

BAHRAIN 2020 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.” The government-run and funded Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (SCIA) oversees general Islamic religious activities, as well as the publication of Islamic studies school curricula and official religious texts. The government continued to question, detain, and arrest clerics and other members of the majority Shia community. International and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported police summoned approximately 10 individuals, including clerics, in the days leading up to and following the August Ashura commemoration – the most significant days of the Shia religious calendar. Police released some the same day and held some overnight; others remained in custody for several days or weeks. On January 13, authorities charged Shia cleric Abdul Zahra al-Samaheji with defamation of religious figures. On August 25, the Court of Cassation upheld a one-year prison sentence against Shia religious preacher Abdul Mohsin Atiyya al-Jamri for a sermon “defaming a figure that is revered by a religious group.” On August 30, the Public Prosecution Office arrested a Shia physician for making remarks in public which defamed religious figures in Islamic history. The government continued to monitor, regulate, and provide general guidance for the content of all religious sermons – of both Sunni and Shia religious leaders – and to bring charges against clerics, citing violations of topics preapproved by the government. The government-run television station continued to air Friday sermons from the country’s largest Sunni mosque, al-Fateh Mosque, but not sermons from Shia mosques. Many Shia mosques broadcast sermons via social media. According to Shia leaders and community activists, the government continued to give Sunni citizens preferential treatment for public sector positions.

Anti-Shia and anti-Sunni commentary appeared in social media. An NGO reported that some in the country blamed the Shia community for the spread of COVID-19 after the first confirmed case was publicly linked to travel from Iran. The NGO pointed to a February statement by a member of the government’s national COVID-19 task force that sought to immediately dispel such rumors. NGOs

reported on the adverse economic effect of Sunni-Shia tensions and local political divisions. Shia representatives reported persistently higher unemployment rates, limited prospects for upward social mobility, and lower socioeconomic status compared to the Sunni population. Because religious and political affiliations were often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

U.S. government officials, including the Secretary of State, the Ambassador, and other embassy representatives, met with senior government officials, including the Foreign Minister, Assistant Foreign Minister, and Minister of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments, to urge respect for freedom of religion and expression, including the right of religious leaders to speak and write freely, and to provide for the full and equal participation of all citizens, irrespective of religious or political affiliation, in political, social, and economic opportunities. In both public and private settings, U.S. officials continued to request that the government pursue political reforms that would take into consideration the needs of all citizens regardless of religious affiliation. The Ambassador and other embassy officials met regularly with religious leaders from a broad spectrum of faiths, representatives of NGOs, and political groups to discuss freedom of religion and freedom of expression as it relates to religious practice. In October, the King Hamad Global Center for Peaceful Coexistence and the Office of the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism signed a memorandum of understanding outlining joint cooperation to combat anti-Semitism in Bahrain and the region.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.5 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the government, there are approximately 712,000 citizens, constituting less than half of the total population. According to 2019 U.S. estimates, Muslims make up 73.7 percent of the total population, Christians 9.3 percent, Jews 0.1 percent, and others 16.9 percent (Hindus, Baha'is, Sikhs, and Buddhists).

The government does not publish statistics regarding the breakdown between the Shia and Sunni Muslim populations. Most estimates from NGOs state Shia Muslims represent a majority (55 to 60 percent) of the citizen population. Local sources estimate 99 percent of citizens are Muslim, while Christians, Hindus, Baha'is, and Jews together constitute the remaining 1 percent. According to

Jewish community members, there are approximately 36 Jewish citizens from six families in the country.

Most of the foreign residents are migrant workers from South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Arab countries. Local government estimates report approximately 51 percent of foreign residents are Muslim; 31 percent Hindu, Buddhist, Baha'i, and Sikh; and 17 percent Christian (primarily Roman Catholic, Protestant, Syrian Orthodox, and Mar Thoma from South India).

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, freedom to perform religious rites, and 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 they do not infringe on the official religion or public order, and it prohibits discrimination based on religion or creed. All citizens have equal rights by law. According to the constitution, all persons are equal without discrimination on the basis of gender, origin, language, or faith. The labor law prohibits discrimination in the public and private public sectors on grounds of religion or faith. The labor law deems dismissal for religion to be arbitrary and illegal but provides for no automatic right to reinstatement. The law also prohibits wage discrimination based on sex, national origin, language, religion, or ideology. The law stipulates recourse through a complaint process to the Ministry of Labor and Social Development (MOLSD) to legal bodies in the event of discrimination or dismissal in the workplace on the basis of religion.

The constitution guarantees the right to express and publish opinions provided these do not infringe on the "fundamental beliefs of Islamic doctrine," and 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 of no less than six months for "exposing the state's official religion to offense and criticism." The law states, "Any publication that prejudices the ruling system of the country and its official religion can be banned from publication by a ministerial order."

Muslim religious groups must register with the Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments (MOJIA) to operate. Sunni religious groups register with the ministry through the Sunni Waqf (endowment), while Shia religious groups register through the Jaafari (Shia) Waqf. The MOJIA endowment boards supervise, fund the work of, and perform a variety of activities related to mosques and prayer halls. Non-Muslim groups must register with the 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 (\$130) for the individuals responsible for setting up the branch.

According to the MOLSD's official website, 19 non-Muslim religious groups were registered with the ministry: 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, 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 Evangelical Church of Bahrain, Marthoma Parish, and the Anglican and Episcopal Church in Bahrain. Additionally, non-Muslim, nonregistered groups include the Baha'i, Buddhist, and Jewish communities.

The penal code calls for punishment of up to one year's imprisonment or a fine of up to 100 dinars (\$270) 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, 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, as part of the MOI, 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, which are appointed by the King with recommendations from the president of the SCIA. The respective endowment boards supervise the activities of mosques and prayer halls, review and approve clerical appointments for religious sites under their purview, and fund expenses for the building and maintenance of religious sites. The government has allocated 2.7 million dinars (\$7.16 million) annually to each endowment board. *Zakat* (Islamic tithes), income from property rentals and other private sources largely fund the remainder of the endowment boards' operations. The endowment boards may pay flat commissions and bonuses to preachers and other religious figures.

The government-run and funded SCIA oversees general religious activities taking place within the country as well as the publication of Islamic studies school curricula and official religious texts. The council is comprised of a chairman, a deputy chairman, and 16 religious scholars eight Sunni and eight Shia, most of them prominent preachers or sharia judges. The King appoints all council members to a four-year term. Independent from other government scholarship programs, the council offers university scholarships to low-income students for advanced Islamic studies. The SCIA reviews all legislation proposed by parliament to ensure the draft law's compliance with sharia. 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 broadcast on official government media, such as the official television station and official radio programs. The council also 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-Islamic 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 and either the Sunni Waqf or the Shia Jaafari Waqf under the MOJIA for Islamic sites. 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 government also determines the need for non-Islamic houses of worship.

The law regulates Islamic religious instruction at all levels of the education system. The government funds public schools for grades one through 12; Islamic studies based on Sunni doctrine are mandatory for all Muslim students and are optional for non-Muslims. Private schools must register with the government and, with a few exceptions (for example, a foreign-funded and foreign-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 must receive permission from the MOE. Outside of school hours, Muslim and non-Muslim students may engage in religious studies that the MOJIA sponsors, as their parents deem fit.

In coordination with the SCIA, a team of MOE-appointed experts routinely reviews and develops the Islamic studies portion of the public school curriculum to emphasize shared Islamic values between different Sunni and Shia schools of thought, reject extremism, and promote tolerance and coexistence. According to the government, the SCIA provides financial assistance to the six registered *hawzas* (Shia seminaries); other *hawzas* choose to be privately funded. The government does not permit foreign donors to contribute to privately funded *hawzas*. There are no restrictions on religious studies abroad. The government also permits non-Muslim groups to offer religious instruction to their adherents in private schools.

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. The constitution also guarantees the duties and status of women and their equality with men, “without breaching the provisions” of sharia. The personal status law states that either the Sunni or Shia interpretation of sharia with regard to family matters, including inheritance, child custody, marriage, and divorce, shall govern depending on the religious affiliation of the party. 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. Non-Muslims may marry in civil or

religious ceremonies; however, all marriages must be registered with a civil court. Civil courts also adjudicate matters such as divorce and child custody for non-Muslims.

The government does not designate religious affiliation on national identity documents, including birth certificates. Applications for birth certificates and national identity documents, however, record a child's religion (either Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or other), 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 religious and other organizations. Organizations wishing to collect money must first obtain authorization from the MOJIA.

The law guarantees inmates of correctional facilities the right to attend burials and receive condolences outside prison.

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

Because religion and political affiliation are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

According to January press reports, in September 2019, Bahrain's Special Investigations Unit referred two police officers to the Military Court on charges related to mistreatment of Shia detainees in Jaw Prison. The press reported that, in December 2019, a criminal court sentenced one of the accused officers to one

year in prison. The court sentenced the other officer and four other police officers to three months in prison in the same case.

The government continued to question, detain, and arrest Shia clerics and community members. 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 January 13, authorities summoned Shia cleric Abdul Zahra al-Samaheji for questioning and remanded him for one week pending an investigation. The government charged him with defamation of religious historical figures. On January 21, authorities remanded him for additional 15 days for further investigation. On February 20, the government released al-Samaheji without formal charge.

On March 12, the King issued a royal decree pardoning 901 inmates, many of them Shia, for humanitarian reasons against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of those released were charged with crimes related to religious expression. On May 23, the King issued a royal decree pardoning and releasing another 154 inmates who served part of their prison terms. These pardons coincided with the Eid al-Fitr holiday.

On August 12, the Court of Cassation reversed the revocation of citizenship of three Shia defendants who were sentenced to life in prison for setting fire to the Sitra Police station in 2017. However, the court did not grant their appeal and the life sentences continued. The Public Prosecution Office said that the three defendants had connections with the February 14 Movement, named for the 2011 uprising against the government and associated with the Shia community.

On August 25, the Court of Cassation upheld a one-year prison sentence against Shia religious preacher Abdul Mohsin Mulla Atiyya al-Jamri for a 2019 sermon “defaming a [historical] figure that is revered by a religious group.” During a sermon delivered in 2019, the preacher reportedly defamed Mu’awiya I, who assumed the caliphate in 661 after the assassination of the Prophet Muhammad’s son-in-law Ali.

On August 30, the Public Prosecution Office arrested a Shia physician, Wissam Khalil al-Arayedh, for defaming historical religious figures during his public reflection to mark the commemoration of Ashura. The Public Prosecution Office said that al-Arayedh’s message promoted violence and sectarian sedition. Activists

and rights groups stated that authorities misinterpreted his remarks. The government released al-Arayedh on September 1 on bail, banned him from overseas travel, and referred his case to the High Criminal Court.

In November, the press reported the Third Lower Court sentenced an unnamed defendant to a six-month prison term for insulting religious symbols and persons of reverence in Islam in sermons he had given. The press stated that the sermons contained “expressions of insult and cursing” aimed at companions of the Prophet Muhammad.

In September, the Public Prosecution Office summoned several Shia preachers because of the content of their sermons: Ebrahim al-Ansari, Qassim Zainuldin, Naji Ahmed Eid, Abdul Nabi al-Gharifi, Nasser Ali, and Ebrahim al-Sammak. The government accused them of “spreading sectarianism” after delivering sermons “defaming revered religious figures.” Activists said that the sermons were part of the Shia observance of Ashura. Authorities sentenced al-Sammak to one year in prison and Ebrahim al-Ansari to six months in prison. The government released the others after detaining them for seven days.

Authorities prosecuted defense attorney Abdulla al-Shamlawi, who defended opposition figures, including Ali Salman and other members of the now-banned opposition group al-Wifaq, which had strong ties to the country’s Shia community, for “defamation.” On September 14, an appeals court gave al-Shamlawi a six-month suspended sentence for “inciting sectarianism.” Some of the charges against al-Shamlawi involved two tweets that he sent in 2019 in which he criticized Sunnis for fasting during Ashura and for considering it a joyful day. The appeals court decision overturned the June 30 verdict of the High Criminal Court, which sentenced al-Shamlawi to eight months in prison for “humiliating an Islamic sect” and “misusing a telecommunications device.”

On September 8, the MOI Anti-Cyber Crime Directorate arrested an individual who circulated a video on social media defaming Shia beliefs. The directorate said that legal proceedings are underway against him.

On September 11, the Court of Cassation reviewed the verdicts of 20 defendants who participated in what the government called an illegal sit-in in front of senior Shia Sheikh Isa Qassim’s house in Diraz that began in 2016. The court upheld sentences in 16 of these cases, rejected two appeals, ordered a reduced prison term in one case, and ordered a retrial in one other. The suspects in this case, known as the “Diraz sit-in case,” were among 146 individuals that the Public Prosecution

Office had accused of possessing explosives, having connections with terror cells based abroad, and attempting to kill police officers.

International and local NGOs reported police summoned approximately 10 individuals, including clerics, in the days leading up to and following the August Ashura commemoration – the most significant days of the Shia religious calendar. Authorities reportedly summoned and interrogated the individuals for the content of their sermons and specifically for “inciting sectarian hatred.” Police held some of them overnight while others were detained and released the same day; others remained in custody for several days or weeks.

On June 15, 2020, the Court of Cassation upheld the death sentences of Zuhair Ebrahim Jassim and Hussain Abdulla Khalil Rashid. The government prosecuted both on charges of targeting security forces and killing a police officer in a bomb explosion in 2014. A *New York Times* report identified the men as members of the Shia community who previously expressed opposition to the government.

On September 17, the Public Prosecution Office filed an urgent motion against a woman for blasphemy and defamation of Islam and other religions after she published defamatory pictures and tweets on social media platforms. The Public Prosecution Office ordered the woman held pending trial.

On September 21, the Court of Cassation overturned the conviction of a citizen charged with blasphemy and misuse of telecommunications and referred the case back to the lower criminal court for retrial.

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

In January, the MOI summoned historian Jassim Hussain al-Abbas for a speech he gave at a conference in which he discussed the history of mosques in the country and alluded to Shia rulers of Bahrain before the first al-Khalifa emir.

In February, the NGO Bahrain Interfaith reported the one-year anniversary of a complaint submitted to the King by Mohsin al-Asfoor, the former head of the Jaafari Waqf, regarding MOI interference in Jaafari Waqf affairs and MOJIA actions affecting the Shia community. These included measures that hampered the

funding, construction, and licensing of new religious endowments, mosques, and *maatams* (Shia prayer houses, sometimes called *husseiniyas* in other countries), specifically the acquisition of new properties for new mosques and maatams, and government delays in approving construction of new mosques and maatams and renovation of existing ones. In June, the King appointed a new head of the Jaafari Waqf. The NGO stated that despite a change in leadership in the Jaafari Waqf, the government had not addressed the issues raised in al-Asfoor's original complaint.

On February 16, Bahrain Interfaith issued a separate report regarding a decision by the country's Electricity and Water Authority, part of the Ministry of Electricity and Water (EWA), to charge facilities that Shia community members identify as maatams for electricity and water. The NGO stated that the authority based its decision on a 2012 law promulgated by the MOJIA which held that, unlike Sunni or Shia mosques, maatams were not houses of worship, which are exempt from utility fees, but were public facilities, which are not. Government officials, on the other hand, dated the decision to a 2016 review of all maatams registered with the Jaafari Waqf, which found that approximately 200 registered maatams were actually residences or shops and not maatams. At that time, the government informed the owners of these buildings that they would need to address the status of their properties and would be responsible for the payment of electric bills. According to a November 2019 article in the newspaper *al-Ayam*, more than 600 of these facilities had not changed their status, had not paid past-due electric bills, and were subject to having their power shut off by the EWA.

According to the government, it generally permitted prisoners to practice their religion, but there were reports from Shia activists that restrictions imposed by prison authorities effectively denied Shia prisoners access to religious services and prayer time. NGOs continued to state that prison authorities routinely denied Shia prisoners needed medical treatment.

In August, inmates in Building 14 at Jaw Prison undertook a hunger strike to protest religious discrimination, lack of access to medical facilities, and limits on family visitation due to COVID-19-related restrictions. There were reports authorities denied prisoners access to religious services during special commemorations such as Ashura, and prayer time. Some detainees said prison officials limited time for practicing Ashura rituals due to COVID-19 mitigation efforts. A government human rights institution that monitored complaints of human rights violations said, however, that inmates were given additional time to practice Ashura rituals in common areas, adding that religious rituals were not permitted in prison cells as a matter of general policy.

The government continued not to provide regular statistics on detainees. The government reported that special rooms were available to prisoners for worship and prayer regardless of religious affiliation. The National Institution for Human Rights, a quasi-governmental organization responsible for investigating complaints of abuse in prisons, stated its investigations did not find widespread harassment or mistreatment by prison guards due to their religious affiliation. NGOs, however, cited several instances of prisoner abuse.

The government did not maintain official statistics on the religious affiliation of public sector employees, members of parliament, or ministers. According to informal estimates, the 40-member Shura Council included 19 Shia Muslim members, one Jewish member, and one Christian member, while the remaining 20 members were Sunni Muslims. Following parliamentary elections in 2018, of 40 seats on the elected Council of Representatives, 25 were won by members identified as Sunnis and 15 identified as Shia. Five of the 24 cabinet members, including one of the five deputy prime ministers, were Shia.

The government reported 598 licensed Sunni mosques and 91 Sunni community centers; authorities increased the number of licensed Shia places of worship to 754 mosques, while the number of maatams remained at 618, the same number as in 2019. The government reported it granted 30 permits during the year to build Sunni mosques and an additional 30 permits to build Shia mosques and maatams. NGOs stated authorities did not allow the construction of new mosques in Rifaa or maatams in Hamad Town, despite numerous requests from community members. The government stated that determining whether a mosque would be Sunni or Shia in new housing developments depended on the needs and demographics of the new residents.

The government continued to monitor and provide general guidance on the content of sermons and to bring charges against clerics who repeatedly spoke on unapproved topics. The MOJIA continued to monitor clerics' adherence to a pledge of ethics it created for individuals engaged in religious discourse. According to the MOJIA, preachers who diverged from the pledge were subject to censure or removal by authorities on the grounds that their actions jeopardized national security. 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. According to Shia community

representatives, during Ashura, police again summoned some Shia chanters and preachers and required them to sign pledges that they would avoid discussing politics in their sermons.

On August 26, the MOI Anti-Corruption and Economic and Electronic Security Directorate warned against social media accounts that spread sectarianism. The MOI stated that these accounts were managed by political groups operating in Lebanon and Iran, including the dissolved al-Wifaq political society and al-Wafa Islamic movement, both of which had strong ties to the country's Shia community.

In March, hundreds of Shia pilgrims reported they were stranded in Iran due to flight cancellations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. At least four persons died in Iran while waiting to be repatriated. The government chartered special flights to allow the stranded pilgrims to return home, but the process ultimately took months due to public safety concerns, airport closures, and the unavailability of flights. Rights groups accused authorities of sectarianism and stated that they were reluctant to repatriate the Shia pilgrims. On March 1, 18 members of parliament (MPs) called on authorities to postpone the return of Bahrainis from the "endemic countries," of which Iran was one. They argued that repatriating Bahrainis at that time would rapidly increase the number of infected persons at home. The Gulf Institute for Democracy and Human Rights said that the MPs' statement "promotes sectarian discrimination and creates discord among people."

On February 29, the Jaafari Waqf issued a statement calling on maatam administrators to freeze all activities (marriages, funerals, and social gatherings) until further notice because of the pandemic and announced that mosques would also be closed for all prayers. The government allowed maatams otherwise to remain open but did not allow maatams to hold or facilitate gatherings of more than five people. The Sunni Waqf ordered Sunni mosques closed on March 23.

The government also closed non-Islamic houses of worship and other places of congregational worship in late April due to concerns about COVID-19. Before the government's decision, many non-Muslim religious groups had voluntarily closed their houses of worship due to the pandemic. The government started to ease official restrictions for all non-Muslim groups beginning in mid-August.

On August 11, due to public health concerns, MOI officials reportedly warned leaders of maatams that hosting Ashura-related activities despite COVID-19 restrictions could result in imprisonment or fines, according to opposition-linked social media accounts. On August 16, the Supreme Council of Health restricted

Ashura ceremonies to online events and urged maatam representatives to abide by preventive measures put in place by the Ministry of Health (MOH).

On August 23, NGOs reported that a maatam in Hamad Town was shuttered by the MOI and that maatam representatives in A'ali and in Manama were summoned by the authorities. The MOI and the MOH cited violations of social distancing regulations to prevent the spread of COVID-19 as the reason for these actions.

On August 26, following meetings with the Jaafari Waqf, the National Task Force to Combat COVID-19 said it would allow Shia mourners to sit in chairs outside maatams during Ashura sermons while maintaining two meters' (six feet) distance between the attendees in all directions. Some members of the Shia community stated that these restrictions were much stricter than those applied to other public buildings such as shopping malls. The task force also stated it would allow Ashura processions in the vicinity of maatams to proceed, providing that social distancing was maintained and other precautionary measures implemented, such as wearing face masks and regularly using disinfectant. The government continued to prohibit large Ashura processions in Manama's city center and in the market area.

On August 26, MOJIA announced the progressive opening of all mosques beginning August 27. The ministry added that all mosques would be open only for *Fajr* (dawn) prayers and that Friday prayers would be performed in Al-Fateh mosque. The MOJIA also said it would suspend prayers in mosques that failed to follow safety and social distancing measures. On September 7, the Jaafari Waqf issued a statement suspending gatherings in maatams following an increase in positive COVID-19 cases subsequent to Ashura commemorations.

The government continued to permit Shia groups to hold processions to commemorate Ashura in August and Arbaeen (the fortieth day after Ashura, commemorating the death of Hussein) in October, with the largest procession organized by a Shia community-led organization, the Manama Public Processions Commission. During the annual two-day public holiday for Ashura, most public schools and government offices were closed. The government permitted public reenactments of the death of Hussein and public processions in commemoration of Ashura.

In August, social media accounts reported that the MOI had summoned mosque representatives in Hamad Town and directed them to suspend broadcasting Ashura sermons due to concerns about crowds gathering to listen to those sermons in contravention of COVID-19 social distancing regulations. A former member of

the Wifaq opposition society stated that the Shia community was forced to use mosques to observe Muharram due to the lack of maatams. Social media accounts also reported that a maatam in Hamad Town was locked by the MOI and that the government summoned maatam representatives in A'ali and in Manama and required the maatam officials to sign a pledge to observe social distancing. On August 26, the media reported that Isa Qassim, whom the media have identified as the leading Shia cleric from the country and who was living in Iran in exile, stated that the government had closed mosques in Hamad Town in the days before Ashura. According to the press report, Qassim said that "No mosque is ever owned by any country."

On August 20, local NGOs reported that the MOI removed several Ashura banners in Ras Rumman, Al-Sahla, and Al-Maameer. The MOI also removed some Ashura flags and banners from streets and private property in Shia villages, but not at the main procession areas in Manama, according to Shia leaders.

Shia Rights Watch, a U.S.-based NGO, stated that authorities announced restrictions on religious congregations and public organizations holding Muharram commemorations, which the government said were based on COVID-19 concerns. According to the NGO, authorities warned that some religious centers would be fined and shut down for three years for hosting Muharram rituals if they violated COVID-19 social distancing protocols. At the same time, Shia representatives stated that malls, swimming pools, and other businesses where customers congregate were allowed to open or continue their operations.

The government continued to permit both registered and unregistered non-Muslim religious communities to maintain identifiable places of worship, hold religious gatherings, and display religious symbols. 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. The Ministry of Information Affairs reviewed all books and publications prior to issuing printing licenses. The MOJIA also reviewed books that discussed religion. According to non-Muslim religious groups, the government did not interfere with religious observances and publicly encouraged tolerance for minority religious beliefs and traditions. In September, the King's Representative for Humanitarian Work and Youth Affairs, Nasser bin Hamad al Khalifa, participated in the celebration of the Hindu festival of Onam and said that

the observance of Onam confirmed the importance of dialogue and understanding in the country. In August, the government announced that it would allow a large-scale renovation and extension of the Shri Krishna Hindu Temple in the Manama souq.

Authorities permitted some churches to build larger premises on different locations, but at year's end, these churches had not received MOLSD's final approval for the location of the new facilities. Government sources reported that land scarcity was the reason for this delay.

There was no progress reported on the construction of a Coptic Orthodox church in Manama following the King's 2016 announcement that he would permit the church's construction. A construction start date had still not been established. Construction continued on a Catholic cathedral, intended to serve as headquarters for the Catholic Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia, which was scheduled for completion by mid-2021.

On August 15, a woman destroyed several Buddhist statues in a shop in Juffair. The following day, after a video of the incident appeared on social media, the MOI arrested the woman on a charge of publicly attacking and degrading a religious sect. Authorities referred the case to the Public Prosecution Office. According to the MOI, she faced charges of intentional criminal damage as well as publicly insulting and desecrating items associated with a religious faith. The King's diplomatic advisor tweeted that the woman's actions were "a crime...of hatred and is [sic] rejected. Here, all religions, sects, and people coexist..."

The government-run television station continued to air Friday sermons from the country's largest Sunni mosque, Al-Fateh Mosque, but not sermons from Shia mosques. Many Shia mosques broadcast sermons via social media.

According to the MOJ, officially registered organizers of Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages needed to abide by strict rules to maintain their licenses. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were no organized pilgrimages to the holy sites.

According to the law, Arab applicants with 15 years' residence and non-Arab applicants with 25 years' residence are eligible to apply for citizenship. Government representatives stated that in recent years, it has received citizenship applications from persons born in Jordan, Yemen, Sudan, Pakistan, and Morocco. The government stated that foreign residents applying for citizenship were not required to report their religious affiliation. Shia politicians and community

activists, however, continued to say the government's naturalization and citizenship process favored Sunni 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 also said Sunnis received preference for other government-related 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 community members, senior civil service recruitment and promotion processes continued to favor Sunni candidates. Other community members 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. The MOLSD reported it organized expositions, job fairs, professional guidance, and assistance to needy families in predominately Shia neighborhoods. The ministry, which has a supervisory role in implementing labor law in the civil sector, again said there were no reported cases of religious or sectarian discrimination during the year. Shia community activists again responded that they lacked confidence in the effectiveness of government institutions to address discrimination, so they did not utilize them.

Two public schools provided more thorough religious instruction for students from elementary school through high school; the remainder of their curricula was consistent with the nonreligious curriculum in other public schools. The MOE's Jaafari Institute provided religious instruction in Shia Islam. The MOE's Religious Institute provided education in Sunni Islam.

The University of Bahrain continued to offer degree programs in religious studies and Islamic jurisprudence for Shia and Sunni students. There were five registered institutes, publicly funded and overseen by the Sunni Waqf, offering religious education for Sunnis. There were several dozen hawzas, six of them registered and authorized by the SCIA.

Human rights activists continued to report discrimination against Shia in education. On August 29, the MOE said it had granted all high-scoring students from government and private schools their initial choices for universities and major placements. The MOE stated that the students could track their own placements and grants on the ministry's website. The government reported the flagship Crown Prince International Scholarship Program (CPISP) continued to have both Shia and Sunni representation, but it again did not provide a statistical breakdown of participants. A list of scholarship recipients' names, fields of study, and schools was published on the CPISP website. Some Shia business leaders again reported that government officials had overturned decisions to deny scholarships to Shia students over concerns the decisions had been biased and did not reflect student merit. There were continued reports that the MOE refused to recognize the foreign degrees of some students, primarily those who studied in China. Some activists said these refusals disproportionately affected Shia students.

NGOs reported the government continued to closely monitor the collection of funds, including charity donations, by religious organizations. 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.

At year's end, the government had still not filled the position of ambassador at large for peaceful coexistence and religious freedom. In 2018 the Foreign Minister announced the government planned to create such a position.

Representatives of the King Hamad Center for Peaceful Coexistence, led by a Board of Trustees comprised of representatives of the country's Sunni, Shia, Christian, Catholic, Baha'i, Hindu, and Buddhist communities, met with governmental and religious groups in several countries, including the United Kingdom, France, and the United States, where they also met with government and civil society leaders. Marking the end of Ashura on August 31, the King expressed thanks to the Shia community for taking steps to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus during recent religious observances, noting that such caution reflected the country's "humane reference in the exercise of religious freedoms, respect for religious pluralism, and ... the general values of [Islam]." On September 15, the diplomatic advisor to King Hamad received the country's Jewish community representative.

Christian community leaders stated they continued the search, which began in 2012, for a suitable location for a new non-Islamic cemetery. While the

government continued to work with them to identify a location, they did not identify a site during the year.

On September 1, the Muslim Council of Elders, an independent international organization based in the United Arab Emirates that promotes unity and an end to sectarianism in Islamic societies, offered membership to the SCIA's head, Abdulrahman bin Mohammed bin Rashid al-Khalifa, in recognition of his efforts to encourage religious coexistence and tolerance.

In a September 21 speech, the King said, "We want the world to know that peace is our message and strategic choice and that tolerance and peaceful cohabitation have long characterized the Bahraini peoples' identity." He added, "True peace means accepting others, and this is the true essence of Bahrain citizens," and that the country was a "lighthouse for intellectual, cultural, religious, and sectarian diversity." Bahrain Interfaith, however, stated in February that it "has not witnessed any positive practical developments on the official level regarding religious freedom, cultivating tolerance, and religious coexistence." The NGO said the government's "policies and practices on the ground are inconsistent with its positions that are more rhetorical than practical."

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Anti-Shia and anti-Sunni commentary appeared in social media. Posts stated that former Shia leaders were "traitors," "agents of Iran," "terrorists," "killers," "criminals," "plotters," and, occasionally, "*rawafid*" (a derogatory term that describes Shia who refused to accept the early caliphates). Anti-Sunni commentary often was characterized by the use of anti-Shia slurs.

Shia Rights Watch reported that some in the country blamed the Shia community for the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The NGO pointed to a statement made in late February by Dr. Manaf Al-Qahtani, a member of the national COVID-19 task force, that sought to dispel such rumors: "Neither the virus nor the disease has any relation to a specific race or a particular sect. It is a widespread virus that anyone may catch. We wish no one would nickname the virus by linking it to a specific party or doctrine." On February 26, Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa delivered remarks that stressed that COVID-19 does not discriminate based on race, ethnicity, or religion and called for a united effort to confront the pandemic.

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. However, those who did so 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 Sunni-Shia tensions and historical political divisions continued to have an economic effect. 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 these effects as being solely based on religious identity.

Several Hindu and Sikh temples operate throughout the country. The Shri Krishna Hindu Temple, more than 200 years old, is an important center of Hindu worship in the country. The country is also home to a historic Jewish synagogue that is undergoing renovation to include a museum on the history of the local Jewish community. There are more than one dozen Christian churches, which include a 100-year-old evangelical Christian church and an 80-year-old Catholic church. There is 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.

In a poll conducted by a Dubai-based public relations firm in the first three months of the year involving a team of international experts, 32 percent of the country's citizens between the ages of 18 and 24 agreed that religion is "the most important"

factor to their personal identity, compared to 27 percent overall for the six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. government officials, including the Secretary of State, the Ambassador, and other embassy representatives, met with senior government officials, including the Foreign Minister and Minister of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments to urge respect for freedom of religion and expression, including the right of clerics and other religious leaders to speak and write freely, and to ensure full inclusion of all citizens, including members of the Shia majority, in political, social, and economic opportunities. U.S. officials both publicly and in private meetings continued to advocate for the government to pursue political reforms that would take into consideration the needs of all citizens regardless of religious affiliation.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to meet regularly with religious leaders from a broad spectrum of faiths, representatives of NGOs, and political groups to discuss freedom of religion and freedom of expression as it related to religious practices. These exchanges included the Ambassador's phone calls and virtual meetings, necessitated by COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, with Sunni and Shia officials, businessmen, and civil society groups during Ramadan. The Ambassador and embassy staff members visited various houses of worship and attended religious events during the year, including the observation of Ashura, Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, Christmas, and Diwali. At these events, they discussed issues related to religious tolerance with participants and emphasized the U.S. government's commitment to religious freedom.

On October 22, the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism and the Chairman of the King Hamad Global Center for Peaceful Coexistence, Khalid bin Khalifa al-Khalifa, signed a memorandum of understanding outlining joint cooperation to combat anti-Semitism in both Bahrain and the region.

The embassy continued to encourage the participation of religious leaders in exchange programs in the United States designed to promote religious tolerance and a better understanding of the right to practice one's faith as a fundamental human right and source of stability. The embassy also continued to support religious freedom through its online presence.