

BAHRAIN 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution declares Islam to be the official religion and sharia the 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.” There is no legal prohibition against apostasy. The penal code punishes any individual who mocks or disdains another religious group. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), media, and opposition outlets said the government continued to question, detain, and arrest Shia clerics. NGOs stated prison authorities routinely denied Shia prisoners needed medical treatment more often than Sunni prisoners. In August, family members and supporters posted on Twitter that inmates at Jaw Prison undertook a hunger strike, in part to protest religious discrimination and lack of access to medical facilities. During the year, the government prosecuted a woman for blasphemy and defamation of Islam and other religions on social media platforms. The government investigated 26 individuals for defamation of religions and convicted two of inciting religious hatred and sectarianism, and one of blasphemy. Fifteen other cases were ongoing at year’s end. In January, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa created two independent councils under the supervision of the Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments (MOJIA) to oversee Sunni and Jaafari (Shia) endowments, with authority over endowment assets, including revenues and places of worship. In February, exiled Shia cleric Sheikh Isa Qassim, residing in Iran, stated the move was “illegitimate” and “hostile” to Jaafari jurisprudence. On February 24, a high criminal court sentenced two employees of the Jaafari Endowment to seven years imprisonment and a 68,000-dinar (\$180,000) fine for embezzlement related to renovating Shia mosques. The government continued to monitor, regulate, and provide general guidance for the content of religious sermons of both Sunni and Shia religious leaders. While the government allowed large groups to gather in Manama and in Shia villages to observe Ashura – the most significant days of the Shia religious calendar – activists and opposition outlets, mostly based abroad, criticized the Ministry of Interior (MOI) for taking down Ashura banners in some places and summoning Shia leaders for questioning in connection with sermons they gave during the observance. NGOs and some Shia clerics and opposition politicians stated that in August, authorities introduced several restrictions aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19 that effectively repressed Ashura

commemorations, including limiting attendance at houses of worship to 30 vaccinated adult individuals, and banning children from attending Ashura rituals. Some Shia religious leaders and opposition politicians stated these restrictions were stricter than those applied to other public venues, and media commentators negatively compared the MOI's response ahead of Ashura to more permissive government preparations for Hindu and Christian holidays. According to Shia leaders and community activists, the government continued to discriminate against Shia citizens and to give Sunni citizens preferential treatment for scholarships and positions in the MOI and military.

Anti-Shia and anti-Sunni commentary appeared in social media. NGOs reported on the adverse economic effect of Sunni-Shia tensions and local political divisions. Shia human rights and political activists reported persistently higher unemployment rates, limited prospects for upward social mobility, and lower socioeconomic status for that community compared with the Sunni population. Societal pressure against conversion from Islam continued, and non-Muslim religious community leaders again reported converts were unwilling to speak publicly or privately to family or associates about their conversions out of fear of harassment or discrimination. Media reported that in August, Jews held services in the newly renovated synagogue in Manama for the first time since 1947, and in October, the community held the first Jewish wedding in the country in over 50 years.

U.S. government officials, the Charge d'Affaires, and other embassy representatives met with senior government officials, including the Foreign Minister and the Minister of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments, and national human rights monitoring institutions to urge respect for freedom of religion and expression, including the right of religious leaders to speak and write freely, and to advocate for the full and equal participation of all citizens, irrespective of religious or political affiliation, in political and social activities and economic opportunities. In both public and private settings, U.S. officials advocated for the government to pursue political reforms that would take into consideration the needs of all citizens regardless of religious affiliation. The Charge d'Affaires and other embassy officials met 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 they related to religious practice.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.5 million (midyear 2021). The NGO World Population Review estimates the population is 1.7 million. According to the national government, there are approximately 712,000 citizens, constituting less than half of the total population. According to 2020 national government estimates, Muslims make up approximately 74 percent of the total population. The Ministry of Information Affairs website states 99.8 percent of citizens are Muslims, while the remainder of citizens are Christians, Jews, Hindus, and Baha'is. The ministry website states 70.2 percent of the total (citizen and noncitizen) population is Muslim and 29.8 percent adhere to other religions and beliefs, such as Christians (10.2 percent), Jews (0.21 percent), Hindus, Baha'is, Buddhists, and Sikhs. According to Jewish community members, there are between 36-40 Jewish citizens (six families) in the country.

The government does not publish statistics regarding the breakdown between the Shia and Sunni Muslim populations. Most estimates from NGOs and the Shia community state Shia Muslims represent a majority (55 to 65 percent) of the citizen population.

Most foreign residents are migrant workers from South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, and other Arab countries. According to national government 2020 census data, approximately 401,500 foreign residents are Muslim; 387,800 are Hindu, Buddhist, Baha'i, Sikh, or Christian (primarily Roman Catholic, Protestant, Syrian Orthodox, and Mar Thoma Syrian from South India). According to Boston University's 2020 World Religions Database, the population includes approximately 1.4 million Muslims, 205,000 Christians, and 109,000 Hindus.

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, freedom to perform religious rites, and 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 they 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 basis of gender, origin, language, or faith. The

constitution states that sharia forms the principal basis for legislation, although civil and criminal matters are governed by a civil code.

The labor law pertaining to the private sector prohibits discrimination against workers on grounds of gender, origin, language, religion, or belief. The labor law deems dismissal for religion to be arbitrary and illegal but does not provide an automatic right to reinstatement. The law also prohibits wage discrimination based on religion, among other factors. The Ministry of Labor and Social Development (MOLSD) investigates claims of discrimination where there is an existing labor relationship; it can escalate violations to the Public Prosecution Office. The MOLSD does not have the authority to receive or manage complaints of religion-based discrimination in hiring. There is no law on discrimination in public sector employment.

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.

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.” The law states, “Any publication that prejudices the ruling system of the country and its official religion can be banned from publication by a ministerial order.”

Islamic religious groups must register with the MOJIA to operate. Sunni religious groups register with the ministry through the Sunni Waqf (endowment), while Shia religious groups register through the Jaafari (Shia) Waqf. MOJIA endowment boards supervise, fund the work of, and perform a variety of activities related to mosques and prayer halls. Non-Islamic groups have the status of civil society organizations and as such must register with and receive a license from the MOLSD to operate. To register, a group must submit an official letter requesting a license to operate; copies of minutes from the founders’ committee meeting; a detailed list of founders and board members, including names, ages, nationalities, occupations, and addresses. It must also submit other information, such as the group’s bylaws, candidates who seek election to the organization’s governing board, a physical address, and bank account in a bank registered with the Central Bank of Bahrain. The group must also request permission to receive funding or transfer funding. Religious groups also may need approval from the Ministry of Education (MOE), the Ministry of Information Affairs, or MOI, depending on the nature of the group’s intended activities. The law prohibits associations from

engaging in politics. The law prohibits activities falling outside 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 dinars (\$130) for the individuals responsible for setting up the branch.

According to the MOLSD's website, the following non-Islamic churches and spiritual groups were registered with the ministry: the National Evangelical Church, Bahrain Malaylee Church of South India Parish, Word of Life International Church, St. Christopher's Cathedral, 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 Evangelical Church of Bahrain, Marthoma Parish, House of Ten Commandments Synagogue, Shri Krishna Hindu Temple, and the Baha'i Social Society.

The penal code calls for punishment of up to one year's imprisonment or a fine of up to 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.

There is no explicit legal prohibition against apostasy. The penal code punishes any individual who insults another religious sect with up to one year in prison and a fine of up to 100 dinars (\$270). It punishes an individual for desecration of religious books with up to one year in prison and a fine of 100 dinars (\$270). The law also prohibits any person from imitating in public a religious ritual or ceremony with the intention of ridiculing it.

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, or advocating for a change of government, among other offenses. The MOI's Office of the Ombudsman, the Prisoners' and Detainees' Rights Commission, and the National Institute for Human Rights address the rights of prisoners, including the right to practice their religion.

The law allows prisoners to receive “alternative non-custodial sentences” in lieu of custodial sentences, provided such a sentence would not endanger public security. The MOI supervises individuals following their release on an alternative sentence, and the trial judge and the public prosecutor determine their eligibility and conditions for an alternative sentence. Alternative sentences may include community service, home detention, electronic surveillance, no-contact orders, or participation in rehabilitation programs.

The MOJIA oversees the activities of both the Sunni Waqf and the Jaafari Waqf, which are appointed by the King with recommendations from the president of the government-run and funded Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (SCIA). 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. The government allocates 2.7 million dinars (\$7.16 million) annually to each endowment board. Zakat (Islamic 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.

On January 20, the King issued a royal decree restructuring the Sunni and Jaafari Waqf directorates. According to the decree, the Sunni and Jaafari endowments are overseen by two independent councils that fall under the direct supervision of “a minister in charge of endowments affairs.” Each council manages its respective endowment, disburses revenues, and has full authority over endowment assets, including places of worship. The endowments were previously under the direct supervision of the Minister of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments.

The SCIA oversees general religious activities taking place within the country as well as the publication of Islamic studies school curricula and official religious texts. The council consists of a chair, a deputy chair, and 16 religious scholars – eight Sunni and eight Shia, most of them prominent preachers or sharia judges. The King appoints all council members to a four-year term. Independent of other government scholarship programs, the council offers university scholarships to low-income students for advanced Islamic studies. The SCIA reviews all legislation proposed by parliament to ensure that draft laws comply 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 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. By law, construction of Islamic places of worship requires MOJIA approval. Non-Islamic groups must obtain MOLSD approval. Municipal authorities provide final approval for construction. Citizens may also offer private land to build mosques. Permission for construction of a new mosque, whether Shia or Sunni, requires a government determination of the need for a new mosque in the area. The government also determines the need for non-Islamic houses of worship. The law permits non-Islamic houses of worship to display crosses or other religious symbols on the outside their premises.

The law regulates Islamic religious instruction at all levels of the education system. The government funds public schools for grades one through 12; Islamic studies based on Sunni doctrine are mandatory for all Muslim students and are optional for non-Muslims. Private schools must register 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, Muslim students may engage in religious studies sponsored by the MOJIA, as their parents deem fit.

In coordination with the SCIA, a team of MOE-appointed experts routinely reviews and develops the Islamic studies portion of the 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 in private schools.

Specialized MOE-run religious schools provide more thorough religious instruction – the Jaafari Institute for instruction in Shia Islam and the Religious Institute for instruction in Sunni Islam – for students from elementary through high school. The remainder of the curriculum is consistent with the nonreligious curriculum in other public schools.

Regarding family and personal status matters, the constitution states inheritance is a guaranteed right governed by sharia. The constitution also guarantees the duties and status of women and their equality with men, “without breaching the provisions” of sharia. The personal status law states that either the Sunni or Shia interpretation of sharia, depending on the religious affiliation of the parties, shall govern family matters, including inheritance, child custody, marriage, and divorce. 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; however, all marriages must be registered with a civil court. Civil courts also adjudicate matters such as divorce and child custody for non-Muslims.

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 that succession to the position of king is hereditary, passing from eldest son to eldest son. The royal family is Sunni.

The law prohibits any individual from being a member of a political society or becoming involved in political activities while serving in a clerical role at a religious institution, including on a voluntary basis.

By law, the government regulates and monitors the collection of money by religious and other organizations. Islamic organizations wishing to collect money must first obtain authorization from the MOJIA. Non-Islamic organizations must obtain authorization from the MOLSD. On August 4, the MOJIA issued an amendment to a royal decree regulating fundraising that requires the Sunni and the Jaafari endowments to submit to the ministry annual reports on funds they collect for religious purposes, including for the construction or renovation of places of worship. The endowments must also deposit collected funds in a bank accredited by the Central Bank of Bahrain and notify the MOJIA. The amendment bans the endowments from receiving money from abroad without MOJIA approval.

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

The country is party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 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 political affiliation are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

According to media, on November 21, the Court of Cassation rejected the appeal of a Shia preacher and upheld a one-year suspended prison sentence against him for "insulting religious figures revered by a group of people" (i.e., Sunni Muslims) during a sermon. Authorities also charged the preacher with organizing an illegal gathering of more than five individuals during the pandemic.

NGOs, media, and opposition outlets reported the government continued to question, detain, and arrest Shia clerics. NGOs reported prison authorities routinely denied Shia prisoners needed medical treatment more often than Sunni prisoners. The MOI confirmed that on April 5, Shia inmate Abbas Hassan Ali Malallah died of a heart attack in Jaw Prison. Shia Rights Watch stated that according to fellow prisoners, Malallah requested medical treatment on April 4, complaining of chest pains, but authorities denied his request. The National Institution for Human Rights (NIHR), a quasigovernmental organization responsible for investigating human rights complaints, including complaints of abuse in prison, said it found no evidence prison guards deliberately denied Mallallah medical services.

On June 8, Hussain Barakat, who was serving a life sentence in connection with a terrorism case involving the Shia militant group "Zulfiqar Brigades," an entity associated with armed religious groups, died in prison after being diagnosed with COVID-19. Human rights activists reiterated their calls to release other prisoners and said prison authorities failed to properly counter the pandemic.

According to local media, on November 15, the Higher Criminal Court of Appeals upheld the prison sentences of 10 Shia individuals to prison terms ranging from three years to life in prison. They, along with four other men, were convicted of

forming a terrorist cell that was affiliated with al-Ashtar Brigades (a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization that is also known as the military arm of the al-Wafa Islamic movement) and planting bombs inside Bahrain National Bank ATMs in Naeem and Jid Hafs areas in February. The four other men escaped after their trials and remained at large at year's end.

According to the government, on September 16, the MOI arrested four Shia individuals and charged them with attempting to plant a bomb inside a Bahrain National Bank ATM in Muharraq. The government said the men were suspected members of the February 14 movement, a branch of the al-Wafa Islamic movement. Opposition sources said authorities arrested 14 individuals.

A human rights activist on Twitter stated that on July 1, Shia cleric Sheikh Abdullah Isa "Mirza" al-Mahroos, who was serving a 15-year sentence in Jaw Prison, undertook a hunger strike to protest mistreatment, lack of proper medical care, and being prevented from seeing his son, who also was incarcerated in Jaw prison. Authorities sentenced al-Mahroos to 15 years in prison in 2011, along with 13 others identified as leaders of the 2011 antigovernment protests and hundreds of other opposition activists. His family said he was eligible for an alternative sentence and had chronic medical issues.

Several Shia clerics arrested during the 2011 antigovernment protests remained in prison at year's end. They were serving prison 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. According to the NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW), activists commemorated the tenth-year anniversary of the protests amid what HRW described as "continuing heavy repression." According to sources, protests on February 13 and 14 included slogans targeting King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa and pictures of exiled and jailed opposition figures.

The MOI's Office of the Ombudsman stated the office resolved 664 grievances from inmates and detainees, constituting 94 percent of the total 691 complaints filed during the year.

In March, the Special Investigation Unit (SIU), part of the Public Prosecutor's Office responsible for investigating complaints filed against security forces, reported receiving 33 complaints in the first quarter of 2020 and interrogating 13 MOI officers. On March 15, the SIU referred three security officers to the criminal court for mistreating inmates in 2020, and on April 15, the court found the three

officers guilty. Two of them received prison sentences and one officer received a fine. The SIU received 68 formal complaints alleging torture, mistreatment, and excessive force by members of the police. It interrogated 107 MOI officers tied to the complaints and prosecuted 16 in criminal court for police misconduct. The SIU referred at least 11 MOI officers to the forensic and psychiatric departments; it referred three others to military courts for disciplinary measures. As of September, military courts took disciplinary action against nine other MOI officers in cases previously referred to them by the SIU.

During the year, according to government announcements, the MOI prosecuted a woman for blasphemy and defamation of Islam and other religions on social media platforms. The government did not release additional details about the nature of the incident. The case was ongoing at year's end.

According to the MOI, during the year, the ministry investigated 26 individuals for defamation of religions, a charge usually stemming from statements made during sermons, and the government prosecuted six of them for inciting religious hatred and sectarianism. Courts convicted two of the six, but authorities did not announce their sentences. The other four cases remained ongoing at year's end. The government also prosecuted 11 of the 26 individuals for "despising other religions" and convicted one person of blasphemy.

The government continued to attach witchcraft and sorcery charges to some cases involving charges of theft and fraud. In March, the director-general of the Capital Governorate Police announced authorities arrested a woman for practicing sorcery and stealing money and personal items from clients. In October, the General Directorate of Criminal Investigation and Forensic Science arrested two men on a charge of practicing witchcraft and sorcery. Authorities also accused the men of violating public morals. The case was referred to the Public Prosecutor's Office and remained pending at year's end.

On May 23, the MOI Anti-Cyber Crime Directorate arrested a Sunni woman and charged her with inciting sectarian hatred. According to the government, the woman said Shia Muslims were responsible for the spread of COVID-19. She appeared before the criminal court on May 27. At year's end, there was no further information available on the disposition of her case.

Zuhair Ebrahim Jassim and Hussain Abdulla Khalil Rashid, two prisoners convicted of involvement in targeting security forces and killing one police officer in a police bus explosion in November 2017 and killing another officer in a bomb

explosion in Damistan in 2014, remained on death row at year's end. In June 2020, the Court of Cassation upheld their appeal of the death sentence. NGOs said their confessions were obtained through torture and that the trial proceedings were unfair. A 2020 *New York Times* report identified the men as members of the Shia community who previously expressed opposition to the government.

According to media, on December 9, the MOI announced it had arrested a male citizen for blasphemy and for inciting immoral activities on social media. The MOI referred the case to the public prosecutor, and it remained pending at year's end.

On February 24, a court sentenced two employees of the Jaafari Waqf to seven years imprisonment and a fine of 68,000 dinars (\$180,000) for embezzlement related to renovating Shia mosques. On March 14, a Council of Representatives inquiry committee on the misuse of the Jaafari Endowment's funds and properties submitted its final report to the committee's office board. The inquiry committee, established in September 2020, consisted of six Shia and three Sunni members of parliament. The report's findings had not been made public by year's end.

On January 21, authorities released Shia preacher Abdul Mohsin Mulla Atiyya al-Jamri after he spent one year in prison for a 2019 sermon "defaming a [historical] figure that is revered by a religious group." The preacher reportedly spoke against the founder of the Umayyad dynasty, Mu'awiya I, who assumed the caliphate after the assassination in 661 of the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law, Ali, who is revered by Shia Muslims.

According to the Twitter post of a supporter, on April 9, authorities released prominent Shia cleric Sayed Kamel al-Hashemi from prison under an alternative noncustodial sentence after he served more than two-and-a-half years for contempt of the King and inciting sectarian hatred based on his comments criticizing the government.

On April 2, the government released Shia citizen Abdunabi al-Sammak from prison under an alternative sentence. Authorities arrested al-Sammak in 2020 for publicly reciting Ziyarat Ashura, a Shia prayer deemed defamatory of religious figures that Sunnis revere. They charged al-Sammak with publicly insulting symbols and defaming the Islamic faith.

The government announced that on April 12, King Hamad pardoned 91 prisoners at the start of Ramadan via royal decree. On May 12, the eve of Eid al-Fitr, the

King pardoned 203 prisoners. On July 18, the eve of Eid al-Adha, he pardoned 32 individuals, including some foreigners.

The NGO Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) stated that on January 1, Shia prisoner Mohamed Abdulnabi Abdulla (also known as Mohamed Abdulnabi Juma al-Khoor) undertook an 11-day hunger strike to protest access to medical facilities. Authorities sentenced Abdulla to life in prison with revocation of citizenship on charges related to a blast in Karranah village in August 2015 that killed one policeman and injured seven others. According to ADHRB, his health declined in prison, and from July 2020 until he undertook the hunger strike, he requested medical treatment by a specialist. On January 11, a prison doctor examined Abdulla and transferred him to Qala'a Hospital to see an orthopedist, who, according to ADHRB, did not order an x-ray. Abdulla continued to state he was not receiving adequate specialized medical treatment and remained in prison at year's end.

The government continued to monitor and provide general guidance on the content of sermons by sending circulars to mosques, and to summon for questioning clerics who spoke on unapproved topics. The MOJIA continued to monitor clerics' adherence to a pledge of ethics it created for individuals engaged in religious discourse. According to the MOJIA, preachers who diverged from the pledge were subject to censure or removal by authorities on the grounds that their actions jeopardized national security. The MOJIA reported reviewing on a weekly basis sermons preachers submitted to the government. The MOJIA reported regularly visiting mosques on unannounced visits 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. According to Shia community representatives, during Ashura, police again summoned some Shia chanters and preachers and required them to sign pledges that they would avoid discussing politics in their sermons.

On August 24, supporters posted on Twitter that authorities summoned Shia chanters Mohamed al-Gallaf, Salih Sahwan, Hasan Norooz, Mahdi Sahwan, and Sayed Ahmed al-Alawi for religious songs they chanted during Ashura and clerics Abdelmohsin al-Jamri, Mohamed al-Rayyash, Hani al-Banna and Aziz al-Khadhran for sermons they gave during Ashura. The men were released shortly afterwards without charges. Supporters posted on Twitter that on June 12, Hooraa authorities summoned Shaikh Majeed al-Meshaal to the police station; they released him the same day without charges.

International and local NGOs reported that police summoned three Shia clerics in August during the days leading up to and following the commemoration of Ashura. Authorities interrogated the men because of the content of their sermons and specifically for “inciting sectarian hatred.” Authorities released two of the men the day after their detention. The third cleric remained in police custody at year’s end.

Political opposition figures on social media stated police summoned clerics and community leaders during the year for the content of their sermons or for creating or distributing publications deemed anti-Islamic. The MOI denied these reports, saying police did not summon or arrest anyone during the year for those reasons.

In January, the family of imprisoned Shia cleric Zuhair Jasim Ashoor, also known as Sheikh Zuhair Jasim Abbas, released a statement describing inhumane treatment by prison authorities. They said Ashoor experienced extended stays in solitary confinement, beatings, sleep deprivation, limited access to water, death threats, as well as authorities confiscating Ashoor’s religious books, including texts he was writing, and prohibiting him from practicing religious rituals. Authorities had arrested and convicted Ashoor in 2013 on terrorism charges. Ashoor’s family stated authorities had tortured him in prison for taking part in a protest inside the prison, a charge the government denied.

According to local social media accounts, on April 20, Jaw Prison authorities allowed Shia scholar Abduljalil al-Meqdad, who was serving a life sentence, temporary release to attend his mother’s funeral. Authorities sentenced al-Meqdad to life in prison after his arrest in March 2011 with other political figures on charges of attempting to overthrow the government. At least five of his relatives, including his brother Habib al-Meqdad, continued serving prison sentences ranging from 10 to 15 years.

The MOI stated its community policing program enlisted individuals directly from communities to act as informal community police, with the goals of maintaining local peace and security, resolving local issues at the community level, and avoiding escalating conflicts to law enforcement authorities. The MOI stated these informal community police monitored religious gatherings and funerals to prevent those gatherings from degenerating into protests or acts of violence.

The NGO Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) recorded one incident of harassment, one incident of threat, and nine incidents in which authorities prevented religious practice during Ramadan, although the NGO did not

provide details. ACLED also reported authorities denied iftar meals to inmates in Jaw Prison.

According to ACLED, authorities regulated Laylat al-Qadr (Night of Power) celebrations by an ad hoc decree issued May 2 that restricted the capacity of mosques and limited attendance to men who had received the second dose of the coronavirus vaccine.

ADHRB reported that police arrested or summoned for questioning several Shia Muslims related to Ashura observances. These included multiple summons sent to individuals who had raised black flags on the roofs of their homes during the holy day on August 18, as well as interrogations, arrests, and detentions of, and fines levied against, other members of the community throughout the country. ADHRB stated, “The violation of fundamental freedoms and religious rites [was] not an isolated occurrence... The pandemic has offered an opportunity to authorities to continue such repression under the guise of preventing the spread of COVID-19. This has dangerously extended the powers given to state security forces and has seen the systematic denial of religious freedom in the country.”

In August, family members and supporters posted on Twitter that inmates at Jaw Prison went on a hunger strike to protest religious discrimination and a lack of access to medical facilities, among other complaints. Some detainees said prison officials, citing COVID-19 mitigation efforts, limited time for practicing Ashura rituals. The NIHR said, however, authorities gave inmates additional time to practice Ashura rituals in common areas. Officials confirmed that religious rituals were not permitted in prison cells as a matter of general policy, and that religious commemorations were only permitted in designated prison common areas.

Activists and opposition media outlets criticized the MOI for taking down Ashura banners in Ras Rumman, South Sehla, and Hamad Town.

In a study released in October, ACLED stated Ashura commemorations in the country were “rooted at the community level and bear religious, social, and political meaning” and, “What lies at the core of the dispute between the Sunni regime and Shiite citizens is Ashura’s political potential.” According to the report, in August, authorities introduced several religious practice restrictions aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19 that effectively repressed Ashura practice and expression, including limiting attendance at houses of worship to 30 vaccinated adult individuals, and banning children from attending Ashura rituals. ACLED stated these restrictions were enforced by means of “judicial harassment” (35

incidents) and the removal of Ashura banners (31 incidents). Authorities arrested and summoned preachers, religious singers, and *maatam* (a Shia prayer house, sometimes called *husseiniya* in other countries) directors for taking part in Ashura commemorations. According to the study, officials denied Shia prisoners the right to celebrate Ashura and punished them if they performed rituals, including with discriminatory acts like preventing them from contacting their families.

Dissolved Shia political society Al-Wifaq issued a report on the government's actions during the first 10 days of the month of Muharram, which culminate in the observance of Ashura, marking the death of Hussein at the battle of Karbala. In its statement, Al-Wifaq said security forces summoned Shia scholars, preachers, officials of religious centers, and others during this period and tore down Ashura banners and flags throughout the country. The statement also said the government used the COVID-19 pandemic to restrict religious activities. According to Al-Wifaq, the government investigated 100 citizens and arrested three for "practicing their religious freedoms," and there were 45 government actions that disrupted Ashura rituals, including confiscating banners or flags and other "provocative practices."

The government stated special rooms were available to prisoners for worship and prayer regardless of religious affiliation. On August 22, the NIHR released a statement on its findings from prearranged visits during Ashura to male and female detention centers. The NIHR stated officials at these facilities said inmates could practice their religious rites "with ease." NIHR stated it spoke at random with inmates who said officials provided them with necessary facilities and services to practice their religious rites. Independent NGOs, however, cited instances where authorities denied prisoners their right to perform religious rituals.

An overseas-based human rights group stated that in at least one case, a judge prohibited an alternative noncustodial sentencing beneficiary from participating in social, cultural, and religious activities, including visiting mosques and *maatams*, or attending religious commemorations while serving his sentence.

According to an August 24 report by ADHRB, the National Task Force to Combat COVID-19 (COVID-19 taskforce) announced two days before the start of Muharram that it would allow Ashura processions in the vicinity of mosques and *maatams*, provided participants observed social distancing and other precautionary measures, such as wearing face masks and regularly using disinfectant. The ADHRB report stated these precautionary health measures "were supposedly in accordance with recommendations by the government's medical team.... However,

the authorities have instead utilized these measures to whitewash restrictions on religious freedoms in the country, alongside concealing the systematic violation of various other human rights.” ADHRB also reported that King Hamad’s son, Shaikh Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa, appeared in media joining in the Indian Onam festival, among large crowds, without employing any obvious public health measures.

Other restrictions on maatams and mosques included a ban on children’s attendance and limits on capacity (30 persons), hours of operation, and geographical boundaries for processions. Additionally, the government prohibited leaders from moving from one maatam to another. Some Shia religious leaders and opposition politicians stated these restrictions were stricter than those applied to other public buildings, such as shopping malls. A video that circulated on social media of a large crowd of spectators at a basketball game caused some members of the Shia community to question whether the COVID-19 taskforce was applying more scrutiny to maatams than other establishments. Media commentators negatively compared the MOI’s response ahead of Ashura to more permissive government preparations for Hindu and Christian holidays.

Media reported that on August 14, a group of 65 maatams issued a joint statement requesting the COVID-19 taskforce review the requirement to limit Ashura processions to certain areas, saying the requirement contributed to overcrowding and ran counter to the goals of the COVID-19 precautionary measures.

After the observance of Ashura, the King thanked the Shia community on August 19 for taking steps to limit the spread of the coronavirus during observances, saying in a statement that he “praised the awareness and national responsibility shown by everyone during Ashura commemoration towards themselves, their surroundings, and society.”

Women’s prayers halls and restrooms remained closed until the end of September, while male prayers rooms opened in April. Media reported that on September 5, parliamentarian and head of the Services Committee Ahmed al-Ansari said the continued closure of women’s chapels and toilet facilities and the government’s directive that the Quran should not be opened as anti-COVID-19 measures were not justified when restaurants and shops were open, where groups congregated and were more vulnerable to objects being touched by multiple individuals. On September 23, the MOJIA announced all female prayer halls and toilet facilities in mosques would reopen, with appropriate health measures in place.

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 it perceived as criticizing Islam. The Ministry of Information Affairs reviewed all books and publications prior to issuing printing licenses. The MOJIA also reviewed books that discussed religion.

According to representatives from the Christian and Hindu communities, the government did not interfere with their religious observances and publicly encouraged tolerance for minority religious beliefs and traditions.

The government reported there were 598 licensed Sunni mosques and 91 Sunni Islamic centers, the same numbers as in 2020. Authorities decreased the number of licensed Shia mosques to 763 (from 764 in 2020) and increased the number of maatams to 624 (from 618 in 2020). During the year, the government granted permits to build three Shia mosques, three maatams, and 23 new Sunni mosques. Authorities temporarily closed 49 Sunni mosques, five Shia mosques, and nine maatams during the year for violating COVID-19 guidelines. MOJIA closed three older mosques for renovation.

The MOLSD reported it did not receive new requests from religious groups for land or construction permits. There was no registered Buddhist temple; however, Buddhist groups reported they met in private facilities.

After the completion of construction, the new Catholic cathedral, Our Lady of Arabia, opened in December in Awali. The government donated the land for the cathedral, intended to serve as the main church for the Catholic Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia, which includes Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. As of year's end, the municipality of Awali had not granted approval for the construction of three proposed Christian churches, citing unspecified security concerns. In 2014, the King donated land for the churches.

In December, the government allocated land for a new Christian cemetery in Salmabad, acting on the Christian community's longstanding request since the country's second Christian cemetery filled its last burial plot in 2014.

The government permitted both registered and unregistered non-Muslim religious communities to maintain identifiable places of worship, hold religious gatherings, and display religious symbols such as crosses outside churches.

According to a December 13 report by the Canadian-American magazine *Vice*, the government did not fulfill its promise to rebuild 38 Shia mosques destroyed in the 2011 uprising. An ADHRB official told the magazine, “Every year there are instances where they [Shia worshippers] pray on the land of these destroyed mosques and they end up being summoned and forced to sign pledges they won’t do it anymore.” Another ADHRB official said, “The mosques that have been rebuilt are mainly rebuilt by the community themselves. A lot of them are not being maintained properly.” In response to the article, the government said in an email to *Vice*, “All 30 unlicensed . . . structures used for religious purposes referred to in your inquiry have been regularized and rebuilt to the standards of other Muslim places of worship in Bahrain (over 1,456 mosques and 625 maatams), except for three which remain under study.”

In March, the Minister of Justice confirmed that maatams were considered places of worship and therefore exempt from paying utility bills.

In November, some commentators declared that a photograph in a 10th grade family education textbook promoting positive self-image and self-esteem deviated from Islamic values by promoting homosexuality. The photograph showed a boy looking in the mirror surrounded by hearts. Assistant Undersecretary for Curricula and Educational Supervision Ahlam al-Amer released a statement defending the photograph as linked to Islamic and educational values. Members of parliament unanimously voted to start a probe into alleged homosexual content in secondary schools and suspend the family education classes until the “offensive” content was removed.

The independent but government-affiliated King Hamad Global Centre for Peaceful Coexistence (King Hamad Centre) reported it offered student exchanges and educational programs centered on dispelling ignorance, discrimination, and intolerance, including religious intolerance. During the year, the center’s Cyber Peace Academy developed an online “interfaith dialogue tool” and mobile app, *Growing Peace*, for young persons to explore scenarios and case studies on themes of violence, discrimination, hate speech, racism, and religious rights. The King Hamad Centre’s Board of Trustees comprised representatives of the country’s Sunni, Shia, Christian, Catholic, Baha’i, Hindu, and Buddhist communities.

The University of Bahrain continued to offer degree programs in religious studies and Islamic jurisprudence for Shia and Sunni students.

All students, regardless of religion, were eligible to participate in the Crown Prince International Scholarship Program (CPISP); the government did not provide a statistical breakdown of participants by religious affiliation. CPISP published a list of scholarship recipients' names, fields of study, and schools on its website. Some Shia community leaders continued to state the MOE favored Sunni students in granting scholarships rather than distributing them based solely on student merit.

Human rights activists continued to report discrimination against Shia students in university scholarship distribution.

There were reports that the MOE refused to recognize the foreign degrees of some students, primarily those who studied in China. Some activists said these refusals disproportionately affected Shia students, a higher proportion of whom obtained degrees in China.

The government-run television station Bahrain TV broadcast Friday sermons from the country's official Al-Fateh Mosque and other Sunni mosques, such as Sabeeka bint Ebrahim Mosque and Sabeeka al-Nusf Mosque, but not sermons from Shia mosques or clerics. Some Shia activists said this was discriminatory, while others said it was better not to be subject to government broadcasting restrictions. Many Shia mosques disseminated sermons via social media. A government-affiliated human rights monitoring organization said Shia prisoners could view Shia sermon videos on their mobile phones.

On February 6, Shia cleric and the spiritual leader of the dissolved Al-Wifaq political society, Sheikh Isa Qassim, who was stripped of his citizenship by the government in 2016 and had been living in Iran since 2018, issued a statement rejecting the restructuring of the Waqf directorates by royal decree, a move that subordinated the directorates to independent councils. He stated the move was "illegitimate" and "hostile" to Jaafari jurisprudence. Qassim also criticized the fact that the budget allocated to the Jaafari Waqf Directorate was dependent on the government. He characterized both actions as the government's "manipulation" of the Jaafari Waqf. In April, Qassim issued a statement that said a new constitution was the only way to resolve the country's divisions. In May, hundreds of supporters gathered at Qassim's home village of Diraz on the anniversary of a 2017 police raid on his home that resulted in the deaths of two protestors.

While by law Arab applicants with 15 years' residence and non-Arab applicants with 25 years' residence were eligible to apply for citizenship, arbitrary implementation of the law from the application stage to approval remained a

common criticism of both Shia and Sunni citizens, as well as migrant rights activists. The government stated foreign residents applying for citizenship were not required to report their religious affiliation. Shia politicians and community activists, however, continued to state 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, the continued recruitment and expedited naturalization of Sunnis represented an ongoing attempt to alter the demographic balance of the country's citizens.

The government did not maintain official statistics on the religious affiliation of public sector employees, members of parliament, or ministers. According to informal estimates, the 40-member Shura Council included 19 Shia Muslim members, one Jewish member, and one Christian member, while the remaining 19 members were Sunni Muslims. Following parliamentary elections in 2018, of 40 seats on the elected Council of Representatives, 25 were won by members identified as Sunnis and 15 identified as Shia. Five of the 22 cabinet members, including one of the four deputy prime ministers, were Shia.

According to Shia leaders and community activists, the government continued to give Sunni citizens preference for government positions, especially in the managerial ranks of the civil service, military, and security services. They also said Sunnis received preference for other government-related employment, especially in the managerial ranks of state-owned businesses. 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 favored Sunni candidates.

Shia community members said 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 MOLSD 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 private 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 and therefore did not utilize them.

NGOs reported the government continued to closely monitor the collection of funds, including charity donations, by religious organizations, with some NGOs describing this as government overreach. 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 7, the government announced it had created a new medal for peaceful coexistence named after King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa to recognize leading personalities and international organizations supporting interfaith and coexistence in the country. The Board of Trustees of the King Hamad Centre said the medal would “contribute to enhancing regional and global awareness of the importance of respecting religions and accepting others to achieve peace and harmony among different peoples and societies.”

Media reported that on August 22, King Hamad’s son, Shaikh Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa, participated in the celebration of the Hindu festival of Onam, where he said the observance confirmed the importance of dialogue and understanding in the country.

On September 13, Minister of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments Shaikh Khaled bin Ali Al Khalifa, speaking during the G20 Interfaith Forum in Italy, highlighted the importance of establishing the rule of law without differentiating between persons of different beliefs.

The Baha’i World News Service and local media reported that on October 30, Hamad Centre chairman Shaikh Khalid bin Khalifa Al Khalifa and foreign diplomats attended a ceremony in Manama marking the centenary of the passing of Abdu’l-Baha, head of the Baha’i Faith from 1892-1921.

The government said developments connected to the signing of the Abraham Accords and to the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel promoted tolerance and acceptance of Jews in Bahrain.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Non-Muslim religious community leaders again reported that there was ongoing societal pressure on individuals not to convert from Islam. Those who did so were unwilling to speak publicly or privately to family or associates about their conversions out of fear of harassment or discrimination.

Both anti-Shia and anti-Sunni commentary appeared in social media. Anti-Shia posts described Shia opponents of the government as “traitors,” “agents of Iran,” “terrorists,” “killers,” “criminals,” “plotters,” and, occasionally, “*rawafid*” (a derogatory term describing Shia who refused to accept the early caliphs). Anti-Sunni posts described the royal family and its supporters as “*nawasib*” (a derogatory term describing Sunnis who are hostile to the family of the Prophet Muhammad).

NGOs working on civil discourse and interfaith dialogue reported Sunni-Shia tensions and historical political divisions continued to have a negative economic effect. Shia representatives stated the persistent higher unemployment rate among members of 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.

In February, the Jewish communities in the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia announced the formation of the region’s first communal organization, the Association of Gulf Jewish Communities (AGJC), incorporated in Dubai. The AGJC president was Ebrahim Dawood Nonoo, a citizen of Bahrain. On August 22, Bahraini Jews held services in the newly renovated synagogue in Manama for the first time since 1947, with the participation of diplomats, members of Jewish communities throughout Gulf Cooperation Council countries, and Bahraini and Emirati Muslims. In October, the AGJC organized the first Jewish wedding in the country in 52 years. The event, conducted under the auspices of the Orthodox Union, which identifies itself as “the world’s largest kosher certification agency,” was the first strictly kosher wedding in the country’s history.

The government-supported NGO King Hamad Global Centre for Peaceful Coexistence held a conference in December entitled “Ignorance is the Enemy of Peace,” focusing on religious freedom. The center conducted programs on combating antisemitism in the wake of the government’s normalizing relations with Israel under the 2020 Abraham Accords.

According to minority religious groups, there was a high degree of tolerance within society for minority religious beliefs and traditions, although not for conversion from Islam or for atheistic or secularist views. Holiday foods, decorations, posters, and books were 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.

Anti-Zionist commentary in social media peaked with announcements of government normalization efforts with Israel, alongside protests employing antinormalization slogans such as “Death to the Zionists” and “Death to Israel.” After the normalization took place, there was negative public reaction to a Twitter post by Houda Nonoo, a former Bahraini Ambassador to the United States, inviting Jews from abroad to visit and settle in Bahrain.

The UAE research and consulting firm PSB took a June poll of youth between the ages of 17 and 24 in 17 Arab states and reported 37 percent of Bahraini respondents said their religion was the most important factor in their personal identity, slightly higher than the regionwide result of 34 percent and the result from the previous year’s survey of 32 percent. Other choices offered by the poll as possible responses included family/tribe, nationality, Arabic heritage, political beliefs, language, and gender.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Charge d’Affaires, other senior U.S. government officials, and embassy representatives met with senior government officials, including the Foreign Minister and the Minister of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments, and national human rights monitoring institutions to urge respect for freedom of religion and expression, including the right of clerics and other religious leaders to speak and write freely. Embassy officials encouraged continued government efforts to counter religious extremist narratives and to ensure full inclusion of all citizens, including members of the Shia majority, in political, social, and economic opportunities. U.S. officials publicly and in private meetings advocated for the government to pursue political reforms that took into consideration the needs of all citizens regardless of religious or prior or current political affiliation by, for example, ensuring voting districts were drawn to promote a representative elected lower house of parliament, encouraging an impartial application process for government positions, and allowing individuals previously connected to religiously based opposition political groups to run for public office.

The Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials met 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. Embassy representatives and senior U.S. officials visited various houses of worship and attended religious events during the year, including observations of Ashura, Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, Christmas, Hannukah, 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 encourage 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 August, the Charge d' Affaires and the chair of the King Hamad Centre met to discuss potential opportunities for cooperation under the 2020 U.S.-Bahrain memorandum of understanding on combating antisemitism. The embassy also supported religious freedom through its online presence, regularly highlighting on social media high level engagements with religious leaders and the embassy's participation in religious observances, for example, during Diwali and hosting a virtual event for Ramadan.