

BAHRAIN 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution declares Islam to be the official religion and sharia to be a principal source for legislation. It provides for freedom of conscience, the inviolability of places of worship, and freedom to perform religious rites. The constitution guarantees the right to express and publish opinions, provided these do not infringe on the “fundamental beliefs of Islamic doctrine.” The law prohibits anti-Islamic publications and mandates imprisonment for “exposing the state’s official religion to offense and criticism.” The government continued to question, detain, and arrest Shia clerics and community members. Authorities detained a number of clerics over the content of their sermons during the commemoration of Ashura in September; all were subsequently released without charge. In January authorities released Majeed al-Meshaal, the head of the Shia Scholar’s Council, who was sentenced in 2016 to two and a half years in prison. On June 9, the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) banned al-Meshaal from delivering Friday sermons on the grounds that he was inciting hatred. In March the criminal court sentenced 167 individuals to prison terms ranging from six months to 10 years for their participation in the 2016 Diraz sit-in held by supporters of Isa Qassim, identified by media as the country’s leading Shia cleric. On July 30, authorities placed Shia cleric Sheikh Isaal al-Qaffas in solitary confinement in Jaw Prison for protesting the execution of two Shia. On August 30, Jaw Prison authorities banned inmates from gathering in large groups to commemorate Ashura in the corridors. The prison permitted inmates to conduct observances in small groups in their cells from 8:00 to 9:00 each night. In general, non-Muslim religious minorities reported they could practice their religion openly without fear of interference from the government. In August the government authorized work to begin on the renovation and expansion of the Shri Krishna Hindu Temple during a visit by the Prime Minister of India. In December the King Hamad Centre for Global Peaceful Coexistence cohosted two roundtables on religious freedom, bringing together Shia and Sunni Muslims, Coptic and evangelical Christians, Baha’is, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jews. The King Hamad Centre cited the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom hosted by the United States in July for providing the impetus to hold these events.

Some representatives of the Shia community continued to state that the higher unemployment rate and lower socioeconomic status of Shia were a result of discriminatory hiring practices. Anti-Shia and anti-Sunni commentary appeared on

social media, including statements that some prominent former and current Shia political leaders were “traitors” and “Iranian servants.” According to non-Muslim religious groups, including Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Baha’is, Buddhist, and Jews, there was a high degree of tolerance within society for minority religious beliefs, traditions, and houses of worship. Although no law prevented individuals from converting from one religion to another, societal attitudes and behavior discouraged conversion from Islam.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 1.5 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the government, there are approximately 689,000 citizens, constituting less than half of the total population. According to 2018 U.S. estimates, Muslims make up 73.7 percent of the total population, Christians 9.3 percent, Jews 0.1 percent, and others 16.9 percent (Hindus, Baha’is, Sikhs, and Buddhists).

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

Most of the foreign residents are migrant workers from South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Arab countries. Local government estimates report approximately 51 percent of foreign residents are Muslim, 31 percent Hindus, Buddhists, Baha’is, and Sikhs, 17 percent Christians (primarily Roman Catholic,

Protestant, Syrian Orthodox, and Mar Thoma from South India), and less than 1 percent Jewish.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

According to the constitution, Islam is the official religion, and the state safeguards the country's Islamic heritage. The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, the inviolability of places of worship, 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 these do not infringe on the official religion or public order, and it prohibits discrimination based on religion or creed. All citizens have equal rights by law. According to the constitution, all persons are equal without discrimination on the basis of gender, origin, language, or faith. The labor law prohibits discrimination in the public and private public sectors on grounds of religion or faith. The law also stipulates recourse through a complaint process to the Ministry of Labor and Social Development (MOLSD) to legal bodies in the event of discrimination or dismissal in the work place on the basis of religion.

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

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

Muslim religious groups must register with the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs and Endowments (MOJIA) to operate. Sunni religious groups register with the ministry through the Sunni Waqf, while Shia religious groups register through the Jaafari (Shia) Waqf. The MOJIA waqfs are endowment boards, which supervise, fund the work of, and perform a variety of activities related to mosques and prayer halls. Non-Muslim groups must register with the MOLSD to operate. In order to register, a group must submit an official letter requesting registration; copies of minutes from the founders' committee meeting; a detailed list of founders, including names, ages, nationalities, occupations, and addresses; and other information such as the group's bylaws and bank account information.

Religious groups also may need approval from the Ministry of Education (MOE), the Ministry of Information Affairs, or the MOI, depending on the nature of the group's intended activities. If any religious group organizes functions outside of its designated physical space without approval, it may be subject to government prosecution and a fine. The law prohibits activities falling outside of an organization's charter. The penal code does not specifically address the activities of unregistered religious groups, but provides for the closing of any unlicensed branch of an international organization plus imprisonment of up to six months and fines of up to 50 Bahraini dinars (\$130) for the individuals responsible for setting up the branch.

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.

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

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

The government-run and -funded Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (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 is comprised of a chairman, a deputy chairman, 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 from other government scholarship programs, the council offers university scholarships for advanced Islamic studies for low-income students. The SCIA reviews all legislation proposed by the parliament to ensure the draft law's compliance with sharia. The council also consults with other government entities before issuing permits to new Islamic societies or centers. The council is responsible for reviewing the content of Islamic programs broadcast on official government media, such as the official television station and official radio programs. The council also organizes interfaith conferences and workshops.

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

The law regulates Islamic religious instruction at all levels of the education system. The government funds public schools for grades 1-12; Islamic studies are mandatory for all Muslim students and are optional for non-Muslims. Private schools must 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, both Muslim and non-Muslim students may engage in religious studies that the MOJ sponsors, as their parents deem fit.

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

Islamic studies 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.

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

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

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

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

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

The law guarantees inmates of correctional facilities the right to attend burials and receive condolences outside 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 politics are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

The press reported on July 27 that the government executed two men, Ahmad al-Mullali and Ali Hakim al-Arab, both Shia citizens, for crimes related to the 2017 shooting of a police officer. Following the executions, Reuters reported that protests broke out in the country, including "several Shia villages and neighborhoods on the outskirts of the capital."

The government continued to question, detain, and arrest Shia clerics and community members. The government continued to monitor and provide general guidance for the content of sermons and to bring charges against clerics who repeatedly spoke on unapproved topics.

On January 29, authorities rearrested the chairman of the dissolved Ulama Council, Sheikh Majeed al-Meshaal, several hours after he was released from prison where he spent two-and-a-half years for holding an illegal gathering during the 2017 Diraz sit-in by supporters of senior Shia leader Isa Qassim. Al-Meshaal appeared before the Public Prosecutor on February 2 on charges of "inciting hatred against the regime." On February 17, the Public Prosecutor extended his detention for an additional 15 days pending investigation. Authorities released him from detention on February 27. Al-Meshaal condemned the revocation of Qassim's citizenship and called for witnesses in Qassim's hometown of Diraz to speak out. On June 9, authorities banned al-Meshaal for an indeterminate period from delivering Friday sermons in the Diraz mosque for inciting hatred. According to an Iranian media source, in September the government barred al-Meshaal from overseas travel.

On June 11, authorities summoned Shia cleric Mulla Abbas al-Jaziri for inciting sectarian sedition but released him on the same day. Activists said al-Jaziri “was investigated over a religious event held in the holy month of Ramadan, on the martyrdom of Imam Ali bin Abi Taleb.”

On July 30, authorities placed Shia cleric Isaal al-Qaffas in solitary confinement in Jaw Prison for protesting the execution of Shia prisoners Ahmad al-Mullali and Ali Hakim al-Arab. In 2016 authorities arrested, convicted, and sentenced al-Qaffas to 10 years imprisonment for involvement with what the government referred to as the “Bahrain Hizballah terrorist organization.” In December the public prosecutor charged al-Qaffas with insulting the king and inciting hatred against the government.

Authorities summoned Shia cleric Mohammed Saleh al-Qashmaei for questioning on May 29 and released him the same day. Al-Qashmaei previously spent one year in prison before being released in 2018. The government also arrested his son and daughter “for harboring prisoners.” His son, Abul Fadhl, was serving 15 years in prison. His daughter was sentenced to five years in January 2018; her sentence was subsequently reduced to three years, and she was released on August 8.

According to press and NGOs, in March the criminal court sentenced 167 individuals out of 171 originally charged to prison terms ranging from six months to 10 years for their participation in the 2016 Diraz sit-in. In May the Supreme Court of Appeals reduced the longer, 10-year sentences, to seven years and six months in prison.

International and local NGOs reported police summoned approximately 25 individuals, including clerics, in the days leading up to and following the September 1-10 Ashura commemoration, the most significant days of the Shia religious calendar. Authorities reportedly summoned and interrogated these individuals “for the content of their sermons” and for “inciting sectarian hatred.” Police held some of them overnight; others were detained and released the same day; while others remained in custody for several days or weeks.

According to human rights NGOs, on July 28, authorities summoned Shia cleric Abdul Nabi al-Nashaba to the Qudaibiya police station in Manama. They arrested him upon arrival and brought him before the Public Prosecution on July 29, where he was ordered detained for 15 days pending an investigation of charges of “contempt of a sect.” Authorities remanded him to jail, releasing him in

September with four other clerics: Isa al-Moaemen, Mulla Qassim Zain al-Dine, Mahmood al-Ajaimi, and Muneer Maatooq.

On June 1, the Court of Cassation, the country's highest court of appeal, upheld life sentences for 55 detainees charged with belonging to the Dhul-Faqar Brigades terror cell.

On April 16, the High Criminal Court ruled on a case involving 169 Shia defendants whom the government accused of being members of the "Bahraini Hezbollah." Of the 169 total defendants, 69 were sentenced to life in prison, 70 received sentences between five to 10 years in prison, and 30 were acquitted; 96 of the defendants were ordered to pay a 100,000 dinar (\$265,000) fine. The court revoked the citizenship of 138 of the 169 defendants. On June 30, the Court of Appeals, at the direction of the king, overturned the revocation of citizenship of 92 of these individuals. Reuters reported the government denied deliberately targeting the Shia opposition, saying it was acting only to preserve national security.

On July 9, the High Criminal Court sentenced Shia cleric Mulla Mohammed al-Madhi to one year in prison for "insulting the companions of prophet Muhammed" in a sermon he delivered during Ramadan.

On August 4, the Public Prosecutor filed an urgent motion against Ali Mohammed Saeed Ali Jassim, a Sunni activist and member of the Unitary National Democratic Assemblage, for insulting Islam and blasphemy on social media. His case was referred to the criminal court for an urgent trial. On September 18, he was convicted and sentenced to one year in prison.

Media reported in January the Court of Cassation upheld life sentences against Ali Salman, former leader of Wifaq, and former Wifaq members of parliament (MPs) Hasan Ali Juma Sultan and Ali Mahdi Ali al-Aswad, for conspiring with Qatar to undermine the government. Wifaq is a banned political movement with strong links to the country's Shia community. In 2018 an appeals court reversed a lower court's acquittal and sentenced Salman, as well as Sultan al-Aswad, who were both tried in absentia, to life in prison for conspiring with Qatar. The UN Human Rights Office and international NGOs, including Amnesty International, said there were serious doubts whether the court proceedings respected the right to a fair trial. In a separate case, authorities previously sentenced Salman to four years imprisonment for "inciting hatred."

According to the press, on August 21, a criminal court sentenced four individuals to seven years each in prison for belonging to the Al-Mukhtar Brigade, a Shia group that the government and the United Kingdom and some other countries have designated as a terrorist organization.

On August 30, a criminal court sentenced nine individuals (including two brothers) to five years in prison for belonging to an Iraqi Hizballah group.

The press reported in February that Isa Qassim, identified by media as the leading Shia cleric in the country whom the government allowed to travel to London in mid-2018 for medical treatment, announced his relocation to Iran. The government stripped Qassim of his citizenship in 2016 and held him under house arrest before permitting him to travel for required medical care overseas.

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

On April 21, the king issued a decree reinstating the citizenship of 551 individuals previously convicted and stripped of their nationality in a series of mass trials. According to NGOs, there were 990 citizenship revocations in the country since 2012, including 180 during the year. The BBC reported that many of the individuals who lost their citizenship were human rights defenders, political activists, journalists, and religious scholars. According to Reuters, activists said most of those covered by the decree were from Shia families. On September 18, Zainab Makki, originally arrested in 2017 for alleged membership in an Iranian-sponsored Shia terrorist group, reported that she has not been able to get her passport back following the king's decree. Makki spent one year in jail on charges of harboring terrorists and hiding explosives in her house; she completed her sentence on March 29 and was released from prison.

According to the government, it generally permitted prisoners to practice their religion, but there were reports from Shia activists that restrictions imposed by prison authorities effectively denied prisoners access to religious services and prayer time. Bahrain Interfaith, an NGO focusing on religious rights and interfaith dialogue, reported Shia prisoners were "subjected to humiliation, persecution, ill treatment, and denial of [medical] treatment." In August a large number of prisoners began a hunger strike in Jaw Prison to protest prison conditions,

including the lack of health care. According to the state news agency, the Office of the Ombudsman conducted an investigation into the hunger strike following reports about the prisoners' action in social media. Regarding prisoners' requests to hold collective worship, the Ombudsman stated prison authorities had cited a requirement to "maintain order and to respect the religious beliefs of others." The Office of the Ombudsman concluded that its investigation did not justify the filing of an official complaint with the government. The National Institute for Human Rights (NIHR), a quasi-governmental organization established by royal decree in 2016, visited Jaw Prison on August 18 and met with some of the individuals on hunger strike. NIHR released a statement saying that it was carefully following the issue to ensure "the health and safety of the inmates and their enjoyment of all their rights and freedoms" and said it would submit its observations and recommendations to the appropriate authorities.

On August 30, Jaw Prison authorities banned inmates from gathering in large groups to commemorate Ashura in the corridors, according to NGOs. The prison, however, allowed inmates to conduct observances in small groups in their cells from 8:00 to 9:00 each night.

The government continued not to provide regular statistics on detainees. The government reported that special rooms were available to prisoners for worship and prayer regardless of religious affiliation. NIHR continued to state it had not received any cases of prisoners being subject to harassment or ill-treatment by prison guards due to their religious affiliation.

In February the head of the Jaafari Waqf sent a letter to King Hamad complaining about the interference of the MOJ in the work of the Jaafari Waqf. In May the MOJ referred to the National Audit Bureau a corruption case against the Jaafari Waqf. In June the king issued a decree appointing a new chairman and new members to the Jaafari Waqf.

The government did not maintain official statistics on the religious affiliation of public employees, members of parliament, or ministers. However, according to informal estimates, the 40-member Shura Council included 18 Shia Muslim members, one Jewish member, and one Christian member, while the remaining 20 members were Sunni Muslims. Following parliamentary elections in 2018, sources suggested that of 40 seats on the Council of Representatives, 25 were won by members identified as Sunnis and 15 identified as Shia. None of the current members of parliament ran on an explicitly sectarian platform. Five of the 24 cabinet members, including one of the five deputy prime ministers, were Shia.

The government reported 596 licensed Sunni mosques and 91 Sunni community centers; authorities increased the number of licensed Shia places of worship to 754 mosques, while the number of *ma'atams* (Shia prayer houses, sometimes called *husseiniyas* in other countries) remained the same at 618. The government reported it granted 30 permits during the year to build Sunni mosques and an additional 30 permits to build Shia mosques and *ma'atams*. The government stated that determining whether a mosque would be Sunni or Shia in new housing developments depended on the needs and demographics of the new residents.

The government continued to monitor and provide general guidance on the content of sermons and to bring charges against clerics who repeatedly 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 their actions jeopardized national security. The MOJIA reported reviewing sermons submitted to the government on a weekly basis by preachers. The MOJIA reported regularly visiting mosques to ensure preacher's sermons were "moderate," avoided discussing controversial topics, did not incite violence, and did not use religious discourse to serve political purposes. 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.

The government continued to permit Shia groups to hold processions to commemorate Ashura and Arbaeen (the fortieth day after Ashura, commemorating the death of Hussein) throughout the country, with the largest procession organized by a Shia community-led organization, the Manama Public Processions Commission. During the annual two-day public holiday for Ashura, most public schools and government offices were closed. The government permitted public reenactments of the death of Hussein and public marches in commemoration of Ashura. As in previous years, the MOI provided security for the processions, but again removed some Ashura flags, banners, and decorations from streets and private property in Shia villages but not at the large procession in Manama, according to Shia leaders. The NGO Bahrain Center for Human Rights reported "at least 17" instances involving police removal of Shia banners and signs. The government stated MOI personnel had removed the banners because they violated zoning restrictions or because they contained political messages.

According to press reporting, Minister of Interior Rashid bin Abdullah al-Khalifa met with the head of the Jaafari Waqf and other Shia leaders prior to Ashura and told them, “the organizers of the religious rituals should control situations by not allowing the exploitation of ... processions for goals far from the main reason for the occasion, such as holding slogans or images of religious or political personalities or foreign groups.” He reportedly said violation of MOI guidance was prohibited and would not be allowed. According to press reports, the minister stated that the role of authorities and Shia leaders was the protection of the privacy of the places of worship and to perform violation-free rituals.

On September 18, in an oral intervention at the UN Human Rights Council, an NGO representative stated, “MOI officials also play an important role in ongoing religious discrimination, arresting and detaining religious leaders and clerics during Ashura, interrupting religious processions, and harassing members of Bahrain’s Shia community during prayer times.”

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

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

Adherents of minority religious groups reported they were able to produce religious media and publications and distribute them in bookstores and churches,

although the government did not permit publications that were perceived to criticize Islam. According to non-Muslim religious groups, the government did not interfere with religious observances and encouraged tolerance for minority religious beliefs and traditions. In August the government announced that it would allow a large-scale renovation and extension of the Shri Krishna Hindu Temple in the Manama souq.

Authorities permitted some churches to build larger premises on a different location, but at year's end, these churches had not received MOLSD's final approval for the location of the new facilities. Government contacts reported that land scarcity was the reason for this delay.

There was no progress reported on the construction of a Coptic Orthodox church in Manama following the announcement in 2016 by the king that he would permit the construction of the church. Construction continued on a Catholic cathedral, intended to serve as headquarters for the Catholic Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia, which was scheduled for completion by mid-2021.

In April the Al-Wifaq opposition society reported 11 Shia mosques out of 30 mosques destroyed or damaged in 2011 had not been repaired or reconstructed. Others were transformed into public parks or completely removed. The MOJIA, however, reported in 2018 it had concluded reconstruction to the extent feasible of 27 of the 30 mosques destroyed or damaged in 2011, in compliance with the recommendations of an independent fact-finding commission. NGOs stated authorities did not allow the construction of new mosques in Rifaa and *ma'atams* in Hamad Town despite numerous requests from community members.

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

According to the MOJ, officially registered organizers of Haj and Umrah pilgrimages needed to abide by strict rules to maintain their licenses. There were no reports by NGOs or in media of favoritism or discrimination regarding the allocation of Hajj visas to Sunni and Shia Muslims.

According to the law, Arab applicants with 15 years' residence and non-Arab applicants with 25 years' residence are eligible to apply for citizenship. The government stated that foreign residents applying for citizenship were not required to report their religious affiliation. Shia politicians and community activists,

however, continued to say the government's naturalization and citizenship process favored Sunni over Shia applicants. They said the government continued to recruit Sunnis from other countries to join the security forces, granted them expedited naturalization, and provided them with public housing while excluding Shia citizens from those forces. According to Shia community activists, this continued recruitment and expedited naturalization of Sunnis represented an ongoing attempt to alter the demographic balance among the country's citizens.

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

Two public schools provided more thorough religious instruction for students from elementary school through high school; the remainder of their curricula was consistent with the nonreligious curriculum in other public schools. The Jaafari Institute provided religious instruction in Shia Islam. The Religious Institute provided education in Sunni Islam.

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

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

The government continued to impose fines ranging from 50 to 400 dinars (\$130-\$1,100) for defacing the country's passports. When announcing the fines in 2018, it stated that writing, tearing, or stamping a passport was illegal unless done by authorized immigration officials in the country or overseas. The NIHR stated the ban included any alterations by ministries, embassies, hotels, banks, or tourism agencies. Often tourism agencies, hotels, and other individuals at overseas religious sites placed stickers or wrote on the passports. Former Shia MP Ali al-Ateesh said the law targeted citizens for visiting [Shia] religious sites in Iran and Iraq, while those with unofficial markings from other destinations were not held accountable. Other MPs said the rule did not target sects, religious tours, individuals, or countries.

NGOs reported the government continued to closely monitor the collection of funds, including charity donations, by religious organizations. The NGOs said religious leaders and organizations not authorized to collect money, or whom the government believed handled the money in improper ways, were potentially subject to legal action.

In 2018 the foreign minister announced the government planned to create a position of ambassador at large for peaceful coexistence and religious freedom; the position remained vacant at year's end.

Press editorials and statements from government and religious leaders emphasized the importance of religious tolerance. Representatives of the King Hamad Centre for Peaceful Coexistence, led by a Board of Trustees comprised of representatives of the country's Sunni, Shia, Christian, Catholic, Baha'i, Hindu, and Buddhist communities, met with governmental and religious groups in several countries, including the United Kingdom, France, and the United States, where they also met with government and civil society leaders. The center cohosted two roundtables on religious freedom in Manama on December 8 and 9. The December 8 roundtable was a partnership between the center and the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation. The event held the following day, entitled "The Launch of Middle East and North Africa International Religious Freedom Roundtable," was cohosted by the International Religious Freedom Roundtable, a U.S. NGO. Both events brought together representatives from a wide variety of religions, including Shia and Sunni Muslims, Coptic and evangelical Christians, Baha'is, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jews. At the December 9 roundtable, King Hamad Centre Chairman Dr. Shaikh Khalid bin Khalifa al-Khalifa sat next to the former Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, Shlomo Amar. NGOs later said they were concerned that Manama was the venue for the conference, given "the government's longstanding refusal to respect religious freedom" and that the conference needed to be accompanied by "practical measures that prevent ... sectarian-based discrimination ... including policies that deprive the country's Shiite[s] of their natural right to fully enjoy full Equal Citizenry."

Local press again featured photographs of senior government officials, including the crown prince, visiting the Diwali festivities of several prominent Hindu families throughout the country.

Christian community leaders stated they continued to search for a suitable location for a new non-Islamic cemetery. While the government continued to work with them to identify a location, they did not identify a site during the year.

According to local media and community representatives, there were cremation facilities for the Hindu community. These facilities, however, were located outdoors and in the populated area of Buhair, and were the subject of complaints over health and environmental concerns from area residents for some time. On September 6, the Southern Municipal Council announced that Hindu cremation would be handled by a specialized company in indoor crematories. The cremations would take place in the Salmabad and Awali areas, far from residential areas.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Anti-Shia and anti-Sunni commentary appeared in social media. Posts stated that former Shia leaders were “traitors” and “Iranian servants,” used the hashtag “Iran Supports Sedition in Bahrain,” and displayed images of prominent Shia figures Ali Salman and Isa Qassim. Anti-Sunni commentary largely focused on characterizing individuals as “apologists” for the government and sometimes went as far as calling individuals “mercenaries.”

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

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

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

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

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. government officials, including the Secretary of State, the Ambassador, and other embassy representatives, met with senior government officials, including the foreign minister and minister of justice and Islamic affairs, to urge respect for freedom of religion and expression, including the right of clerics and other religious leaders to speak and write freely, and to ensure full inclusion of all citizens, including members of the Shia majority, in political, social, and economic opportunities. U.S. officials both publicly and in private meetings continued to advocate for the government to pursue political reforms that would take into consideration the needs of all citizens regardless of religious affiliation. Embassy staff attended the two roundtables focusing on religious freedom in Manama on December 8 and 9 that were hosted by the King Hamad Centre for Peaceful Coexistence, which cited the July Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington as the impetus behind these events.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to meet regularly with religious leaders from a broad spectrum of faiths, representatives of NGOs, and political groups to discuss freedom of religion and freedom of expression as it related to religious practices. These exchanges included the Ambassador's meetings with Shi'a leaders during a visit to a *ma'atam* during the commemoration of Ashura in September. The Ambassador and embassy staff members visited various houses of worship and attended religious events during the year, including the observation of Ashura, Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, Christmas, and Diwali. At these events, they discussed issues related to religious tolerance with participants and emphasized the U.S. government's commitment to religious freedom.

The embassy continued to 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. The embassy also continued to support religious freedom through its online presence. On International Religious Freedom Day, the embassy tweeted, "In honor of National Religious Freedom Day we

recognize the Bahraini government for their continued efforts in supporting an environment which fosters freedom of religion. #sharedvalue.”