

# **BAHRAIN 2015 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 Sunni-led government continued to question, detain, and arrest Shia clerics, community members, and opposition politicians for defaming another religion, inciting hatred against another religious group, engaging in political speech in sermons, and allegedly supporting terrorism. The government also prosecuted Shia political figures on charges, which the international media and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported were politically motivated. In June a criminal court sentenced Sheikh Ali Salman, Secretary General of the Shia opposition political society Wifaq, to a total of four years’ imprisonment on two separate charges of inciting hatred and promoting disobedience to the law in political speeches he had given in 2014. In August authorities arrested former Wifaq Member of Parliament (MP) Sheikh Hasan Isa on allegations his distribution of funds to families in his district had helped finance a terrorist bombing. In April the Court of Cassation upheld the dissolution of the Islamic Ulema Council (IUC), the main assembly of Shia clerics in the country, saying the IUC had used religion as a cover for political activity. The government stated it intervened in religious practices when it determined religious authorities were encouraging violence or sectarian hatred. The government investigated terrorist bombings from 2014 in which two persons were killed; 25 Shia were tried and convicted of perpetrating the attacks, with one defendant given the death penalty while the others received prison sentences ranging from 10 years to life. In February the government revoked the citizenship of 72 individuals accused of supporting terrorist organizations, including Sunnis who had left the country to fight on behalf of Da’esh (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), as well as Shia clerics and human rights activists. The government allowed Ashura processions to occur, but questioned a number of clerics about politicizing their Ashura speeches. Non-Muslim groups said the government usually did not interfere with religious observances performed by registered non-Muslim institutions. The Ministry of the Interior (MOI) increased its security presence around Shia mosques following attacks on Shia mosques in other countries. The government continued to rebuild

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Shia mosques damaged in the 2011 unrest and to reinstate Shia workers who had lost their government employment following the unrest. Human rights activists said the Shia population experienced discrimination in access to government employment and educational opportunities.

Representatives of the Shia community reported discrimination against Shia in a variety of sectors, but representatives of non-Muslim religious groups reported continued general acceptance of their presence and activities. Anti-Shia commentary appeared in private broadcasts and publications and on social media, including allegations against leaders of the Wifaq of supporting terrorism. Local newspapers detailed vandalism at Shia mosques and the destruction of the grave of a Sufi leader following calls on social media to destroy it.

The U.S. Ambassador, visiting U.S. government officials, and embassy officers encouraged government officials to continue to protect religious sites, fully implement the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) recommendations (including those related to the reconstruction of places of worship), end discrimination against Shia in government employment and education, and support national unity initiatives. Embassy officers met regularly with religious leaders and representatives of NGOs to discuss the welfare of detainees and rights of religious minorities.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 1.3 million (July 2015 estimate), with citizens making up approximately 45 percent of the population. Local sources estimate citizens are 99 percent Muslim, while Christians, Hindus, Bahais, and Jews constitute the remaining 1 percent. The government does not publish statistics regarding the sectarian breakdown between Shia and Sunni; most estimates say Shia constitute a majority (at least 60 percent) of the country's citizen population.

According to Jewish community members, there are approximately 36-40 Jewish citizens, or six families, in the country. Most of the foreign residents are migrant workers from South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Arab countries. Over half of the foreigners are non-Muslim, including Hindus, Buddhists, Christians (primarily Roman Catholic, Protestant, Syrian Orthodox, and Mar Thoma from South India), Bahais, and Sikhs.

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Taking account of both citizens and noncitizens, the Central Informatics Organization (CIO) calculates Muslims make up 73.8 percent of the total population, Christians comprise 8.3 percent, and Jews 0.9 percent.

### **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, and freedom to perform religious rites and hold religious parades and meetings "in accordance with the customs observed in the country." The constitution guarantees the freedom to form associations as long as these do not infringe on the official religion or public order, and prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion or creed. There is no legal statute implementing the latter provision.

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

The penal code calls for punishment of not more than one year imprisonment or a fine of not more than 100 Bahraini dinars (BD) (\$265) for offending one of the recognized religious groups or their practices. It prescribes the same penalty for openly defaming a religious figure considered sacred to members of a particular group.

Muslim religious groups must obtain a license from the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs (MOJIA) to operate. Non-Muslim religious groups must register with the Ministry of Labor and Social Development (MOLSD) to operate. In order to register, groups 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. Religious groups also may need approval from the Ministry of Education (MOE), the Ministry of Culture, the Information Authority, 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 penal code does not specifically address the activities of unregistered religious groups, but provides for

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the closing of any unlicensed branch of an international organization plus imprisonment of up to six months and fines of up to BD50 (\$133) for the individuals responsible for setting it up.

Nineteen non-Muslim religious groups are registered with the MOLSD, including Christian churches and a Hindu temple.

The law prohibits anti-Islamic publications and broadcast media programs and mandates imprisonment for no less than six months for “exposing the state’s official religion to offense and criticism.” The law does not further prohibit, restrict, or punish the importation, possession, or distribution of religious literature.

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 national and municipal entities. Government entities allocating building permits include the MOJIA, the Islamic Affairs Awqaf (Endowment) Boards, the country’s five municipalities, the Survey and Restoration Directorate, and the Survey Department.

The constitution states the law shall regulate religious instruction at all levels of the educational system. Islamic studies are mandatory for all Muslim students and are optional for non-Muslim students in public schools. Muslims attending public schools may study other religions, but on their own time. The government funds all public schools from kindergarten through grade 12. Students may also attend private schools, which must be registered with the government, but need not teach religious studies.

The Maliki school of Sunni jurisprudence forms the basis of the Islamic studies portion of public school curriculum, which does not include the Jaafari traditions of Shia Islam. One public school, the Jaafari Institute, provides religious instruction in Shia Islam; the remainder of its curriculum is consistent with the nonreligious curriculum in other public schools. An estimated 1,200 students attend the Jaafari Institute from elementary level through high school.

For Shia adult religious education, there are five Jaafari *hawzas* (Shia religious universities), which have been allowed to continue to operate despite not being officially registered.

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According to the constitution, sharia forms a principal basis for legislation. The civil and criminal legal systems include courts implementing a Maliki interpretation of Sunni sharia as well as civil code.

The constitution states inheritance is a guaranteed right governed by sharia. It guarantees the duties and equality of women according to sharia as well. Provisions of the law regarding personal status regulate family matters, including inheritance, child custody, marriage, and divorce. The codified version of the law incorporates a Sunni interpretation of sharia, and is only applicable to the Sunni portion of the population. There is no codified Jaafari (Shia) personal status law. The Shia population uses an informal court system to apply Jaafari personal status law; mixed Sunni-Shia families may choose which court system will hear their case. The codified Sunni personal status law requires a woman's consent for marriage and permits women to include conditions in the marriage contract. There is no comparable provision affecting Shia women.

The government does not designate religious affiliation on national identity documents. Birth certificate applications record a child's religion, but not denomination. The birth certificate itself does not include the child's religion.

### Government Practices

The government continued to question, detain, and arrest Shia clerics, community members, and opposition politicians for defaming another religion, inciting hatred against another religious group, engaging in political speech in sermons, and allegedly supporting terrorism. The government also prosecuted Shia political figures on charges which the international media and NGOs reported were politically motivated. In June a criminal court sentenced Sheikh Ali Salman, Secretary General of the Shia political society Wifaq to a total of four years' imprisonment on two separate charges of inciting hatred and promoting disobedience to the law in political speeches he had given in 2014. In August authorities arrested former Wifaq MP Hasan Isa on allegations his distribution of funds to families in his district had helped finance a terrorist bombing. The Court of Cassation upheld the dissolution of the Shia Islamic Ulama Council (IUC), saying it used religion as "cover" for political activities. The government investigated terrorist bombings from 2014 in which two persons were killed; 25 Shia were tried and convicted of perpetrating the attacks, with one defendant given the death penalty while the others received prison sentences ranging from 10 years to life. In February by royal decree, the government revoked the citizenship of 72

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individuals, including some Sunni as well as Shia, for supporting terrorist organizations. The government said it intervened in religious practices when it determined religious authorities were encouraging violence or sectarian hatred. The government did not generally interfere with religious observances performed by registered non-Muslim institutions. The MOI increased its security presence around Shia mosques following attacks on Shia mosques in other countries. The government continued to rebuild Shia mosques damaged in the 2011 unrest and to reinstate Shia workers who had lost their government employment following the unrest. Shia leaders said preference was given to Sunni citizens for educational scholarships, employment as teachers, and employment in sensitive government positions. Because religion and political affiliation were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

The government arrested individuals on charges related to defamation of religion and inciting hatred against another denomination. In June the higher criminal court sentenced opposition leader and Wifaq Secretary General Sheikh Ali Salman to four years in jail for inciting hatred and disobedience to the law following his arrest for political speeches in 2014. The international news media, as well as international NGOs, reported the conviction as politically motivated. The UN and the European Union issued public statements condemning the conviction as an abuse of Sheikh Salman's right to freedom of expression. As of the end of the year, his case remained under appeal and he remained in prison. The Sunni head of the socialist opposition society reportedly was jailed on similar charges.

Public officials alleged some Shia opposition members were supporters of terrorism. Authorities detained and subsequently arrested former Wifaq MP Hasan Isa in August, alleging he had helped finance a terrorist bomb attack resulting in the deaths of two policemen in Sitra. Isa denied the charges, saying he had distributed funds to poor families in his role as a religious leader of the neighborhood. Wifaq said the charges were politically motivated. Isa's trial continued through the end of the year, and he remained in prison.

In May the Supreme Criminal Court sentenced a Sunni individual to one year in prison, a BD2000 (\$5,300) fine, and deportation upon completion of his sentence for inciting sectarianism and encouraging extremism on social media; his case remained under appeal at year's end. A Sunni comedian was arrested in August for criticizing officials' handling of Shia protesters; he was released a few days later. In January education authorities suspended a teacher and reduced her salary

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for using a classroom handout which reportedly insulted a companion of the Prophet.

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In February the government issued a royal decree revoking the citizenship of 72 individuals, including both Sunni and Shia, accused of supporting terrorist organizations. Among those deprived of citizenship were Sunnis accused of leaving the country to fight with Da'esh, as well as some Shia clerics and human rights activists. Two individuals appealed the decision; their cases were not resolved as of the end of the year.

Several Shia clerics arrested in 2011 and given sentences ranging from 15 years to life imprisonment on charges related to terrorist activity or inciting hatred, and associated with the political opposition protest movement, remained in prison at year's end.

In April the Court of Cassation, the highest court, rejected the appeal by the IUC, the main assembly of Shia clerics in the country, of the 2014 decision by the High Administrative Court to dissolve the IUC and liquidate its assets. The High Administrative Court had found in favor of the government's suit stating the IUC was unlicensed and "used religion as a cover" for political activity.

The MOI and the public prosecutor summoned a number of Shia clerics and community leaders for questioning, for engaging in political speech in their sermons. In June the authorities questioned the Chairman of the dissolved IUC, Sayed Majeed al Meshal, regarding a sermon he gave in which he denounced the authorities and spoke in support of Sheikh Ali Salman. He was then released. On December 31, the authorities summoned Shia clerics Maytham al Salman and Abdulla al Ghuraifi for questioning regarding speeches they gave at a rally commemorating the arrest of Sheikh Ali Salman.

The government permitted Shia groups to hold processions to commemorate Ashura and Arbaeen, but summoned 13 religious chanters and clerics for questioning related to politicizing their Ashura speeches. The government did not detain or arrest any of those it questioned, however. Although the MOI provided

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security for the processions, Shia leaders reported MOI personnel also removed some Ashura flags, banners, and decorations from streets and private property, resulting, in at least one case, in a clash with local youth who tried to prevent the banners' removal. The government said the banners were removed for unspecified violations.

The MOJIA threatened clerics with suspension if they espoused violence. In June the authorities suspended Salafist preacher Jassim Saedi, a former MP, who previously had been suspended for anti-Shia commentary, but then reinstated him in July. He continued to make anti-Shia commentary via social media.

In May the High Criminal Court acquitted newspaper columnist Tareq al-Amer, who had been dismissed from his position at the local daily *Al-Bilad* in 2014 and whom authorities had charged with disdaining the Shia denomination for printing material mocking Shia religious thought in his column. The court ruled the article did not include phrases indicating contempt for a denomination and was of a political nature and not religious. Al-Amer found employment at the *Al-Watan* newspaper in June.

The government reported there were 440 licensed Sunni mosques and 80 Sunni community centers, while the number of licensed Shia places of worship included 609 mosques and 618 *ma'atams*, (Shia prayer houses). The state funded all licensed mosques. In newer residential developments such as Hamad Town and Isa Town, often containing mixed Shia and Sunni populations, observers reported there tended to be a disproportionate number of Sunni mosques, which they said evinced government favoritism.

Some non-Muslim groups reported they had experienced bureaucratic delays in trying to complete the reregistration process instituted by the MOLSD over the past several years for unspecified reasons. The reregistration reportedly involved resubmission of documents required for a group's original registration.

The government continued to fund, monitor, and exercise control over official Muslim religious institutions, including Shia and Sunni mosques; religious community centers; Shia and Sunni religious endowments; and the religious courts, representing both the Shia- and Sunni-affiliated schools of Islamic jurisprudence. The Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs continued to review and approve clerical appointments within both the Sunni and Shia communities.

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Following a spike in sectarian violence in the region during the summer, the MOJIA re-affirmed its commitment to monitor sermons and urged preachers to abide by the regulations against inciting violence against other denominations and against addressing political issues in sermons. The MOJIA announced it would publish model sermons to guide preachers, but would not require preachers to use them. A group of Shia scholars spoke out against the promotion of sample sermons by the government.

The government-run television station did not broadcast Friday sermons from Shia mosques, while broadcasts from Sunni mosques appeared regularly on the channel.

The MOI increased its security presence around Shia mosques following attacks on Shia mosques in neighboring countries. The MOI promised to install additional security cameras at the mosques and reached out to community volunteers to help protect the mosques. As part of its public condemnation of the attacks, the government advocated for the organization of joint Sunni and Shia prayers as a show of Muslim solidarity against such attacks. Although some citizens supported the idea of joint unity prayers, many others, both Sunni and Shia, posted opinions on social media rejecting the idea and the prayers were not well-attended. Some Shia said the government was using the idea of joint prayers as “propaganda” to avoid addressing grievances of the Shia community. Some Sunni citizens launched a social media campaign titled “I will not pray before a Shia Imam.”

In July the MOI investigated reports unknown individuals had thrown copies of the Da’esh flag at the front door of the Shia-affiliated Ain Al-Dar Mosque in the Jid Haffs neighborhood. The incident was documented in photos posted on social media. As of year’s end, authorities had not reported any results of their investigation.

The government permitted non-Muslim communities that had registered to maintain identifiable places of worship, hold religious gatherings, and display religious symbols. The MOI provided security for large events held by non-Muslim communities. Security forces stated they monitored religious gatherings and funerals to maintain peace and security.

Observers reported the government permitted minority religious groups to produce religious media and publications and distribute them in bookstores and churches. Observers also reported the only religious media and publications available did not criticize Islam.

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Construction on a cathedral to serve as headquarters for the Catholic Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia did not progress much during the year following a groundbreaking ceremony last year after the king had set aside land for the construction of a number of new churches. Christian community leaders stated the government was continuing to explore options for expanding Christian cemeteries.

The government continued to implement the recommendations made in November 2011 by the BICI to rebuild 30 Shia mosques damaged or destroyed during the 2011 unrest. On November 7, the government announced it had reconstructed and handed over 13 complete mosques to the Jaafari Waqf (the government agency responsible for Shia mosques). The head of the Jaafari Waqf reported these 13 brought the total number of reconstructed mosques to 27, with the three remaining locations under study. Observers stated, however, only 21 mosques had been completely reconstructed and reopened, including seven rebuilt by the communities where they were located. Observers said the other six remained under construction; of these six, five appeared from the outside to be nearly complete. The Shia community, which argued mosque grounds must be preserved as they were, remained dissatisfied with the locations of three of the reconstructed mosques, which the government had moved due to their proximity to major roads.

Shia politicians and activists continued to claim the government's naturalization and citizenship processes favored Sunni applicants over Shia applicants. They said the government recruited Sunnis from other countries to join the security forces, while excluding Shia citizens from those forces, and then granted new Sunni members of the security forces expedited naturalization and other benefits, such as housing. The Shia activists said this recruitment and expedited naturalization of Sunnis was an attempt to alter the demographic balance among the country's citizens.

Shia leaders stated Sunni citizens often received preference for government educational scholarships, employment as teachers, and employment in government positions, especially in the managerial ranks of the civil service and the military. They said few Shia citizens held significant posts in the defense and internal security forces. Senior civil service recruitment and promotion processes reportedly favored Sunni candidates. Shia leaders said educational, social, and municipal services in most Shia neighborhoods were inferior to those in Sunni communities. The government stated it had a policy of nondiscrimination in employment, promotions, and the provision of social and educational services.

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The 40-member Shura Council, the upper house of parliament, included 15 Shia members, one Jewish member, and one Christian member, while 23 of its members were Sunni. Five of the 23 cabinet ministers were Shia, including one of the five deputy prime ministers. The royal family is Sunni.

The government continued working to address the reinstatement of Shia workers dismissed in the wake of the 2011 unrest. As of March the Ministry of Labor reported the resolution of 130 of the 165 cases identified in the 2014 agreement between the ministry, the Chamber of Commerce, and the General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions.

Human rights activists said claims of discrimination in education had continued since 2011. They stated many qualified Shia teachers remained unemployed despite a shortage of teachers in the public schools. In that connection, they also cited the hiring of foreign Sunni teachers. Although university scholarships had previously been based only on students' scores, the activists stated the interview panel for scholarships, introduced in 2011, continued to ask about students' political views and family background if their name or address suggested they might be Shia. They said many top scoring Shia applicants were offered scholarships in less lucrative or less prestigious fields, or in a field of study they did not wish to pursue. Following the decision of some of those students to self-fund their study at foreign universities, the MOE denied recognition of some of their degrees, reportedly saying the universities were not accredited.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Sources in the private sector continued to report discrimination against Shia in the technical and financial sectors. As a result, Shia representatives said, Shia Muslims continued to have a higher unemployment rate and lower socio-economic status than Sunni Muslims, adding to the tensions between the two communities. Observers said regional Sunni-Shia tensions and historical political divisions continued to affect intra-Muslim relations. Because religion and political affiliation were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

Local sources said some Muslims did change their religion, despite societal pressure not to do so, but those who did would not speak publically about their conversion.

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Anti-Shia commentary continued to appear in the broadcasts and publications of news media which regularly supported government policies. Columnists for *Al Watan* referred to protesters as “thugs” or “terrorists.” Some social media accounts repeated allegations against the Wifaq leadership, including Sheikhs Isa Qassim and Ali Salman, of support for terrorism. Comments often referred to the Shia political opposition as “Iranian subordinates,” “coup plotters,” and “Safavids.” In the Hidd neighborhood, a petition was circulated in local mosques and advertised on a billboard discouraging the hiring of Shia teachers, calling them “traitors.”

Representatives of non-Muslim religious groups continued to report general acceptance of their presence and activities in the country, and said they operated without threats or intimidation. A video posted on social media in October accused a citizen of leading a “secret church,” (Christian) but most replies to the post focused on the country’s guarantee of religious freedom. Comments continued to be posted for approximately one week.

Local newspapers reported vandalism at Shia mosques. In June residents of Dair neighborhood said vandals destroyed the exterior doors and tore pages out of the Quran and other prayer books at the Al-Kheef Mosque. A municipal council member from the area denounced the incident. In May individuals destroyed the grave of Sufi leader Mohamed bin Ali Al Hejazi in Muharraq Cemetery, following statements on social media calling for its destruction.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The Ambassador, visiting senior U.S. government officials, and embassy officers encouraged government officials to continue to protect religious sites, fully implement the BICI’s recommendations on the reconstruction of places of worship, and support national unity initiatives such as joint prayers. U.S. officials also urged the government to respect freedom of expression, including expression by clerics; to ensure Shia had equal access to employment and services, specifically in the security sector; to pursue reconciliation between the government and Shia communities; and to further empower human rights watchdog institutions, such as the Ombudsman and the National Institution for Human Rights, to engage the government on the rights of prisoners to practice their religions. U.S. officials advocated for the government to continue to pursue political reforms which would take into consideration the needs of all citizens regardless of religious affiliation.

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The Ambassador and embassy officers met regularly with religious leaders, representatives of NGOs, and political groups to inquire about their freedom to worship, the status of the mosque reconstruction projects, and the welfare of detainees, and to encourage their participation in national unity and reconciliation initiatives.