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# BAHRAIN: RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN THE CROSSHAIRS

A REPORT MONITORING ASHURA VIOLATIONS IN 2021



designed by:



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# INTRODUCTION

Over the past ten years, institutional discrimination against Shiite citizens in Bahrain, including restrictions on religious practices, has been monitored and documented. This report is limited to monitoring violations that took place in the months of Muharram and Safar in 2021, two months in which Shiite citizens hold funeral processions and councils, where preachers address historical events related to Ashura. This report presents how the Government of Bahrain uses its institutions, such as security services, security personnel, police stations, and the prison administration to suppress religious freedoms and discriminate against citizens for their beliefs. It also it also investigates how the media fails to cover religious violations against Shiite citizens in Bahrain.

Since 2011, Bahraini authorities have been transforming Ashura — as well as months of Muharram and Safar of Hijri calendar — into an opportunity to practice collective punishment against Shiite citizens by systematically restricting religious rites on the

occasion. Violations in previous seasons have included: severe restrictions placed upon prisoners who wish to practice religious rites, bans on the display of banners and other manifestations of Ashura, such as «black decals», the arrest and ill-treatment of preachers, “Radoods” and Husseinat officials, who have been summoned to security centers for investigation into the content of their mourning speeches and chants, attacks on mourning processions with tear gas and fissile bullets, attempts to prevent central prayer on Ashura night in the Manama, criminalizing the opinions of preachers related to the history of Islam, and other forms of harassment. It is important to note that such abuses are the result of political decisions and state policy, not individual behavior: these actions are systematic and institutionalized.



## **LEGAL RESPONSIBILITY** OF THE STATE TO PROTECT RELIGIOUS RITUALS

The practice of religious rites is an inherent right for every individual, religious group, and sect. Since Shiite citizens (Jaafari) have their own religious practices, the State must provide protection for them and guarantee the practice of these rituals in the form recognized by the sect without restrictions or interference. This right is enshrined in the Bahraini constitution and recognized in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, along with other regional and Islamic charters and treaties. Citizens have the right to practice rituals of their own, as in the case of the revival of Ashura. Therefore, when any exceptional circumstances occur, it is necessary to refer to the stakeholders (from the

sect) and coordinate with them on the procedures and precautions that must be taken, which happened this past year during the Covid-19 pandemic. Such planning requires coordination between the State and religious scholars from the Shiite sect.

When the state imposes exaggerated measures or attempts to prevent the revival of Ashura, it is a clear infringement and a violation of the right to practice religious rites. The State bears legal responsibility in this matter in two respects:

1. Recognizing the origin of the sect's right to privacy, which is the practice of commemorating Ashura ceremonies, and in the sect making decisions and procedures;
2. Not visiting the places of the revival and mourning without legal justification, and not using excessive force against mourners.

These legal responsibilities are enshrined under Article 22 of the Bahraini Constitution, which states: "Freedom of conscience is absolute, and the State guarantees the sanctity of places of worship, and the freedom to perform religious rituals, processions, and religious meetings in accordance with established customs in the country."



## **FIELD MONITORING** OF ASHURA VIOLATIONS

Four arbitrary arrests were made during Ashura this past year. The detainees were arrested after being summoned to police stations for investigation, all have since been released. They were: The head of the funeral procession of Imam Ali (peace be upon him) "Fadel Hammad" from "Al-Deir" area, and two young men, "Ali Mansoor Al-Mallah" and "Muhammad Mahdi Daif" from "Karzakan" district, who did not respond to summons requests, so members of the security forces attacked a funeral procession in "Al-Sayyida Khadija" (peace be upon her) neighborhood in "Salmabad" district and arrested the two men, then released them later on bail of 100 dinars each.

While the number of summons reached 18 cases,

the same as the three cases mentioned above who were arrested according to summonses, Additionally, there were 15 other cases of religious scholars being interrogated at police stations on having charges pressed against them for infractions related to reviving Ashura rituals. They are : Head of the General Authority for the Funeral Processions of "Al-Deir" area, "Faisal Al-Momen", "Sheikh Muhammad Riash", "Sheikh Abdul Mohsen Mulla Atiya Al-Jamri", "Al-Radoud Muhammad Al-Qallaf", "Al-Radoud Saleh Sahwan", "Al-Radoud Hassan Nowrouz", "Al-Sayyid Ahmed Al-Alawi", "Ali Muhammad Al Abbas", "Hussein Ali Muhammad Ashour", "Kazem Ibrahim Al-Mahdi", "Muhammad Abdul Halim Fardan", "Ali Ahmad Mahdi", "Youssef Ahmad Mahdi", "Ahmad Khalil Zain Al-Din", "Sadiq Abdul-Wahed Marhoon". Moreover, the committee in charge of mourning processions in Hamad Town, Roundabout was summoned.

Throughout the documentation process conducted by Salam DHR, police investigation sessions were not based on a specific crime or complaint but were instead acts of harassment and intimidation by police against practicing Shiites, meant to limit their religious freedom.

The number of violations by the security services during the Ashura season reached 42 cases, they are distributed as follows:

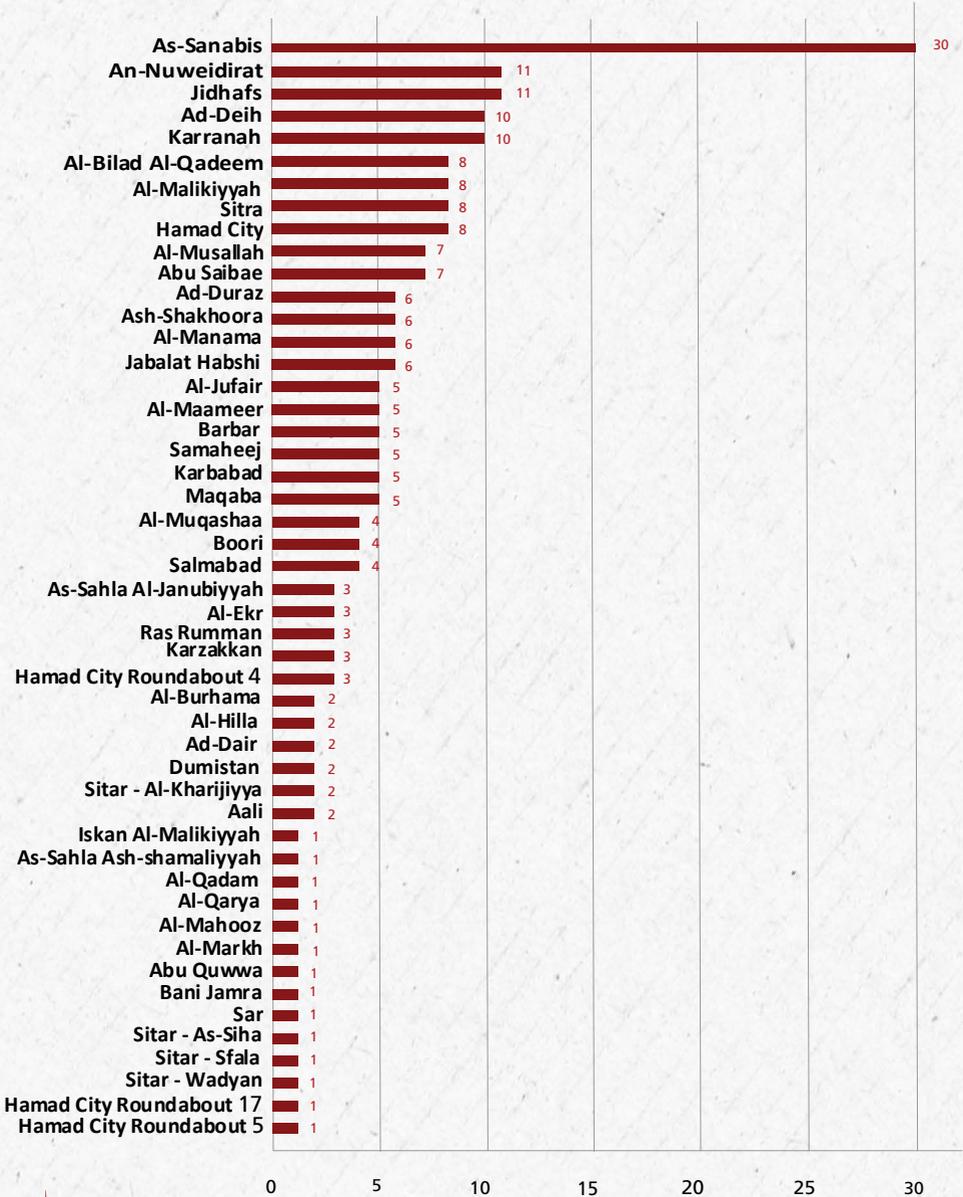
- 2 cases of sabotaging Ashura appearances;
- 12 cases of Ashura banners being confiscated;

- 12 cases of provocative depictions of participants in mourning councils and processions;
- 8 cases of police harassment, which included provocative speech made by members of the security services in front of Shiite funerals, police monitoring of ceremonies and participants, and the arrest of participants who failed show their identification papers;
- 5 cases of restricting standards for holding funeral ceremonies, including preventing processions, and;
- 3 other cases of provocative practices.

These events were monitored in 25 Bahraini regions, in addition to 225 raids on 50 Bahraini areas, the most prominent of which were: 30 raids in the "Al-Sanabis" area, 11 raids in each of "Nuwaidrat" and "Jidhafs" areas, 10 raids in each of "Al-Daih" and "Karana" areas, and fewer than 10 raids in other areas.

## Regions

## Region Raids



Number of Raids

Restrictions on religious freedoms were not limited to individuals participating in Ashura celebrations or rituals in various Bahraini regions, they were also implemented in prisons, where independent human rights organizations observed that the administration of Jau Detention Center prevented detainees from practicing religious rites during Ashura season twice in Building No. 5 (Warehouse 2) on the first night of Muharram, and in Building No. 12.

This was followed by peaceful protests by prisoners of conscience, denouncing the restrictions they were subjected to and demanding the right to hold special religious ceremonies for the occasion.



## **MONITORING GOVERNMENTAL NEWSPAPERS**

Despite the annual targeting of Ashura season by the security services under the supervision of the government, pro-government newspapers did not provide parallel coverage of events. They did not mention the repression of individuals who took part in the in the revival. No information was published on summonses to interrogation centers, incidents of arrest or harassing during the events, or restrictions on religious institutions. Instead, pro-government media published articles praising the Government of Bahrain's actions, which they claimed provided "freedom and security" for Ashura rituals, and congratulating the government on the «success of its efforts» in

securing the freedom to practice religious rites for its citizens.

Currently, the Media Affairs Authority is the official body that controls the state-owned Bahrain Radio and Television Corporation and The Bahrain News Agency where it is responsible for organizing and controlling the press and publications. The Chairman of the Commission is directly appointed by the King. The Bahrain News Agency monitors and edits local and international news.<sup>1</sup> There is currently no atmosphere where independent media can survive in Bahrain.

**During this year's Ashura season, ten press articles on government achievements in securing the Ashura ceremony were monitored:**

- 1.** «Ashura in Doha is an Impossibility» by Salah al-Jouder - Al-Ayyam Newspaper <sup>2</sup>
- 2.** «Ashura Precautionary Measures: Official Consensus» by journalist Adel Marzouk - Al-Balad newspaper <sup>3</sup>
- 3.** «Religious Preaching in Ashura» by journalist Abdul Ali Al-Ghasra - Al-Balad newspaper <sup>4</sup>
- 4.** «Since Ancient Times: Ashura: Bahrain's «Civilized Illumination» by

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1 <https://salam-dhr.org/?p=3516>

2 <https://www.alayam.com/Article/alayam-article/417956/Article.html>

3 <https://www.albiladpress.com/news/20214680//columns/718602.html>

4 <https://albiladpress.com/news/20214685//columns/719286.html>

journalist Adel Al-Marzouq - Al-Balad newspaper <sup>5</sup>

**5.** «Organizational and Awareness Performance Within the Framework of an Integrated Security System to Make the Ashura Season a Success» - Al-Ayyam Newspaper <sup>6</sup>

**6.** «President of the Association (Al-Tasamoh): Ashura is a Season to Increase National Cohesion and Love Among the People of Bahrain» by journalist Youssef Bouzbon - Al Balad newspaper <sup>7</sup>

**7.** «Ashura Season: The National Model of Religious Freedom and Brotherhood» by Haifa Adwan - Al Watan Newspaper

**8.** «Ashura's Success Thanks to High Royal Patronage» of the local affairs editor of Al Balad newspaper <sup>8</sup>

**9.** «The Sparrow Brothers: The Ashura Season in Bahrain is Internationally Distinct» by journalist Saeed Mohammed - Al Balad Newspaper <sup>9</sup>

**10.** «The Policeman Who Saved Ashura from Chaos» by Farid Ahmed Hassan - Al Watan Newspaper

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5 <https://www.albiladpress.com/news/20214687//columns/719515.html>

6 <https://www.alayam.com/alayam/local/919960/News.html>

7 <https://albiladpress.com/news/20214690//bahrain/719921.html>

8 <https://albiladpress.com/news/20214693//bahrain/720330.html>

9 <https://albiladpress.com/news/20214694//bahrain/720438.html>

# CONCLUSION

The Government of Bahrain has not ended its systematic practice of suppressing the religious freedoms of Shiite citizens. It continues to persecute civilians for their religious practices and beliefs. The new Prime Minister not introduced promised reforms on religious discrimination against Shiite citizens and it remains unclear when, or if, these reforms will take place. Security forces continue to suppress religious freedoms through methods of police harassment, such as arbitrary arrests, imposing fines, and forcing citizens to limit religious practices. Moreover, security services continue to raid and disperse mourners with excessive force. Meanwhile, state-controlled media is being used to misdirect and whitewash these occurrences.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## To the Government of Bahrain:

- 1.** End restrictions on the religious practices of prisoners and improve the prison environment;
- 2.** End practices of sectarian discrimination, such restrictions on Shi-ite citizens religious rituals;
- 3.** Respect national and international legislation that criminalize religious discrimination, enact laws and legislation criminalizing religious abuse, and those who violate these rights accountable;
- 4.** Adopt a policy of non-interference in funerals and ensure freedom of practice within public order;
- 5.** Allowing the UN Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief to visit Bahrain;
- 6.** Hold those involved, including prison officials, accountable for violating religious freedoms, particularly in regard to the Ashura season;

We hope that member states of the Human Rights Council and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights will support the right of Shiite citizens to exercise their freedom of religion and belief in Bahrain without restriction.

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