



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: BAHRAIN

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To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

Religious Freedom Conditions in Bahrain in 2020

By Scott Weiner, Supervisory Policy Analyst

Introduction

Bahrain has made some progress in recent years toward greater religious freedom, and continued to do so in 2020 despite the impact of COVID-19. The country has experienced over 88,000 COVID-19 infections, with more than 340 deaths. As such, the government has restricted freedom of assembly and limited gatherings for religious services in order to slow the spread of the virus. While some of these restrictions are *consistent* with international legal standards on freedom of religion, others are problematic, particularly toward the majority Shi'a Muslim community. While most religious communities in Bahrain, including Shi'a, are free to worship, Shi'a Bahrainis have long faced difficulties in an array of areas, including employment, political representation, freedom of expression, promotion within the military, and mosque construction. In 2016, Bahrain *banned* the Shi'a al-Wefaq party, and in 2019 *stripped citizenship* from 138 Shi'a following a mass trial. There were no reports of such citizenship revocations in 2020. Bahraini authorities have cited Iran's ongoing efforts to expand its influence in the country as the reason for heightened government concern about subversive activity by Iranian-backed Shi'a militants. While Iran's support for such activities has been documented widely, the Bahraini government has sometimes used this pretext to crack down on Shi'a opposition leaders, clerics, and activists, without consistently substantiating charges of subversion or terrorist activity.

In 2020, the government continued to harass religious leaders and restrict the practice of religious rituals and the *expression* of religious beliefs, particularly over social media. It also continued to limit freedom of religion in prisons beyond reasonable measures relating to public health and safety. In 2020 annual report, USCIRF *recommended* the State Department place Bahrain on its Special Watch List for systematic and ongoing religious freedom violations. The United States should continue to raise these restrictions on religious freedom with Bahrain's government. Additionally, when the next administration nominates a new U.S. ambassador to Bahrain, Congress should examine as part of the confirmation process what steps they will take to advance religious freedom in the country.



Positive Developments

Throughout 2020, Bahrain continued to promote international religious freedom and regional interfaith understanding. In September, Bahrain and Israel signed the Abraham Accords, a U.S.-brokered normalization agreement that included a [commitment](#) to “a future in which all peoples and all faiths can live together.” In February 2020, Bahraini Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad [met](#) with Pope Francis to discuss religious freedom issues. Days later, the King Hamad Global Centre for Peaceful Coexistence [announced](#) a memorandum of understanding with the United States to promote religious tolerance through youth empowerment. On June 9, 2020, Bahrain released human rights activist [Nabeel Rajab](#) to a noncustodial sentence. On August 30, 2020, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa [gave](#) an address to mark the end of Ashura, congratulating Bahrainis on a successful religious observance and [emphasizing](#) Bahrain’s role as a home of “religious freedom” and “respect for sectarian pluralism.” In late October, the King Hamad Center [signed](#) a memorandum of understanding with the United States on combating antisemitism. Bahrain’s elected Council of Representatives (CoR) has also spoken out periodically on religious freedom issues. In January 2020, the CoR [condemned](#) the Indian Citizen Amendment Act (CAA) as discriminatory against Muslims. That same month, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo publicly [thanked](#) the CoR for its statement condemning the mistreatment of Uighurs in China.

Interrogations of Shi’a Religious Leaders

In early 2020, Bahrain continued a systematic campaign of harassment against Shi’a religious figures in the country. It summoned, interrogated, and arrested several Shi’a religious leaders over the content of their sermons and prayers. In both January and March 2020, authorities [summoned](#) Shi’a Sheikh Ali al-Jadhafsi over the [content](#) of his religious supplications. The government also [interrogated](#) Sheikh Ali Rahma over the content of a sermon he gave. Security officials [arrested](#) and briefly detained preacher Jassim Haddad at Bahrain International Airport. On February 6, Bahrain’s government [summoned](#) preacher [Mohammed al-Rayash](#). Four days later, police summoned Sheikh Fadhel al-Zaki for questioning in Hamed Town. On January 22, security officials [arrested](#) Sheikh Abdul Mohsen Mulla Atiya al-Jamri following a visit to Mecca, based on comments the government considered “insulting” to Islamic figures. In February, he received a one-year prison sentence over these comments. In June 2020, the Bahrain Court of Appeals [upheld](#) this sentence.

Ashura 2020

Shi’a Muslims in Bahrain observe Ashura by commemorating the martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed. Bahrain is notably the only country on the Arabian Peninsula that designates Ashura as a national holiday. Shi’a mourners hang commemorative banners, march in large processions, beat their chests, and wave flags to

symbolize the flag carried during the battle by Hussein's brother Abbas, who was also martyred. Mourners observe Ashura in gathering spaces called *matams* (also called *husseiniyat*), which host speeches and performances.

In 2020, the Bahraini government continued to impose restrictions on Ashura processions on public health grounds to prevent the spread of COVID-19. It took [similar measures](#) ahead of Ramadan, which both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims observe in Bahrain. Bahrain's Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs' Shi'a Ja'afri Endowment, the Supreme Council of Health, and the National Medical Taskforce to Combat Coronavirus announced these [restrictions](#) on August 15, 2020. They included limiting mourning to virtual gathering, limiting *matam* attendance to staff only, and recommending these staff wear masks and adhere to social distancing norms while broadcasting mourning rituals live. The Bahraini government requested that the names of all *matam* staff be recorded for contact tracing purposes, and that they get pre-emptive medical checks. They recommended further that mourning rituals not exceed 20 minutes in order to limit the potential exposure of staff to COVID-19. Notably, the government did not require similar distancing requirements for the Hindu observance of Onam in Bahrain, which a member of the Bahraini royal family [attended](#).

Shi'a religious authorities issued a [statement of support](#) for these restrictions in early August. Some socially-distanced [processionals](#) did take place, as well as [socially distanced mourning gatherings](#). Bahrain experienced a [spike](#) in COVID cases following Ashura, which some analysts attributed to a lack of social distancing by those who observed the holiday in person.

Beyond these guidelines, government officials also announced restrictions not directly connected to public health. For example, the government [called](#) for placing Ashura signs and banners only in the vicinity of *matams*, and limited the use of loudspeakers to Ashura rituals only. As in previous years, police [removed](#) Ashura banners in Manama hung across streets and [posted](#) outside people's houses. Police also [summoned](#) the heads of *matams* over the raising of black banners and the practicing of religious rites.

During the holiday, Bahrain's government also [interrogated several Shi'a preachers](#) and [religious officials](#) over the content of their sermons and the recitation of standard Ashura supplications and prayers. The government charged Dr. Wessam al-'Areedh with "insulting Sunni religious figures" after he [recited](#) a standard Ashura prayer. He was held in jail for five days after being released on bail and remained under a travel ban pending a trial. Bahrain also [arrested](#) preacher Qassim Zein al-Din for "[insulting religious figures](#)" in his Ashura sermon.

Treatment of Shi'a in Prisons

Following the outbreak of COVID-19 in Bahrain, the government [released](#) 1486 prisoners, 901 of whom were pardoned. The remainder were allowed to serve their sentences on non-custodial grounds. For members of the Shi'a community who remained in prison, however, restrictions on religious practice persisted. Prison officials prohibited inmates at Jau Prison from observing the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Ja'afar Sadeq, who founded the Ja'afri Shi'a Muslim school of jurisprudence. The officials [threatened](#) those who did with solitary confinement.

During Ashura, prison officials allowed groups of four cells to commemorate the holiday together following protests from prisoners. In August 2020, Bahrain's National Institute for Human Rights [conducted field visits](#) to prisons and found no evidence of religious freedom violations. However, prisoners reported having religious items [confiscated](#).

Conclusion

Bahrain has taken reasonable steps to limit the spread of COVID-19, while also trying to ensure that various religious groups can observe different holidays and rituals. At the same time, some limitations have lacked a clear link to public health. Bahrain has also continued to crack down on religious leaders – particularly Shi'a leaders – over the content of their religious speech. In the months ahead, Bahrain should continue to ensure freedom of religion or belief, consistent with international human rights standards, even as it responds to COVID-19 by prioritizing public health measures.



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