

# **BAHRAIN 2017 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.” In July the government passed a unified “family law” codifying personal status to include inheritance, child custody, marriage, and divorce for both Sunni and Shia Muslims. The government continued to question, detain, and arrest Shia clerics, community members, and opposition politicians. On May 21, Sheikh Isa Qassim, identified by media as the leading Shia cleric in the country, received a one-year suspended sentence in absentia (Qassim was living under de facto house arrest) for money laundering and collecting funds without a government license. On May 23, security forces conducted an operation to remove pro-Qassim protestors who had blocked roads surrounding Qassim’s residence since June 2016, which resulted in five deaths, 286 arrests, and 31 injured police officers. Police continued to restrict entry into Qassim’s predominantly Shia neighborhood of Diraz through year’s end. On December 4, the government permitted Qassim to leave his home, for the first time since June 2016, to receive medical treatment for several days at a private hospital. On April 3, the country’s highest appeals court, the Court of Cassation, overturned the Appeals Court’s nine-year prison sentence of Sheikh Ali Salman, secretary general of the Shia-aligned opposition political society Wifaq, and restored his original four-year sentence. On November 12, the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs (MOJIA) filed new espionage charges against Salman for conspiring with Qatar to undermine the government in 2011. In February the Court of Cassation rejected Wifaq’s appeal to halt the groups’ dissolution and liquidation of its assets and upheld a September 2016 appeals court denial of Wifaq’s appeal. International human rights organizations again published reports stating Shia prisoners were vulnerable to intimidation, harassment, and ill treatment by prison guards because of their religious affiliation. Shia community representatives said there was ongoing discrimination in government employment, education, and the justice system. Public officials continued to state some Shia opposition members were supporters of terrorism. The government permitted Shia groups to hold processions to commemorate Ashura and Arbaeen throughout the country with minimal interference from the government. In September the king launched the

Bahrain Declaration to call on all persons of faith to “disown practices such as the encouragement of extremism and radicalization, suicide bombing, promotion of sexual slavery, and the abuse of women and children.” According to non-Muslim religious groups, the government did not interfere with religious observances and it encouraged tolerance for minority religious beliefs and traditions.

According to local press reports, during the year some militant groups used improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and firearms to attack police and claimed responsibility using Shia religious terminology to justify their attacks. Four police officers were killed in these assaults. In response, the government launched investigations into the attacks, prosecuted members of Shia groups, and blamed Iran for materially supporting these militant groups. Representatives of the Shia community reported the higher unemployment rate and lower socioeconomic status of Shia were exacerbated by continued discrimination against Shia in the private as well as the public sectors and added to tensions between the Shia and Sunni communities. Both anti-Shia and anti-Sunni commentary appeared on social media, including allegations prominent Shia leaders supported terrorism or engaged in what was termed “treasonous behavior,” and others using derogatory terminology to describe Sunnis. According to non-Muslim 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.

The U.S. Ambassador, visiting U.S. government officials, and U.S. embassy officers met with government officials to urge them to end discrimination against Shia in employment and education; to pursue reconciliation between the government and Shia communities; and to allow prisoners to practice their religions. In August the Secretary of State called on the government to “stop discriminating against the Shia communities.” U.S. officials also continued to advocate for the government to pursue political reforms, which would take into consideration the needs of all citizens regardless of religious affiliation. Embassy officers met regularly with religious leaders of all faiths and representatives of NGOs to discuss religious freedom.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the population at 1.4 million (July 2017 estimate). Of the total population, citizens number 677,000, according to the local government’s 2017, most recently available estimate. According to U.S. estimates, Muslims make up 70 percent of the total population; Christians 14.5 percent;

Hindus 9.8 percent; Buddhists 2.5 percent; and Jews 0.6 percent. Local sources estimate 99 percent of citizens are Muslim, while Christians, Hindus, Bahais, and Jews together constitute the remaining 1 percent.

The government does not publish statistics regarding the sectarian breakdown between Shia and Sunni Muslims; most estimates state Shia constitute a majority (55 to 60 percent) of the citizen population. According to Jewish community members, there are approximately 36 Jewish citizens, from six families, in the country.

Most of the foreign residents, who, according to the government, make up approximately 55 percent of the total population, are migrant workers from South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Arab countries. Local government estimates report approximately 51 percent of foreign residents are Muslim, 17 percent Christians (primarily Roman Catholic, Protestant, Syrian Orthodox, and Mar Thoma from South India), fewer than 1 percent Jewish, and 31 percent followers of other religions (Hindus, Buddhists, Bahais, and Sikhs).

## **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, the freedom to perform religious rites, and the 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. Shia and Sunni citizens have equal rights by law. According to the constitution, all people are equal without discrimination on the grounds of gender, origin, language, or faith. The labor law prohibits discrimination in the public sector on grounds of religion or faith. The law also stipulates victims of dismissal or discrimination in the work place on the basis of religion are entitled to legal recourse, but the government had not defined or identified an effective means of recourse by year's end.

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 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.”

Muslim groups must register with the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs (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 waqfs are endowment boards, which supervise, fund the work of, and perform a variety of activities related to mosques and prayer halls. Non-Muslim congregations and groups must register with the Ministry of Labor and Social Development (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 Ministry of Interior (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 (BD) (\$130) for the individuals responsible for setting up the branch.

According to the MOLSD’s official website, 19 non-Muslim religious groups are 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 (Mormons), 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, three non-Muslim, nonregistered groups include Bahai, Buddhist, and Jewish communities.

The penal code calls for punishment of not more than one year's imprisonment or a fine of no more than BD100 (\$265) 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, attending conferences abroad without authorization, 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 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. The respective endowment boards, Sunni and Jaafari, supervise the activities of mosques and prayer halls, review and approve clerical appointments for religious sites under their purview, and fund expenses for religious sites. The endowment boards' operations are largely funded by monetary donations or property donated to the boards by citizens. In addition, the respective Sunni and Shia endowment boards are funded by the state as well as tithes, income from property rentals, and other private sources. The income is used to fund the maintenance of religious sites. The boards also pay for salaries, supplies, and building expenses for the religious sites. The endowment boards may pay flat commissions and bonuses for preachers and other religious figures. Board members' salaries are funded by the MOJIA.

The Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (SCIA) oversees general religious activities taking place within the country, and reviews the parliament's draft legislation as well as the publication of Islamic studies school curricula and official religious texts. The council comprised a chairman, a deputy chairman, and 16 prominent religious scholars, eight Sunni and eight Shia, most of them prominent preachers or sharia judges. The king appoints council members for a four-year term. Independent from other government scholarship programs, the council offers university scholarships for advanced Islamic studies for low income students. All legislation proposed by the parliament is reviewed by the SCIA to ensure the draft law's compliance with sharia, as applicable. 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 aired or broadcast on official government media, such as the official television station and

official radio programs. The council also has a peacebuilding role and 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, the Survey and Restoration Directorate, and the Survey Department. 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 law regulates Islamic religious instruction at all levels of the educational system. The government funds public schools for grades 1-12; Islamic studies are mandatory for all Muslim students, and are optional for non-Muslims. Many students attend private schools, which must be registered with the government and, with a few exceptions (for example, a foreign-funded and -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, in addition to the required Islamic religious education for Muslim students, must receive permission from the Ministry of Education (MOE). Outside of school hours, both Muslim and non-Muslim students engage in religious studies as their parents decide.

The MOE reports that no particular school of jurisprudence forms the basis of the Islamic studies portion of the public school curriculum. According to the MOE, it utilizes a team of experts to routinely review and develop the Islamic studies public school curriculum to emphasize shared Islamic values between different Sunni and Shia schools of thought, reject extremism, and promote tolerance and coexistence. There are two public schools that provide more in-depth religious instruction for students from elementary school through high school; the remainder of their curricula is consistent with the nonreligious curriculum in other public schools. The Jaafari Institute provides religious instruction in Shia Islam. The Religious Institute provides education in Sunni Islam.

The University of Bahrain offers degree programs in religious studies and Islamic jurisprudence for Shia and Sunni students. There are five registered institutes,

publicly funded and overseen by the Sunni Waqf, offering religious education for Sunnis. There are several dozen *hawzas* (Shia seminaries), some registered and some not registered. According to the government, the SCIA provides financial assistance to six of the registered *hawzas*; other *hawzas* choose to be privately funded. Foreign donors are not permitted to contribute to privately funded *hawzas*. Non-Muslim groups are also permitted to offer religious instruction to their adherents.

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. It also guarantees the duties and status of women according to sharia. In July the government passed a unified family law, which codifies personal status law for both the Sunni interpretation and Jaafari interpretation of sharia with regard to 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. Prior to July there was no personal status law for Shia. Previously, Shia would use a court system in which personal status matters are decided by judges who used their own discretion to interpret Islamic tradition. Non-Muslims may marry in civil or religious ceremonies, and civil courts make decisions for them on 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, however, record a child's religion, 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 organizations, including religious ones. Organizations wishing to collect money must first obtain authorization from the MOJIA to do so.

In May the parliament approved an amendment to a 2014 law on correctional facilities that would guarantee inmates the right to attend burials and receive condolences outside of prison. Parliament also approved a proposal to provide religious lectures and sermons for prisoners, who previously relied on books, brochures and leaflets for spiritual guidance.

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**

*Summary paragraph:* The government continued to question, detain, and arrest clerics, community members, and opposition politicians associated with the Shia community. On May 21, Sheikh Isa Qassim, identified by the media as the leading Shia cleric in the country (who had been confined under de facto house arrest), and two of his employees received a one-year suspended sentence in absentia for money laundering and collecting funds without a government license. Since June 2016, the police have restricted access to Qassim's home village following a sit-in around his house by his supporters who protested the revocation of his citizenship. On May 23, security forces conducted an operation to remove the protestors who had been blocking roads surrounding Qassim's residence, located in the predominately Shia neighborhood of Diraz. The operation resulted in 286 arrests, five deaths, and 31 injured police officers. On December 4, the government permitted Qassim to leave his home for the first time since June 2016, in order to receive medical treatment for several days at a private hospital. On April 3, the Court of Cassation overturned the Appeals Court's nine-year prison sentence given to Ali Salman, secretary general of the Shia-aligned opposition political society Wifaq, and restored his four-year sentence. On November 12, the Bahrain News Agency reported new criminal charges were being filed against Salman and two other individuals for conspiring with Qatar to undermine the government in 2011. In February the Court of Cassation upheld a September 2016 appeals court denial of Wifaq's appeal and upheld the lower court's order to shut down Wifaq and liquidate its assets. International human rights organizations published reports stating Shia prisoners were vulnerable to intimidation, harassment, and

mistreatment by prison guards because of their religious affiliation. Shia community representatives complained about what they said was discrimination in government employment, education, and the justice system. Government officials continued to state some Shia opposition members were supporters of terrorism and engaged in treasonous behavior. The government permitted Shia groups to hold processions to commemorate Ashura and Arbaeen throughout the country. According to non-Muslim religious groups, the government did not interfere with their religious observances and encouraged tolerance for minority religious beliefs and traditions. Because religion and political affiliation were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

On May 21, the High Criminal Court sentenced Shia cleric Sheikh Isa Qassim, who had been confined under a de facto house arrest, to a one-year suspended sentence in absentia on charges of money laundering and collecting funds without a government license. Two of Qassim's employees, Hussain Al Qassab and Mirza Al Durazi, also received suspended sentences for the same crimes. The court fined the three individuals BD 100,000 (\$265,000) each and reportedly confiscated more than BD 3 million (\$7.96 million) from Qassim's bank account and reported the funds would be delivered to local charities. In October Qassab withdrew his appeal of the suspended sentence and fine. Qassim's supporters reported his office had collected the money and spent the funds in accordance with Shia customs and obligations, known as *khums*, and said the government had targeted Qassim due to his prominent status in the Shia community. On December 4, the government permitted Qassim to leave his home for the first time since June 2016, in order to receive medical treatment for several days at a private hospital.

Supporters of Qassim continued a sit-in demonstration until May 23 around his house in the village of Diraz which began after the government revoked Qassim's citizenship in June 2016. In response, the government established checkpoints to control access to Diraz. Local residents complained of long lines and difficulties accessing their community. Authorities prevented nonresidents, including Shia clerics, from entering to attend or lead prayers at mosques in Diraz.

On May 23, the MOI conducted a security operation targeting alleged members of a terrorist cell involved in the sit-in around Qassim's residence. The MOI stated its actions were to "apprehend terrorists operating in the area and clear illegal roadblocks and obstructions." Protesters and human rights groups, including the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), stated police opened fire with shotgun pellets and teargas on peaceful demonstrators. Police stated protesters attacked

them with iron rods, axes, knives, rocks, firebombs, and grenades. According to local press, police arrested 286 persons, reportedly including fugitives who had escaped from Jaw Prison in January. The media reported five civilians were killed and 31 police officers injured in clashes with protesters during the operation. While police stated use of force was justified, opposition groups and activists said the killings were politically motivated and were evidence of excessive use of force. Local and international human rights groups criticized the government's actions. BCHR expressed concern over the "total impunity" of security forces, while Amnesty International called for an independent investigation into police use of "excessive force" against the protesters.

On November 8, the MOI authorities entered and searched the Islamic Awareness Society headquarters in Diraz, which the government had closed in 2016. The authorities said they were responding to a suspicious package near the building. The society was registered as a charity with the MOLSD, but it was reportedly headed by Qassim, and its members were largely Shia clerics and religious workers such as teachers and chanters. Shia activists said the government had likely used the report of a suspicious package as an excuse to raid the society's headquarters.

In October residents of Diraz reported the MOI prohibited guest speakers from entering the village to teach at prayer halls during Ashura celebrations. International NGOs reported the police had summoned more than 70 individuals, including 30 clerics, prior to and during the Ashura celebrations. Police held many individuals overnight; some were detained and released soon after.

Courts sentenced several Shia clerics to prison terms for participating in the demonstrations in support of Qassim. In October a court sentenced Hamza Al Deiri, scholar and former Member of Parliament (MP) of Wifaq, to one year in prison for taking part in the sit-in outside of Qassim's residence. Authorities released seven other Shia clerics in August after they completed a one-year prison term following a demonstration in support of Qassim. Between August 3-9, authorities released an additional six Shia clerics – Sheikh Mounir Al-Maatouk, Sayed Yassine Al-Mosawi, Sheikh Imad Al-Shagla, Sheikh Aziz Al-Khadran, Sheikh Ali Naji, and Sayed Ali Ahmad – one year after their arrest over the Diraz protest that began in June 2016.

On April 3, the Court of Cassation overturned the Appeals Court's nine-year prison sentence of Sheikh Ali Salman, secretary general of the Shia opposition political society Wifaq, restored his four-year sentence, and cleared him of the charge of calling for regime change. On November 12, the Bahrain News Agency reported

authorities filed new criminal charges against Salman and two other individuals, Hasan Ali Juma Sultan and Ali Mahdi Ali Al Aswad, for conspiring with Qatar to undermine the government in 2011. Salman's two codefendants were abroad and would be tried in absentia. Salman appeared in the High Criminal Court on November 29 and December 28; however, no verdict had been announced in this case at year's end.

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

Authorities arrested Shia scholar Sheikh Abdul Zahra Al Karbabadi along with his wife and sister on April 28. No update on their cases was available at year's end.

Former Wifaq MP Hasan Isa remained in prison while his trial on charges of helping to finance a terrorist bomb attack continued. Authorities had arrested Isa in August 2015, following a July 2015 bombing in Sitra that killed two police officers. Isa denied involvement in the bombing, saying he had not given money to terrorists, but had distributed funds to poor families in his role as a religious leader of his neighborhood. The Court of Appeals postponed Isa's case until November 7, but no further information was reported publicly.

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 April 11, the High Criminal Court of Appeal upheld a six-month jail sentence for a Shia religious chanter, Mahdi Sahwan, who had participated in what the government called "an illegal gathering" outside of Qassim's residence. On April 12, authorities summoned four Shia clerics for questioning after the clerics commemorated the death of an Iraqi clergyman who was executed by the Iraqi government in the 1980s. On May 25, the government arrested Shia cleric Isa Al Moamen for a sermon he delivered in August 2016. He was released after serving a three-month prison sentence. On June 28, authorities charged Sheikh Hasanain Al-Mhanna with "inciting hatred against the regime and inciting contempt against a sect" based on the background of a sermon he delivered. No additional details were reported on his case.

Authorities generally permitted prisoners to practice their religion, but there were reports authorities sometimes denied prisoners access to religious services and prayer time. The government continued not to provide regular statistics on

detainees. International NGOs reported Shia prisoners were vulnerable to intimidation, harassment, and ill treatment by prison guards because of their religion, which at times led to coerced confessions. Some Shia prisoners at Jaw Prison and at the pretrial Dry Dock facility reported they were not allowed to practice their faith freely. Government officials stated the MOI, which supervised detention facilities, only prohibited practices when they violated prison safety rules, such as waving religious banners or organizing large-scale gatherings for religious ceremonies. In November the National Institute for Human Rights, (NIHR), a quasi-official government human rights organization, stated inmates had the right to perform their religious rites as long as it did not impact the security of the prison or detention center. Inmates at Jaw Prison staged several hunger strikes throughout the year to protest detention conditions that included lack of religious freedom.

The NIHR reported 15 cases of complaints by Muslim inmates and five Christian inmates at Jaw Prison saying prison guards prevented them from performing prayers in a designated prayer area for all faiths.

On April 12, Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, one of 13 Shia leaders sentenced to life in prison in 2011, started a hunger strike which lasted 24 days to protest what he said was degrading treatment and poor conditions in Jaw Prison. On September 9, the press reported inmates at Jaw Prison staged a hunger strike to protest prison conditions and lack of religious freedom, in particular the right to pray. Shia activists reported inmates from at least four cellblocks joined the strike and the prison administration isolated the group and cut off outside communication. Most prisoners reportedly ended the hunger strike on September 24, after prison officials agreed to improve conditions and allow Shia inmates greater ability to worship.

At year's end, no additional information was reported by the local press on implementation of the amendment allowing inmates to attend burials and receive condolences outside of prison. In response to the parliament proposal to provide religious lectures and sermons for prisoners, the government reported the law already permitted inmates to receive special programs for seminars and educational lectures. The government also stated inmates possess the right to maintain their own library containing a variety of religious books and publications.

The government during the year reported 452 licensed Sunni mosques and 91 Sunni community centers, while the number of licensed Shia places of worship remained at 608 mosques and 618 *ma'atams* (Shia prayer houses, sometimes called *husseiniyas* in other countries). In 2016, the government reported there were 440

licensed Sunni mosques and 80 Sunni community centers, while the number of licensed Shia places of worship had been 609 mosques and 618 *ma'atams*. It reported it granted nine permits during the year to build Sunni mosques and 17 permits to build Shia mosques and *ma'atams*. According to local press reports, the predominantly Shia neighborhoods in the Northern Governorate have 344 Shia mosques, more than half of the country's total, and 211 *ma'atams*, nearly one-third of the country's registered *ma'atams*. Observers reported that, in new housing developments, there continued to be a disproportionately large number of Sunni mosques, which they said showed continued government favoritism toward Sunni Muslims. The government stated that determining whether the mosque was Sunni or Shia in new housing developments depended on the needs and demographics of the new residents.

The MOJIA continued to monitor clerics' adherence to a pledge of ethics it had created for individuals engaged in religious discourse. Preachers who diverged from the pledge were subject to censure or removal by authorities. 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. The MOJIA also continued to announce how much money an adult should give on a voluntary basis to the poor on religious feast days. According to Shia community representatives, during Ashura, police summoned some Shia chanters and preachers and had them sign pledges to avoid discussing politics from the pulpit.

The government continued to permit Shia groups to hold processions to commemorate Ashura and Arbaeen throughout the country, with the largest procession organized by a Shia community-led organization, the Manama Public Processions Commission. Local press estimated the largest procession attracted 150,000-200,000 attendees in downtown Manama. 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 government stated MOI personnel had removed the banners because they violated zoning restrictions or because they contained political messages.

The government continued to permit both registered and unregistered non-Muslim 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.

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 2009, the government adopted a codified family law for Sunnis; however, following criticism from Shia religious leaders, the legislature did not pass a corresponding Shia personal status law at that time. Prior to passing the codified family law in July, the king appointed a sharia committee comprised of Sunni and Shia religious scholars to review the draft law for compliance with sharia provisions for both the Sunni and Shia branches of Islam.

In 2016, the king announced he would permit a Coptic Orthodox church to be built in Manama; there were no updates available at year's end.

The government again reported no significant reconstruction work had been done on the three remaining Shia mosques from the 30 it had damaged or destroyed in 2011. The government pledged to do the reconstruction in compliance with the recommendations of an independent fact-finding commission established by the king in 2011. The government reported that one mosque in Salmabad was reconstructed by local residents without a permit on an "illegal" site, despite the government's offer for an alternative site in the same neighborhood. According to the government, the second remaining mosque, in Hawrat Sanad, was under evaluation because nine other Shia mosques already existed within close proximity. The government also stated the third mosque, in Madinat Zayed, was under review pending determination of the need for a new mosque in the area. Some Shia stated they remained dissatisfied with three of the 27 reconstructed mosques because they had been rebuilt in different locations. Shia leaders stated the mosque grounds should have been preserved as they were. The government reported many of the mosques were previously built using primitive materials, without licenses, or in areas not in compliance with zoning regulations.

In June the local press reported officials from the Jaafari Waqf Directorate and local municipal authorities blamed each other for the lack of attention to

maintaining, remodeling, or cleaning existing Shia mosques and *ma'atams* in the Northern Governorate.

NGOs reported the government showed disparate treatment of Shia versus Sunni individuals and stated this different treatment fueled perceptions among the Shia community of a justice system stacked against them. For example, several times during the year the government reported it had investigated a number of officials from the mostly-Sunni police and military services for breaking the law or violating official procedures, but the government did not name any of the individuals, including those who had been convicted of crimes, were in jail, or had been removed from their positions. On the other hand, the Public Prosecution Office, the MOI, and the state-run Bahrain News Agency sometimes published names and pictures of Shia who were convicted of crimes, although not explicitly stating their religious affiliation, and at times published their names before the persons were indicted.

The government-run television station continued to air Friday sermons from large Sunni mosques, but not sermons from Shia mosques.

According to the law, Arab applicants with 15 years' residence and non-Arab applicants with 25 years' residence are eligible to apply for citizenship. Shia politicians and community activists, however, continued to say the government's naturalization and citizenship process favored Sunni applicants 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 reported Sunnis received preference for 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 leaders, senior civil service recruitment and promotion processes continued to favor Sunni candidates. They 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; however, many parents with the financial means preferred to send their children to private schools. The government repeated its statements 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, said there were no reported cases of religious or sectarian discrimination during the year. Shia community activists said that they lacked confidence in the effectiveness of government institutions to address discrimination, so they did not utilize them. The king continued to appoint Shia citizens to senior leadership positions, including cabinet positions and seats on the Shura Council, the upper house of parliament appointed by the king.

Human rights activists reported discrimination against Shia in education continued. Activists said interview panels for university scholarships continued to ask about students' political views and family background. The government said their scholarships remained competitive, but some applicants not selected said their being passed over was due to discrimination. Rights activists said many top scoring Shia applicants continued to receive scholarship offers in less lucrative or less prestigious fields. The government reported that the flagship Crown Prince Scholarship Program continued to have representation from members of both Shia and Sunni groups, but it did not provide statistics of such a breakdown. There were continued reports of the MOE refusing to recognize the foreign degrees of some students. Some activists said these refusals disproportionately affected Shia students.

The 40-member Shura Council included 18 Shia members, one Jewish member, and one Christian member, while 20 of its members were Sunni. Five of the 23 cabinet members, including one of the five deputy prime ministers, were Shia.

In February the Court of Cassation rejected the appeal of Wifaq to halt the group's dissolution and liquidation of its assets, upholding a September 2016 appeals court denial of Wifaq's appeal and a lower court's order to shut down the organization.

Throughout the year government officials made statements accusing Shia individuals or segments of the Shia community of specific crimes, alleging they were supporters of terrorism, linking individuals with what they said were Iranian-backed militants' efforts to subvert the government, or threatening community members and institutions with future legal action.

NGOs reported the government closely monitored the collection of funds by religious organizations, including charity donations. 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 September under the king's patronage, an interfaith NGO, This is Bahrain, launched the Kingdom of Bahrain Declaration in Los Angeles in cosponsorship with the Simon Wiesenthal Center. The Bahrain Declaration calls on all "people of faith" to "disown practices such as the sowing of terror, the encouragement of extremism and radicalization, suicide bombing, promotion of sexual slavery, and the abuse of women and children." Local and international press reported that Arab diplomats, other foreign representatives, and 300 interfaith leaders from around the world attended the event.

News editorials and statements from government and religious leaders emphasized the importance of religious tolerance. For example, in October the king wrote an editorial in international media that was reprinted in local press, highlighting what he said was the country's tradition of churches, synagogues, a Sikh temple, and a 200-year old Hindu temple being built in close proximity to mosques. He wrote, "religious freedom should not be viewed as a problem but rather a very real solution to many of our world's biggest challenges and especially terrorism, which knows no religion and threatens all peace-loving people." Local press featured photos of the crown prince visiting the Diwali festivities of several prominent Hindu families.

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

During the year, local press reported individuals allegedly associated with militant groups committed attacks on police, and some groups claiming responsibility used Shia religious terminology to justify their attacks. In response, the government launched investigations, prosecuted members of violent groups, and said Iran was providing material support to these groups. The government reported four police officers were killed, dozens sustained minor injuries, and 13 sustained life-threatening or serious injuries during the year. Perpetrators of these attacks often filmed themselves attacking police and posted such videos on social media. They sometimes wore religious garb such as burial shrouds.

The government reported IED attacks killed two police officers during the year, including a June 18 blast that killed an officer near the home of prominent cleric

Isa Qassim, and an October 27 blast targeting a police bus that killed one officer and injured eight others.

On December 31, local press reported authorities tried a group of 60 individuals involved with a local militant group, Al Ashtar Brigades, for their reported role in the January 29 killing of an off-duty police officer and the January 1 Jaw Prison break, in which assailants freed 10 Shia inmates and killed a guard.

On October 1, according to press reports, Shia militant group Wa'ad Allah (God's Promise Brigades), believed by the government to be associated with Al-Ashtar Brigades, detonated an IED targeting an MOI checkpoint in Daih during Ashura processions. Five police officers were injured.

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 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 effect domestically. 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 many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

Construction on a cathedral to serve as headquarters for the Catholic Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia, on land donated by the king, was scheduled to begin in early 2018. Christian community leaders stated that they had made some progress in finding a location for a new non-Muslim cemetery. There were cremation facilities for the Hindu community.

Several Hindu temples and Sikh temples operated throughout the country. The Shri Krishna Hindu Temple is reportedly over 200-years old and was often visited by high-level government officials, including the crown prince. The country was also home to a Jewish synagogue and more than a dozen Christian churches. 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.

Some social media accounts repeated allegations that prominent Shia leaders supported terrorism or had engaged in what was termed “treasonous behavior.” Comments continued to refer to the Shia political opposition as “Iranian subordinates” and “coup plotters.” Other social media posts accused prominent Sunnis of being “ISIL affiliates,” “dogs,” and “*takfiri*” (Muslims who kill other Muslims who do not follow the same belief structure).

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

The Ambassador, other embassy officers, and Department of State representatives met with government officials to urge them to respect freedom of expression for all, including clerics; ensure members of the Shia community had equal access to employment and services; pursue reconciliation between the government and Shia communities; and allow prisoners to practice their religions. In August the Secretary of State called on the government to “stop discriminating against the Shia communities.” U.S. officials both publicly and in private meetings continued to advocate for the government to pursue political reforms, which 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 all faiths, representatives of NGOs, and political groups to discuss their freedom of religion, the welfare of detainees, and freedom of expression as it relates to religious practices.