

KEY FINDINGS

In 2017, the Bahraini government made a concerted effort to promote religious freedom, interfaith understanding, and peaceful coexistence, including by King Hamad bin Al Khalifa issuing the Kingdom of Bahrain Declaration and announcing the establishment of the King Hamad Global Centre for Inter-Faith Dialogue and Peaceful Co-Existence. In addition, non-Muslim religious communities continued to be able to freely practice their faith, both publicly and privately. Nevertheless, religious freedom conditions did not improve for the majority Shi'a Muslim community amid an ongoing stifling of dissent and a deterioration of human rights conditions generally. While Shi'a religious leaders were not targeted in 2017 as they had been during the summer of 2016, a significant crackdown in May 2017 resulted in the deaths of five Shi'a Muslim demonstrators, injuries to dozens, and the arrests and detentions of civilians and religious leaders. In addition, during the year, authorities continued to deny some

Shi'a clerics access to specific mosques and banned others from conducting Friday prayers, sermons, and other religious services. Discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in government employment and some public and social services continued. Also, during the reporting period, Iranian government support for subversive activity by Shi'a militant groups in Bahrain increased. In 2017, the government made some progress in redressing past abuses against Shi'a Muslims but backtracked on other recommendations it had made progress on from the 2011 report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI). As a consequence of developments in 2017, in 2018 USCIRF—for the second year in a row—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

- Encourage the Bahraini government to address religious freedom concerns both privately and publicly, and report openly on the government's success or failure to implement genuine reforms, including by making public an annual assessment of Bahrain's progress, or lack thereof, on implementing BICI recommendations;
- Urge the Bahraini government to continue to make progress in implementing the BICI recommendations, including those related to freedom of religion and belief, sectarian incitement, and accountability for past abuses against the Shi'a community;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the unconditional release of prisoners of conscience and religious freedom advocates, and press the country's government to treat prisoners humanely and allow them access to family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, lawyers, and the ability to practice their faith;
- Apply the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, [Executive Order 13818](#), or other relevant targeted tools, to deny U.S. visas to and block the U.S. assets of specific officials and agencies identified as responsible for violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief;
- Ensure clear and consistent messaging at all levels of the U.S. government regarding Bahrain's human rights and religious freedom obligations under international law;
- Increase support for rule of law, community policing, and countering violent extremism programs;
- Assist in the training of government entities, including security officials, prosecutors, and judges, to better address sectarian violence and incitement through practices consistent with international human rights standards;
- Include Bahraini civil society and religious leaders in exchange and U.S. visitor programs that promote religious tolerance, interreligious understanding, and interfaith dialogue;
- Urge the Bahraini government to pass a law in the Shura Council addressing incitement to violence in the media, ensuring compliance with international human rights standards; and
- Urge the Bahraini government to cooperate fully with international mechanisms on human rights issues, including by inviting visits from the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Kingdom of Bahrain

GOVERNMENT

Constitutional Monarchy

POPULATION

1,410,942

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*

70.3% Muslim (60% Shi'a, 35–40% Sunni)

14.5% Christian

9.8% Hindu

2.5% Buddhist

0.6% Jewish

<0.1% Folk religion

1.9% Unaffiliated

0.2% Other (including Sikhs and Baha'is)

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

BACKGROUND

According to the Bahraini 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 slight majority comprising expatriate workers, primarily from South and Southeast Asia.

During the past year, the overall human rights situation continued to decline. In June 2017, authorities shut down the sole remaining independent news site, Al Wasat, which reported on issues affecting the majority Shi'a community, reportedly for "creating discord" and damaging Bahrain's relations with other countries. In May, the government suspended indefinitely the last major political opposition entity, the National Democratic Action Society (Wa'ad), for criticizing the execution of three Bahrainis in January 2017. In addition, prominent human rights defenders and members of outlawed political opposition groups were sentenced to prison during the year or continued to serve lengthy terms. For example, in July 2017, noted human rights

defender Nabeel Rajab was sentenced to two years in prison for criticizing the government in a tweet; in February 2018, after the end of the reporting period, Rajab was sentenced to an additional five years in prison for tweets criticizing alleged abuses by authorities in Bahraini prisons and the conflict in Yemen. In September 2017, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein stated that "democratic space in the country has essentially been shut down" and that since June 2016, Bahraini authorities have imposed "severe restrictions on civil society and political activism through arrests, intimidation, travel bans and closure orders." The Bahraini government contends that those arrested and charged breached public order laws during authorized processions or protests, in some cases carrying weapons. Bahraini and international human rights groups, the UN, and the State Department dispute this.

Furthermore, in 2017, Bahraini authorities 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 more widely during the past year, the Bahraini government sometimes used this pretext to crack down on some Shi'a opposition

leaders, clerics, and activists without substantiating subversion or criminal activity; such rhetoric and actions also exacerbated sectarian tensions in the country. Most Bahraini Shi'a clerics deny any subversive relationship with Iran and state their primary tie with the country is having acquired religious training in Qom, Iran, the largest center for Shi'a religious study in the world.

In October 2017, USCIRF staff and representatives of the International Religious Freedom Office at the State Department traveled jointly to Bahrain. In March 2018, after the end of the reporting period, USCIRF Commissioners and staff traveled to Bahrain to assess religious freedom conditions and meet with Bahraini government officials, the government-appointed National Institution for Human Rights, the U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials, lawyers, and representatives of civil society and religious communities.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2017

Positive Developments and Ongoing Challenges

In September 2017, Bahraini King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa announced the release of The Kingdom of Bahrain Declaration, a document that highlights the rich history of religious diversity and pluralism in Bahrain and calls for religious freedom for all and peaceful coexistence. In September 2017, the Bahraini government also announced that the King Hamad Global Centre for Inter-Faith Dialogue and Peaceful Co-Existence would be inaugurated in 2018 in Bahrain. The center is expected to host dialogues and conferences on religious freedom and interfaith dialogue, among other things.

Compared to other countries in the region, Bahrain is—and has long been—pluralistic, and among the most tolerant of religious minority communities.

The majority Shi'a Muslim community—despite facing challenges since uprisings in 2011—is generally free to worship in mosques without incident and perform religious rites and ceremonies without

interference. Nevertheless, over the past two years, authorities increasingly have targeted religious leaders and some religious activities while clamping down on freedoms of expression, association, and assembly. In response to concerns about the negative effect on religious freedom conditions, Bahraini officials argue that religious freedom is not being violated, but rather that opposition groups and activists are causing political and security problems by violating laws or creating discord.

Non-Muslim Religious Minority Communities

Approximately half of the expatriate workers in the country 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. The various communities reported the ability to publicly and privately practice their faiths without interference or limitation. Bahrain hosts an active 200-year-old Hindu temple—the oldest in Gulf—the Arabian Peninsula's only intact synagogue, and the seat of the Catholic Vicarate of Northern Arabia, which includes Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. A new Catholic church—which will be the largest in the Gulf region—is in the process of being built on land donated by the King.

Targeting of Shi'a Religious Leaders and Activists

In 2017, the targeting of Shi'a clerics was less pronounced when compared to the previous year. Many of the clerics who were arrested, detained, and imprisoned during the summer of 2016 were either released or completed their prison terms; others have pending cases on which authorities took no action. Sheikh Mohammad al-Shahabi was among the first of the clerics to be released, leaving prison in February 2017 after his sentence was commuted from two years to six months.

Nevertheless, during the year, the government continued to target and prosecute Shi'a Muslim political

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figures—some affiliated with Al Wefaq, the leading Shi'a Islamist political society that was dissolved in 2016—often on unfounded or unsubstantiated charges with implications for religious freedom. In May, Sheikh Isa Qassim, Bahrain's most senior Shi'a cleric, was given a one-year suspended sentence on charges of money laundering, which human rights groups called unsubstantiated; Shi'a activists claim the charges stemmed from Sheikh Qassim's collection

of *khums*, which senior Shi'a clerics receive and spend to serve the poor and indigent. Two of Sheikh Qassim's aides, Sheikh Hussein Mahrus and Mirza al-Obaidli, were given three-year suspended sentences on the same charges. In 2016, authorities revoked Sheikh Qassim's citizenship for allegedly seeking to form an organization supporting foreign religious leaders, an allegation he denied.

Later in May, soon after Sheikh Qassim's sentencing, Bahraini authorities undertook a security operation in the predominantly Shi'a Muslim village of Diraz, the location where Sheikh Qassim has been living under house arrest since 2016, and where supporters staged regular demonstrations since his citizenship was revoked. According to human rights organizations, the security operation shut off access to the village and authorities cleared out the area using live ammunition, resulting in the deaths of five civilians, injuries to dozens, including police officers, and nearly 300 arrests. Several individuals, including some Shi'a clerics, were charged and convicted of incitement to hatred and violence and illegal gathering; their cases were ongoing at the end of the year. In June, a group of UN human rights experts, including the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, [criticized](#) Bahrain security forces for using "excessive and lethal force to disperse peaceful protestors who had gathered in a sit-in." The statement urged the government to "cease its campaign of persecution against human rights defenders, journalists and anyone else with divergent opinions, and take all measures to guarantee a safe and enabling environment for all Bahrainis, independent of their political opinions, beliefs or confession." The government claimed it gave ample warning before clearing out the village, but

many demonstrators opted not to leave. At the end of the reporting period, authorities continued to deny Shi'a clerics and worshippers access during Friday prayers to the Imam al-Sadiq Mosque in Diraz.

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According to Bahraini and international human rights groups, the targeting of Shi'a clerics constitutes a systematic campaign of harassment that violates their rights to freedom of assembly, speech, and religion. In

many of these cases, the Bahraini government has used charges of insulting religious symbols and/or religion, illegal gathering, unlawful protesting, engaging in political speech in sermons, and supporting terrorism.

The Dissolution of Al Wefaq

In July 2016, the government dissolved the Shi'a Islamist political society, Al Wefaq, and seized its assets, on accusations that it provided "a nourishing environment for terrorism, extremism, and violence." Al Wefaq disputed these charges and appealed the ruling to the highest court in Bahrain, the Court of Cassation. In February 2017, the Court of Cassation denied the appeal, drawing strong criticism from the UN and international human rights groups.

In December 2016, Al Wefaq's former secretary general, Sheikh Ali Salman, was sentenced to nine years in prison in a retrial ordered by the Court of Cassation. Sheikh Salman was convicted on a range of security-related charges—including inciting regime change and insulting the Ministry of Interior—that UN experts have criticized as violating his freedoms of expression, association, and religion. In April 2017, his sentence was reduced to four years. In November 2017, he was charged separately with spying for Qatar, which he denied; at the end of the reporting period, that case was ongoing. In the past, the State Department called for Sheikh Salman's unconditional release; he has been imprisoned since December 2014.

Implementation of BICI Recommendations

The Bahraini government asserts that it has implemented all 26 of the BICI recommendations, including

those related to freedom of religion or belief. However, human rights groups and the State Department have concluded that only some recommendations have been implemented, while others were either fulfilled partially or not fulfilled at all. The latest assessment, a June 2016 [State Department report](#), found that “much work remains to be done” in implementing the recommendations, including in areas related to religious freedom and sectarian incitement.

As recommended in the BICI report, the Bahraini government has created entities to address accountability for abuses, including a Civilian Settlement Office to compensate for deaths and injuries from the 2011 unrest, an Office of the Ombudsman in the Ministry of Interior to ensure compliance with policing standards and receive reports of misconduct, and a Special Investigations Unit (SIU) in the Office of Public Prosecution to investigate and prosecute security personnel for committing crimes against civilians. According to the SIU, since 2011, 51 cases have been referred to criminal courts and more than 120 defendants for trial, including 17 officers employed by the Ministry of Interior. Of those convicted, prison sentences ranged from six months to seven years. During the last four months of 2017, the SIU received 31 complaints and referred 13 members of the security forces for criminal prosecution; those cases are ongoing.

During the past year, the government appeared to backtrack in two areas where it had made progress. In January 2017, Bahraini authorities restored arrest and investigation powers to the National Security Agency, which the BICI report found to have tortured and abused predominantly Shi’a Muslim demonstrators. In April, the king signed a bill amending the constitution to allow military courts the right to try civilians; human rights groups called the move an attempt to deny due process to Shi’a Muslim dissidents and activists charged with unsubstantiated or unfounded terrorist-related crimes.

By the end of the reporting period, the Bahraini government had rebuilt 20 of the 30 Shi’a mosques and religious structures that were destroyed in 2011 and identified in the BICI report. The government estimated

it spent approximately \$10 million doing so. Three structures still require legal and administrative approval, and no progress has been made on their rebuilding. Seven structures were built at the expense of the Shi’a community. According to the State Department, the Bahraini government claimed it had reimbursed the Shi’a community for reconstruction costs through payments to the national Shi’a endowment; however, members of the Shi’a community dispute this claim. The government also has stated that it helped secure legal permits for the seven structures.

Limitations on Religious Expression and Sectarian Incitement

While government officials discouraged sectarian language in media outlets, progovernment and private media at times used inflammatory, sectarian rhetoric. In addition, the Ministry of Information Affairs has drafted a new law that would curb incitement to violence, hatred, and sectarianism, as recommended in the BICI report; however, the law has not yet been referred to the Shura Council for consideration.

In May 2016, the parliament passed, and the Shura Council ratified, article 5 of the Political Societies Law, which prevents clerics who give sermons from joining political societies that engage in any political activities. The law also states that “political societies’ heads and leaders shouldn’t be religious preachers, even if they occupy the position in the societies without being paid.”

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Human rights groups view this as limiting clerics’ free speech and association rights, while Bahraini officials see it as a way to prevent the politicization of religious activities. Bahraini officials claim that freedom of

expression and speech is upheld in the country, but say that some groups use this defense to incite hatred and sectarian violence.

Article 169 of the 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.” Human rights groups are concerned that

such broad language, subject to varying interpretations, increases the likelihood of infringement of 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 100 Bahraini dinars (approximately \$265). Despite charges and convictions in previous years, there were no known convictions during the reporting period.

Other Forms of Discrimination

According to human rights groups, members of the Shi'a community 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, including the military and police. In addition, [UN experts found](#) patterns of cultural, economic, educational, and social discrimination against the Shi'a Muslim community, including in the education system, media, public sector employment, and other government social policies such as housing and welfare programs. The Bahraini government denies any discrimination against the Shi'a community in government employment, and asserts there has been progress to diversify the military and security apparatus. For example, the government continued recruiting individuals from all segments of society, including the Shi'a Muslim community, into its community policing program.

In October 2017, authorities reportedly interfered with some Ashura commemorations. According to human rights groups, security forces removed religious banners and posters from 21 predominantly Shi'a Muslim neighborhoods, met protests with tear gas and live ammunition, and arrested 12 civilians. Bahraini officials claimed they were forced to intervene due to excessive vandalism and looting by youth.

New Personal Status Law

In July 2017, Bahrain became the first country in the region to pass a unified personal status law, covering both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. The new law weakens the

power of religious courts to regulate marriage, divorce, and custody issues, among other things. The Bahraini government hailed the passage of the law as significant progress on the legal status of all female Bahraini citizens, both Sunni and Shi'a Muslim. Some Shi'a Muslim legislators and others within the Shi'a community opposed the law, arguing that only senior Shi'a clerics should have the authority to legislate on such matters, not the state.

U.S. POLICY

U.S.-Bahraini relations have been focused primarily on geopolitical concerns, including the regional influence of Iran and security cooperation. Bahrain, a longstanding U.S. ally in the region, has hosted a U.S. naval presence since 1946 and is home to over 8,000 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-NATO ally," allowing the country access to defense research cooperation and purchase of certain otherwise-restricted U.S. arms.

While the Obama Administration conditioned the sale of F-16 fighter jets on specific human rights progress, the Trump Administration has prioritized a closer defense relationship with Bahrain. In March 2017, the administration announced it planned to drop all human rights conditions

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on the sale of F-16 fighter jets and other arms to Bahrain, and in September it approved a \$3.8 billion arms deal package. In November 2017, President Donald Trump and then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson met with Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa in Washington, DC. These discussions reportedly focused on countering Iranian regional influence, resolving ongoing Gulf tensions, and promoting economic relations. President Trump also extended the 1991 U.S.-Bahrain Defense Cooperation Agreement for another 15 years.

Also in March, the State Department [designated](#) two Bahraini nationals, Ahmad Hasan Yusuf and Alsayed Murtadha Majeed Ramadhan Alawi, as Specially Designated Global Terrorists under Executive Order 13224. Both Yusuf and Alawi are affiliates of a Bahrain-based violent group, al-Ashtar Brigade,

that has claimed responsibility for about 20 bombings since 2013. In publishing the designation, the State Department noted that Iran funded and supported the Brigade and, therefore, the designations were part of the U.S. effort to “aggressively target Iran’s destabilizing and terrorism-related activities in the region.”

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 2015, Congress directed the secretary of state to submit an assessment of Bahrain’s progress in implementing the BICI recommendations, including a description of specific steps taken and an assessment of compliance with each recommendation. The State Department produced two such reports, one in 2013 and one in 2016. Both reports found the government had made some progress, but that more was needed, 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.

During 2017, State Department officials spoke out about human rights developments in Bahrain. In June, the State Department [expressed concern](#) about the

dissolution of the opposition Wa’ad political society and about the deaths in Diraz. In July, the State Department called for the release of human rights defenders [Nabeel Rajab](#) and Ebtisam al-Saegh and urged Bahrain to respect fundamental freedoms.

In August 2017, during the rollout of the 2016 international religious freedom report, then Secretary Tillerson [expressed concern](#) that the Bahraini government “continued to question, detain, and arrest Shia clerics, community members, and opposition politicians” as well as about “ongoing discrimination in government employment, education, and the justice system” against the Shi’a community, which he urged the government to stop. According to the State Department, U.S. government officials at all levels, including embassy staff, have urged the Bahraini government to fully implement the BICI recommendations, end discrimination against the Shi’a community, support national unity and reconciliation efforts, respect freedom of expression, bolster the independence of watchdog organizations, and provide for the religious freedom of prisoners.