [denied access](#) to religious books. USCIRF has [expressed concern](#) that Bahraini prisons have barred [dissemination](#) of many Shi'a Muslim religious texts ahead of Muharram, the month in which Ashura falls.

Key U.S. Policy

The Trump administration has prioritized a close defense relationship with Bahrain in order to counter Iran's influence in the region and its attempts to destabilize Bahrain. Following a February 2019 meeting between then U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander Joseph Votel and Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad, the United States and Bahrain concluded several major arms agreements. Bahrain also hosted the June "Peace to Prosperity" workshop on an Israeli-Palestinian final status plan. In July, at the State Department's [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#), Bahraini Foreign Minister Khaled bin Ahmed Al Khalifa met with Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz, the first-ever public meeting between officials from those two countries. In December, Bahrain also hosted Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem Shlomo Amar at a regional meeting of the International Religious Freedom Roundtable in Manama.

Although the United States and Bahrain enjoy a close defense relationship, Congress has continued to express concerns about freedom of religion or belief in the country. A bipartisan delegation of members of the House of Representatives [visited Bahrain](#) in late December 2019. During Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad's visit to the White House in September 2019, Senators Marco Rubio (R-FL), Ronald Wyden (D-OR), and Christopher Murphy (D-CT) released a [bipartisan letter](#) to President Donald J. Trump noting that they were "concerned by the government of Bahrain's concerted efforts to silence peaceful opposition and quash free expression." This statement addressed broader human rights issues, but it also included the banning of Shi'a Muslim-majority political parties and the issuance of a life sentence against Shi'a Muslim Sheikh Ali Salman.

INDIVIDUAL VIEWS OF COMMISSIONER JOHNNIE MOORE

The Kingdom of Bahrain does not meet the threshold to be included in this report. It is a country whose struggle against Iranian intervention and terrorism (often cleverly and intentionally disguised in a religious context) has been given too little regard by the international community and it is a country whose unique and historic pluralism, still unrivaled in the region, has been given too little credit. Moreover, Bahrain's commitment to social harmony has not just been an internal matter, it has also become an integral part of its foreign policy through courageous efforts—direct and indirect—to promote interfaith tolerance and to facilitate peace between the Israelis and Palestinians, especially in 2019. Sure, Bahrain remains imperfect, but these days it is far more worthy of immense praise, than of withering criticism. It should absolutely be removed from USCIRF's Annual Report, a decision that should have been made long ago.