



# Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain

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## Religious Freedom in Bahrain

Religious freedom violations have been occurring in Bahrain for decades. However, the intensity of such attacks greatly escalated following the pro-reform protest movement of 2011. The population of Bahrain is estimated to be between 60% and 70% Shia, 30% to 40% Sunni, and 1% and 2% other minorities. Despite Bahrain's Shia majority, the ruling al-Khalifa family is Sunni. Religious freedom violations in Bahrain have been well documented by the United States government, including in the [2013 annual report from the US Commission on International Religious Freedom](#), as well as the [2010 US Department of State \(DoS\) report on International Religious Freedom](#), and the [2008 United States Country Report for Bahrain](#).

## Religious Freedom Violations in Bahrain

### Naturalizing Citizens

The Government of Bahrain has been known to naturalize Sunni immigrants in an attempt to change the demographics of the country. Such practices were documented in a 2005 [report](#) from the [Bahrain Center for Human Rights](#), as well as in the [2010 US DoS report on International Religious Freedom](#), which noted “credible reports that naturalization and citizenship processes often favored Sunni applicants over Shi’a applicants.”

### Discrimination in Building Requests

Permit requests to build Shia mosques face more restrictions than Sunni requests, as noted in the [2005 United States Country Report for Bahrain](#) and the [2006 US DoS report on International Religious Freedom](#), which found the Bahrain government doesn't grant permits to Shia to build mosques in predominantly Sunni parts in Bahrain.

### Targeting and Demolition of Shia Places of Worship

The [Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry](#) (BICI), commissioned by the King to investigate allegations of misconduct by government forces during the 2011 uprising, documented the demolition of 30 places of worship between March and May 2011, including [Abou Thir Al Ghiffari mosque](#), estimated to be more than 300 years old. [USCIRF's 2013 report](#) noted mosque demolition appeared to target Shia in “response to the demonstrations.” Despite government assurances that the destroyed mosques would be rebuilt, USCIRF [found](#) “no clear timeframe,” for rebuilding the mosques. The [targeting](#) of [Shia places](#) of worship [continues](#) to this day.

### Discrimination in Hiring

The practice of discrimination based on religion in hiring practices was documented in the [2005 United States Country Report for Bahrain](#), which noted that only 40% of university students were Shia, despite their majority share of the population. The report also found that “Shi’a citizens were employed in lower paid, less skilled jobs.” Dr. M. Cherif Bassiouni, Chair of the BICI, noted the continuation of this policy and [called](#) political inequality between Sunni and Shia one of the main causes of social upheaval in Bahrain.

### Detention, Torture and Harsh Sentences

Although the pro-democracy uprising of 2011 included both Shia and Sunni protestors, the majority of those arrested were Shia. Most commonly arrested by plain-clothed security forces during [midnight house raids](#), individuals are often held for days, and in some cases up to several weeks, during which they are [interrogated without legal representation](#) and subjected to ill-treatment, insults, humiliation, and even [torture](#).

### Sectarian Discourse

A campaign of defamation and incitement against Shia began shortly after the 2011 uprising. Social media accounts were [created](#) to publish names and personal details of protesters, along with derogatory language

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insulting to Shia. The [BICI also noted](#) programming on Bahrain's state-run television incited violence and hatred against Shia. The [sectarian discourse continues](#) to this day.

#### Harassment and Dismissal of Professionals and Workers

The [BICI report](#) found the majority of the thousands of professionals and students who were harassed or unfairly [dismissed](#) for their supposed participation in the 2011 uprising were Shia. At least 2,500 workers were dismissed from their jobs, and although the majority were later reinstated, many were demoted or stripped of any authority and remain objects of discrimination. Workers also [reported](#) that they were required to sign loyalty pledges in support of the Government upon reinstatement.

Medical professionals who treated injured protesters were targeted by the government under the auspices that Shia medical staff [discriminated](#) against Sunni patients when administering treatment. Forty-eight medical professionals faced arbitrary arrest and sentences of up to 15 years of imprisonment. Almost all of them were severely [tortured, ill-treated and dismissed](#) from their positions at Salmaniya Medical Complex. When arrested, medics [reported](#) they were humiliated and insulted by security force personnel for being Shia.

#### Targeting of Teachers and Students

Following the 2011 protest movement, more than 100 teachers were [arrested, suspended or fired](#) from their jobs, the majority of them Shia. Schools in Shia areas were [raided](#) and teachers were arrested, beaten, and humiliated in front of their students. More recently, the Ministry of Education [transferred](#) several qualified Shia employees from Bahrain Training Institute to jobs not matching their qualifications and experiences.

In 2011, the government of Bahrain [expelled](#) dozens of Shia university students and revoked some of their scholarships. Other students were [arrested, tortured, and sentenced](#) to up to 15 years imprisonment. Additionally, the Ministry of Education updated the application process for scholarships to include a personal interview. While the Ministry claims the interview was implemented to determine the interests of the students, the questions [asked](#) appear designed to determine the religious and cultural background of the students.

### **Policy Recommendations**

#### *NGO Community*

- 1) Sign onto a letter to USCIRF asking that Bahrain be raised to a Tier Two Country
- 2) Sign onto a letter to members of Congress asking them to urge State to launch an investigation into the Bahrain Government's progress on addressing religious freedom violations
- 3) Sign onto a letter to members of Congress asking them to urge the Department of Labor to provide an update on the situation of sacked workers and the current status of consultation under the U.S.-Bahrain Free Trade Agreement

#### *USCIRF*

- 1) Raise Bahrain to a Tier Two country

#### *Members of Congress*

- 1) Ask the Department of Labor for an official update on sacked workers and the current status of consultation under the U.S.-Bahrain Free Trade Agreement
- 2) Write a letter of concern regarding the situation of religious freedom in Bahrain
- 4) Draft legislation tying IMET funding to the country in questions compliance with international religious freedom standards in their military and police forces

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