



**Australian Government**  
**Refugee Review Tribunal**

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# Country Advice

## Bahrain

Bahrain – BHR40540 – Bahrain –  
Treatment of Protesters – Treatment of  
Shias  
21 June 2012

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### 1. What is the current situation in Bahrain in relation to opposition protests and the authorities' attitude towards the opposition and participants in demonstrations?

Opposition protests have continued on a regular basis in the months since RRT Country Advice BHR39737, but have not reached the scale or level of violence as those witnessed in 2011.<sup>1</sup> Reports suggest the Government has continued to use heavy handed tactics in its attempts to contain the protests, including the use of tear gas and rubber bullets. Human rights reports also state that brutality by security forces, including arbitrary arrest and torture, has continued despite government pledges of reform.

On 3 May 2012 *Al Jazeera* reported that '[o]pposition parties hold weekly rallies and riot police clash almost nightly with protesters in villages of the Shia Muslim majority'.<sup>2</sup> A 21 June 2012 *AFP* article notes that '[d]emonstrations have intensified in recent months as protesters sporadically clash with the police'.<sup>3</sup> However, according to a 12 June 2012 article from think tank The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, despite the continuance of low level demonstrations, the protest movement has essentially been contained. The article states:

Protests persist in villages across the island, but they are at a relatively low level. The main protests are planned for major events, most recently Formula One's return to Bahrain. The protests are so hard to predict because they are being directed by the amorphous youth coalition without party control—al-Wifaq does not have command over the protesters.

At this stage, it is a relatively managed situation with tensions simmering just underneath the surface. The real apex of violence is over for now as the regime has realized this is not in its interest—the stronger security crackdowns do not sell well internationally.

...Tensions will most likely be managed and chaos will be contained. I do not see the opposition having enough clout or organization to mount more sustained protests. And the regime has certainly gotten much smarter about how to respond. With this being

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<sup>1</sup> RRT Country Advice 2012, *Country Advice BHR39737*, 30 January

<sup>2</sup> 'Bahrain accuses foreign media of exaggeration' 2012, *Al Jazeera*, 3 May  
<<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/05/20125220628139601.html>> Accessed 20 June 2012

<sup>3</sup> 'Bahrain 11-year-old 'to hear verdict on July 5'' 2012, *AFP*, 21 June  
<<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5h70GCLg4MoxBh-qr-CpzH5jEAseA?docId=CNG.d1ec7a9368a32aed4fb1dc6c803cf4af.741>> Accessed 21 June 2012

said, there could be a galvanizing event that alters the landscape, but for now the ruling family has the upper hand.<sup>4</sup>

There have nevertheless been some significant demonstrations in recent months, which have seen security forces resort to violent tactics in their response. For example

- A 17 June 2012 PressTV article reported that protesters in the capital Manama had clashed with Government security forces who responded with tear gas and rubber bullets.<sup>5</sup>
- An 8 June 2012 *UK Press Association* article reported that ‘[r]iot police in Bahrain fired tear gas and stun grenades as tens of thousands of protesters staged the biggest anti-government demonstrations in weeks in the divided Gulf nation’.<sup>6</sup> A 9 June *AFP* article also reported there were similar protests near Manama the previous day.<sup>7</sup> The protests followed the arrest earlier in the week of prominent activist Nabeel Rajab.<sup>8</sup>
- On 24 April 2012 four policemen were reportedly injured by a bomb blast in the village of Diraz, which officials labelled a terrorist attack.<sup>9</sup> On 9 April 2012 seven police were injured when a homemade bomb exploded during a protest near Manama.<sup>10</sup>
- Bahrain’s hosting of a Formula One Grand Prix amid ongoing protests was much publicised in international media, however despite protests in the run up to the event, the 22 April 2012 motor race was held without major incident.<sup>11</sup>
- On 9 March 2012 up to 100,000 people demonstrated outside of Manama, reportedly the biggest protest in over a year, following a call to protest by the country’s most influential Shia cleric, Sheikh Isa Qassim.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Wehrey, Frederic 2012, ‘Bahrain’s Lost Uprising’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 12 June <<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2012/06/12/bahrain-s-lost-uprising/bkgv>> Accessed 19 June 2012

<sup>5</sup> ‘Bahraini regime forces attack anti-regime protesters’ 2012, PressTV, 17 June <<http://www.presstv.com/detail/2012/06/17/246600/bahraini-regime-forces-attack-protesters/>> Accessed 18 June 2012

<sup>6</sup> ‘Tear gas used on Bahrain protesters’ 2012 (UKPA) – Jun 8 <<http://www.google.com/hostednews/ukpress/article/ALeqM5hsxjsOWtepPrNWwxuZ7ThMFkio7g?docId=N0173041339177431240A>> Accessed 18 June 2012

<sup>7</sup> ‘Bahrain police forcefully disperse Shiite rally’ 2012, *AFP*, 9 June <<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hEkZneEwKshWvVbv44U9aDnm9zsQ?docId=CNG.77d52b238aae4509a56c20582e5ad5b5.351>> Accessed 19 June 2012

<sup>8</sup> ‘Tear gas used on Bahrain protesters’ 2012 (UKPA) – Jun 8 <<http://www.google.com/hostednews/ukpress/article/ALeqM5hsxjsOWtepPrNWwxuZ7ThMFkio7g?docId=N0173041339177431240A>> Accessed 18 June 2012; ‘Bahrain police forcefully disperse Shiite rally’ 2012, *AFP*, 9 June <<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hEkZneEwKshWvVbv44U9aDnm9zsQ?docId=CNG.77d52b238aae4509a56c20582e5ad5b5.351>> Accessed 19 June 2012

<sup>9</sup> ‘Bomb attack injures Bahrain policemen’ 2012, *BBC News*, 25 April <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-17838725>> Accessed 20 June 2012

<sup>10</sup> ‘Policemen injured in Bahrain blast’ 2012, *Al Jazeera*, 25 April <<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/04/201242423023159289.html>> Accessed 20 June 2012

<sup>11</sup> ‘Bahrain’s Formula One Gala Not Going as Planned’ 2012, *The New York Times*, 20 April <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/21/world/middleeast/bahrain-protests-intensify-before-formula-1-race.html?pagewanted=all>> Accessed 20 June 2012; ‘Protests, clashes in Bahrain before Formula One race’ 2012, *Reuters*, 21 April <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/21/us-bahrain-grandprix-clashes-idUSBRE83K0AZ20120421>> Accessed 21 June 2012; ‘Bahrain News — The Protests’ 2012, *The New York Times*, 14 June <<http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/bahrain/index.html>> Accessed 19 June 2012

<sup>12</sup> ‘Bahrain protesters join anti-government march in Manama’ 2012, *BBC News*, 9 March <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-17309839>> Accessed 19 June 2012; ‘Bahrain’s Shias demand

Information indicates the Government's attitude towards the protest movement has not changed significantly since the previous response. A 31 May 2012 article from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace provides the following information regarding recent measures taken by authorities against protesters:

The hardline faction, which controls the security forces as well as the instruments of censorship, is now very open about its intention to silence the opposition. In late April, it appointed Samira Rajab, a polarizing figure who has praised Saddam Hussein and whose anti-Shia statements have aroused the ire of the opposition, as information minister. Concurrently, it arrested human rights activist Zainab al-Khawaja for staging a protest to demand the release from prison of her father, the prominent activist 'Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja; she has since been sentenced to a month in prison. On May 5, it detained another popular dissident, Nabeel Rajab, for his tweets. Most recently, on May 27, it sentenced six Bahraini nationals to fifteen-year sentences for plotting attacks in Bahrain on behalf of Iran.

To make matters worse, the Bahraini parliament passed legislation on May 9 that increased the punishment for assaults on security forces and issued a number of threats against the Shia cleric 'Isa al-Qasim. Most recently, state television renewed attacks on Bahrain's only independent newspaper, al-Wasat. On the streets, meanwhile, opposition sources cite increasingly aggressive tactics by security forces, such as shooting bird pellets and tear gas rounds at close range and forcibly breaking into homes.<sup>13</sup>

The same report also notes some positive steps taken by the Government but concludes that these gestures are unlikely to lead to more structural reform. It states:

In tandem with this crackdown, however, the regime has taken some steps to convince the international community, particularly the UN Human Rights Council, that it is taking positive steps to curb human rights violations. In anticipation of the publication of a critical report by the Human Rights Council, Bahrain's lower court acquitted 14 defendants on May 15 accused of illegal assembly and rioting, including a member of al-Wifaq's consultative council. And a week later on May 22, the government began (but then delayed) the retrial of 'Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja and 20 other activists. This was a key recommendation of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, an autonomous fact-finding body that issued a highly critical report of the regime's response to the 2011 uprising. On May 28, it released the activist Nabeel Rajab, and Zainab al-Khawaja was released on bail the next day.

The Bahraini Shura Council also approved an amendment to a law against spreading false information, rewording it to specify the crime as "deliberately" spreading false information with "intention of causing harm." Most recently, Bahrain agreed to "consider" UN recommendations to release political prisoners, ban torture, and join the International Criminal Court.

But given the current balance of power within the royal family, it is doubtful that these gestures presage deeper structural reforms. Most likely, as the opposition charges, they

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reform at mass rally' 2012, *Al Jazeera*, 10 March

<<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/03/201239144334860869.html>> Accessed 19 June 2012;

'Bahrain News — The Protests' 2012, *The New York Times*, 14 June

<<http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/bahrain/index.html>> Accessed 19 June 2012

<sup>13</sup> Wehrey, Frederic 2012, 'The March of Bahrain's Hardliners', 31 May

<<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2012/06/12/bahrain-s-lost-uprising/bkgv>> Accessed 19 June 2012

are tactical stop-gap measures to remove the regime from the spotlight of international scrutiny.<sup>14</sup>

A 29 April 2012 Human Rights Watch report states that police brutality and torture has continued in the nearly six months since the release of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report in November 2011 and subsequent Government pledges to end such practices.<sup>15</sup> The report notes that while conditions inside prisons have improved since the release of the BICI report, excessive police violence during arrests and transit to detention facilities has continued.

An April 2012 Amnesty International report states that “despite the authorities’ claims to the contrary, state violence against those who oppose the Al Khalifa family rule continues, and in practice, not much has changed in the country since the brutal crackdown on anti-government protesters in February and March 2011”.<sup>16</sup> The report goes on to detail a number of incidences of excessive use of force against peaceful protests in 2012, some of which resulted in the deaths of demonstrators, as well as examples of arbitrary detention and torture.<sup>17</sup>

On 14 June, a Bahraini court acquitted nine medics, and reduced the sentences of nine others who had been given heavy sentences under a special military court set up to deal with cases arising from the protests in 2011. The verdict drew criticism from human rights groups who believe the charges and convictions are politically motivated, based on the fact the doctors and nurses treated injured protesters.<sup>18</sup>

## **2. What is the current situation of and the attitude of the authorities towards Shi’as in Bahrain? Is the Shi’a population in general at risk of harm because the authorities have imputed all Shi’as with anti-government opinion?**

Information suggests the situation for Shi’as in Bahrain remains unchanged. Sources indicate there has been no concrete political reform and institutionalised discrimination against the Shi’a population remains.<sup>19</sup> No new information could be located to indicate the Shi’a population currently faces a general risk of harm because of imputed anti-government opinion. Sources indicate that the protest movement continues to be dominated by Shi’as, and recent prominent arrests and trials all appear to have involved Shi’a defendants. However, no recent examples were found of authorities targeting individuals simply on the basis of their faith.

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<sup>14</sup> Wehrey, Frederic 2012, ‘The March of Bahrain’s Hardliners’, 31 May  
<<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2012/06/12/bahrain-s-lost-uprising/bkgv>> Accessed 19 June 2012

<sup>15</sup> Human Rights Watch 2012, ‘Bahrain: Police Brutality, Despite Reform Pledges’ 29 April  
<<http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/04/29/bahrain-police-brutality-despite-reform-pledges>> Accessed 20 June 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Amnesty International 2012, ‘Flawed Reforms - Bahrain Fails to Achieve Justice for Protesters’, April, p.5  
<<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE11/014/2012/en/a23b192e-c518-49e1-8a97-c11e4789f06f/mde110142012en.pdf>> Accessed 21 June 2012

<sup>17</sup> Amnesty International 2012, ‘Flawed Reforms - Bahrain Fails to Achieve Justice for Protesters’, April, pp.38-45  
<<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE11/014/2012/en/a23b192e-c518-49e1-8a97-c11e4789f06f/mde110142012en.pdf>> Accessed 21 June 2012

<sup>18</sup> ‘Bahrain eases medic sentences, U.S. “deeply disappointed”’ 2012, *Reuters*, 14 June  
<<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/14/bahrain-medics-idUSL5E8HE8TJ20120614>> Accessed 20 June 2012;  
‘Bahrain appeals court reduces jail terms of protest medics’ 2012, *BBC News*, 14 June  
<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18438705>> Accessed 21 June 2012

<sup>19</sup> Wehrey, Frederic 2012, ‘Bahrain’s Lost Uprising’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 12 June  
<<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2012/06/12/bahrain-s-lost-uprising/bkgv>> Accessed 19 June 2012; Amnesty International 2012, ‘Flawed Reforms - Bahrain Fails to Achieve Justice for Protesters’, April, p.5  
<<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE11/014/2012/en/a23b192e-c518-49e1-8a97-c11e4789f06f/mde110142012en.pdf>> Accessed 21 June 2012

More recent reports were located which align with the conclusions of RRT Country Advice BHR39737, that the government response to the 2011 was deliberately discriminatory against the Shi'a community.<sup>20</sup> The 12 June 2012 Carnegie Endowment report mentioned above suggests that the Government has actively attempted to turn the political unrest into a sectarian issue. The report states:

The regime has skilfully played the Shia card, saying that any move toward democracy is a Shia bid for power and a power play by Iran. It's working. People are divided along sectarian lines in jobs, in schools, and in communities.

The reform movement, at one time, included cooperation between Shias and Sunnis as both tried to promote democracy. And from the vantage point of those in power, the best way to fracture this cooperation was pitting groups against each other. This is not to say that there are not Sunnis in the opposition today, but the government's efforts have been effective.<sup>21</sup>

An April 2012 Amnesty International article argues that the Government response to the 2011 protests amounted to a collective punishment against the Shi'a community. The article states:

After the Bahraini government violently crushed the protests in mid-March 2011, the authorities engaged in systematic repression against all those who were active in the antigovernment protests, and orchestrated a collective punishment policy against the Shi'a community. At least 38 Shi'a prayer centres were demolished. The government argued that these centres were illegal makeshift buildings which did not comply with official planning criteria. On 22 April 2011, the Minister of Justice, Islamic Affairs and Endowments Shaikh Khalid bin Ali Al Khalifa said: "what have been demolished are, in fact, unlicensed buildings regardless of any doctrine."

He added that the government was guaranteeing religious freedom and protecting houses of worship but would never tolerate any violations of building regulations. However, some of the demolished mosques had existed for many years. The timing of their destruction, and the fact that all mosques destroyed were used by the Shi'a community, point out to the targeting of the Shi'a community. Bahraini media, including the national state-controlled television channel and pro-government newspapers orchestrated a campaign against the Shi'a community. Those who led and or were active in the protests were labelled as traitors working for Iran. The weekly television programme "Open Dialogue" broadcast "confessions" extracted from detainees under torture and other ill-treatment and threat. Protestors who appeared on television usually apologized and pledged not to protest or get involved in politics. State-controlled media and top government officials mobilized many in the Sunni community, who are loyal to the royal family and the government, against the Shi'a protesters. Some well-known pro government politicians and journalists spoke on Bahraini and other Arab television channels as if Shi'a Bahrainis were second class citizens. For example, one politician said on television: "we have paid for their education here and abroad and this is what we get from them". Bahraini society became further polarized along sectarian lines.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> RRT Country Advice 2012, *Country Advice BHR39737*, 30 January

<sup>21</sup> Wehrey, Frederic 2012, 'Bahrain's Lost Uprising', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 12 June <<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2012/06/12/bahrain-s-lost-uprising/bkgv>> Accessed 19 June 2012

<sup>22</sup> Amnesty International 2012, 'Flawed Reforms - Bahrain Fails to Achieve Justice for Protesters', April, pp. 49-50 <<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE11/014/2012/en/a23b192e-c518-49e1-8a97-c11e4789f06f/mde110142012en.pdf>> Accessed 21 June 2012.



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<<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/03/201239144334860869.html>> Accessed 19 June 2012
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<<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/21/us-bahrain-grandprix-clashes-idUSBRE83K0AZ20120421>> Accessed 21 June 2012

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<<http://www.google.com/hostednews/ukpress/article/ALeqM5hsxjsOWtepPrNWwxuZ7ThMFki07g?docId=N0173041339177431240A>> Accessed 18 June 2012

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