

Bahrain – Freedom of religion, May 2018

Although there are no official statistics, Bahraini citizens are [estimated](#) to be 70.3% Muslims, with at least 60% Shia Muslim, approximately 35-40 % Sunni Muslim. There are approximately 14.5% Christians, 9.8% Hindus, 2.5% Buddhists, 0.6% Jews, less than 0.1% folk religion members, 1.9% unaffiliated and 0.2% of others (including Sikhs, and Baha'is.)

Government perspective: a model of religious tolerance

Despite widespread religious discrimination against non-Sunni Muslims, Bahrain's government officials have been striving to [convey](#) an image of religious openness and freedom in the Kingdom.

During **UN Human Rights Council 37th session in March 2018**, Bahrain [presented](#) itself as "***a model in the establishment of tolerance, religious freedom, coexistence and dialogue among all religions, civilizations and cultures at the national, regional and international levels***". It prided itself on recent "efforts" to promote religious tolerance, including the adoption of [Bahrain declaration on religious tolerance](#) in July 2017 and the inauguration of [King Hamad's Global Centre for Interfaith Dialogue and Peaceful Co-existence](#) in March 2018. Touting its religious diversity, Bahrain has repeatedly [claimed](#) that "*a multitude of mosques of various sects, 19 churches, a synagogue and a 200 year old Hindu temple*" sit next to each other in Manama.

During an [event](#) chaired by MEP David Campbell Bannerman (ECR) on 6 December 2017 in EP, [Nancy Dinah Elly Khedouri](#), a Jewish member of Bahrain's Shura Council, assured that everyone could freely practice his/her religion in the country, while **denying any kind of discrimination against Shias**, deemed to be a misconception spread by media dissenting with the King's vision and Iran.

Systematic discrimination of the Shia majority

While compared to other Gulf countries, Bahrain [is](#) among the most tolerant of non-Muslim religious minority communities, Shia Muslims have been subjected to a harsh persecution for decades. **Since 2011 the authorities have [intensified](#) restrictions on Shia religious and cultural rights.** Among others:

- While Bahrain has enshrined the freedom to practice religious rites without government interference in its [constitution](#), the authorities have imposed **restrictive measures against Shia religious practices**, notably in the **city of Duraz** under [security siege](#) since June 2016. Since then, the authorities [have](#) consistently **denied Shia clerics and worshippers access to Duraz**, imposing a *de facto* ban on Friday Prayers in Duraz's largest mosque, Imam Al-Sadiq's mosque. They have also [conducted](#) mass arrests and interrogations of individuals attending Friday prayers in Duraz and/or participating in the demonstrations. Dozens of Shia clerics have been charged with "**illegal gathering**".
- Security forces have also been using **excessive force to repress peaceful gatherings** in support for imprisoned Shia clerics. On 23 May 2017, 5 protesters were killed and 286 were arrested in a [brutal raid](#) into Duraz peaceful sit-in in support of Sheikh Isa Qassim (see infra).
- Despite [claims to the contrary](#), the Bahraini government has not [fully completed rebuilding all 30 of the destroyed religious](#) structures identified in the [2011 Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry \(BICI\) report](#) (recommendation 1723) – notwithstanding that many others sites have been damaged or destroyed since 2011. The government has rebuilt only [22 of the 30 structures](#) identified, at least 8 mosques [remain](#) in disrepair and 7 were rebuilt by the Shi'a community who disputes having received any reimbursement from the government.
- **Demographic manipulation and state-sanctioned gerrymandering:** Since 2012, more than 600 Bahraini – the vast majority of whom [are](#) Shia – have been [revoked of their citizenship](#). The

government has simultaneously [systematically naturalized](#) foreign security personnel from Sunni majority countries. It has also long engaged in [discriminatory political districting](#) to undermine predominantly Shia political societies and to disenfranchise Shia voters. On 22 May 2016, the government [amended](#) Article 5 of the Political Societies Law to prohibit religious figures from political participation.

- **Discrimination in welfare, culture, education and employment:** Shia Muslims are also widely [excluded](#) from public and social services (including access to housing and welfare programs). Shia – and specifically Baharna – culture is systematically excluded from country's official history, media and educational curricula. The Government permits [only one Shia-specific school](#), the Jaafari Institute, to operate legally within the country. In 2016, it [dissolved](#) two major Shia civil society organisations: the Al-Risala Islamic Society and the Islamic Enlightenment Society (Al-Tawiya).

Shia Muslims are significantly [marginalized from government employment](#), holding less than 15% of the positions. They also suffer from [widespread sectarian discrimination and abuses in Bahrain's defence sector](#), ranging from biased hiring practices to training materials preaching aggressive sectarian ideology. An analysis of [Nur al-Sunna \(Light of the Sunna\)](#), a religious pamphlet published by the Bahrain Defence Force (BDF) [revealed](#) it justifies acts of discrimination and possibly violence against heretical groups, i.e. non Sunni sects of Islam. While government officials publically discourage sectarian language, public and private media (including government and/or pro-government [social media accounts](#)) [continued](#) at times to use **inflammatory, sectarian rhetoric**.

For further documentation on Shia discrimination into the media, cultural, political, economic, and religious facets of Bahraini society, see:

- ADHRB, BCHR, BIRD, *Apart in their own land, Government discrimination against Shia in Bahrain* : [Volume I Violence, Political Disclusion, and Attacks on the Shia Religious Establishment](#) / [Volume II Economic Disclusion, Cultural Marginalization, and Media Discrimination](#), 2015.
- ADHRB, BCHR, BIRD, [Bahrain's Third Cycle UPR: A Record of Repression](#), pp. 151-180.

Intensified repression of Shia figures

As part of its wider crackdown on peaceful critics, Bahraini authorities have [intensified](#) their continued targeting of Shia leaders, in particular political figures. The [US Commission on International Religious Freedom \(USCIRF\)](#) found that *"during the year [2016], the Bahraini government has **increasingly cracked down on the religious freedom of its majority-Shi'a Muslim population**". It reports a sharp increase in the number of "interrogations, arrests, convictions, and arbitrary detentions of Shi'a Muslim clerics, mostly on unfounded and unsubstantiated charges". In August 2016, a group of UN experts [had warned](#) over the "**systematic harassment**" of the Shia community "on the basis of their religion", including "the intensified wave of **arrests, detentions, summons, interrogations and criminal charges** brought against numerous Shia religious clerics and singers, human rights defenders and peaceful dissidents". Between June 2016 and February 2017, Bahraini authorities have **summoned, charged and/or sentenced at least 80 Shia religious leaders** for "insulting religious symbols and/or religion, illegal gathering, unlawful protesting, engaging in political speech in sermons and supporting terrorism". The most emblematic cases include:*

- **Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society**, the country's largest Shia opposition group: On 19 February 2018, Bahrain's Court of Cassation [upheld](#) the decision to shut down Al-Wefaq which was originally closed in July 2016. The Court [declared](#) that al-Wefaq "*challeng[ed] the legitimacy of the constitution of Bahrain*", "*supported violence by posting [on Twitter] pictures of terrorists holding sharp objects to depict them as peaceful protesters*", expressed its "*solidarity*" with its Secretary General, Sheikh Ali Salman, called "*for foreign intervention*" and "*turned places of*

worship into political forums". In doing so, the Court [failed](#) to present credible evidence to demonstrate that Al-Wefaq is anything but a peaceful opposition movement, as these are all legitimate forms of freedom of association and expression.

- **Ayatollah Sheikh Isa Qassim**, the country's most prominent Shia cleric and considered as Al-Wefaq's spiritual leader: In June 2016, the Ministry of Interior **arbitrarily revoked the citizenship** of 70 years-old Sheikh Isa Qassim, stating that he [allegedly caused](#) "damages to the interest of the State or took action contrary to the duty and loyalty to it", without presenting any credible evidence. Sheikh Isa Qassim was then placed under house arrest and the authorities initiated legal proceedings against him. In May 2017, he was [sentenced](#) *in absentia* to one year in jail suspended for three years on charges of illicit fundraising and money laundering. The **charges relate solely to the Shia religious practice of *khums***, a payment made by Shia Muslims to Shia clerics for charitable distribution to the community. On 29 January 2018, the Court of Cassation [upheld](#) his prison sentence and revocation of citizenship. He's now still at [risk of deportation](#) and his health rapidly [deteriorates](#).
- **Sheikh Ali Salman**, Secretary-General of Al-Wefaq: Sheikh Ali Salman [was arrested](#) in December 2014 and [sentenced](#) to four years in prison in June 2015 for supposedly "*inciting disobedience and hatred in the kingdom*" in political speeches. While he was sentenced in appeal to an additional 5 years for "*inciting to overthrow the government*", the Court of Cassation [acquitted](#) him of this charge in April 2017, officially returning the prison term to four years. In 2015, the [UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention](#) declared Sheikh Ali Salman's detention arbitrary and called for his release.

In November 2017, Bahraini [authorities charged](#) him separately with "*exchanging intelligence information with a foreign country and with those serving its interests to carry out hostile acts against Bahrain, as well as to harm its military, political and economic standing and undermine its national interests*" and with "*delivering and divulging defence secrets to a foreign country, disseminating tendentious news and statements about the internal situation in Bahrain for the sake of undermining its prestige and status*". According to the information obtained by [Amnesty International](#), the charges relate to recorded telephone conversations that took place in 2011 between Sheikh Ali Salman and the then Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad Bin Jassim Bin Jabr Al-Thani. However, Qatar's mediation between the government and the opposition groups [was open](#) and [well-documented](#) in 2011. The [2011 BICI report](#) (para. 525 to 527) relates that the then US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Jeffrey D. Feltman, suggested Qatari Prime Minister as a mediator, but the proposal was rejected by the Bahraini government. In March 2018, Bahrain's Public Prosecution [requested](#) the "*maximum penalty*" (i.e. death sentence) against Sheikh Salman and his two co-defendants, who are also former Al-Wefaq leaders. The verdict is [expected](#) on 21 June 2018 – meaning that he might remain in detention after the completion of his current sentence.

[UPR 2017 Recommendations](#)

114.62	Adopt effective measures in law and practice to eradicate all forms of discrimination , in particular on the basis of religion or belief (Honduras)	Supported
114.63	Take additional measures to combat intolerance , negative stereotyping and stigmatization, as well as discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons based on religion or belief, in line with Human Rights Council resolution 16/21 (Brazil)	Supported
114.175	End the practice of revocation of citizenship , adopt legal and institutional safeguards to prevent discrimination against members of religious minorities and provide effective remedy for victims of arbitrary arrest, detention, summons or travel bans (Czech Republic)	Noted

UPR 2012 Recommendations

115.70	Meet the aspirations of groups that are the victim of discrimination (Belgium)	Supported	Not implemented
115.93	Prevent incidents of violence against members of ethnic and religious communities (Canada)	Supported	– No perceived progress
115.103	Create a more diverse, inclusive police force, reflective of society (United States of America)	Supported	
115.145	Implement the commitment to rebuild the Shia places of worship destroyed (Austria)	Supported	Perceived progress