

BAHRAIN 2023 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution declares Islam to be the official religion and sharia the 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.” It is a crime to mock or disdain a religious group. In public schools, Islamic studies, based on Sunni doctrine, are mandatory for Muslim students in grades one through 12. The constitution provides for women’s equality with men, but “without breaching the provisions” of sharia.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and human rights activists continued to state some Shia prisoners received inadequate medical treatment. In August-September, more than 800 prisoners at Jau prison, many of them Shia dissidents, engaged in a hunger strike for improved conditions, including better medical care and the right to pray together in groups. Demonstrators in Manama reportedly marched in support of the strikers. Prisoners suspended the strike in September after press reported the government agreed to implement changes. Separately, the government placed the Ministry of Health in charge of prisoner care, relieving the Ministry of Interior (MOI) of this responsibility. In May, a lower criminal court sentenced three members of the Al Tajdeed Society (Shia) to one year in prison for undermining Islamic values. On December 14, the King pardoned the three men, who had remained free on bail while appealing their case. The government continued to regulate the content of sermons of both Sunni and Shia religious leaders and the collection of funds, including charitable donations, by religious organizations. The government permitted large groups to gather in processions for Shia religious

observances during Ashura in July. The government funded the construction and renovation of several Sunni and Shia mosques in multiple parts of the country.

In March, a government official discussed religious tolerance in education with an adviser to the World Jewish Congress president. Eleven members of parliament expressed concern over the meeting and the possible addition of academic content they perceived as inconsistent with Islamic values. Many Shia Muslims said the government continued to favor Sunni Muslims for senior positions in the MOI and military and favored Sunnis for hiring for other government positions. Non-Muslim religious groups, mainly composed of noncitizens, continued to report freedom to openly practice their religion, without government interference. In October, the King met with the Pope at the Vatican and discussed ways of promoting peaceful coexistence among religious groups.

Several protests took place against the normalization of diplomatic relations with Israel (normalization). Some Friday sermons criticized normalization, and some were followed by demonstrations near the Shia mosque in Diraz. Following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel and Israel's military response in Gaza, anti-Israel and antisemitic demonstrations and rhetoric in sermons increased substantially, and newspapers continued to post anti-antisemitic cartoons. One cartoon depicted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as Adolf Hitler wearing a Nazi uniform with his right hand raised in a Nazi salute. According to minority religious groups, there was societal acceptance for minority religious beliefs but intolerance for persons who converted from Islam or held atheist or secularist views, and converts from Islam were unwilling to speak about their conversion. Sunni-Shia tensions continued, and both anti-Shia and anti-Sunni commentary appeared in social media.

The Ambassador, other senior U.S. government officials, and U.S. embassy representatives met with senior government officials, including the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, and the Minister of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and

Endowments, and national human rights monitoring institutions to urge respect for freedom of religion or belief and expression, including the right of religious leaders to speak and write freely, and to advocate the full and equal participation of all citizens, irrespective of religious or political affiliation, in political and social activities and economic opportunities. The Ambassador and other embassy officials met regularly with religious leaders and community members 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 practice. On July 21, the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism met with the Foreign Minister in Washington.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.5 million (June 2023). According to 2021 Bahrain national government data, there are approximately 720,000 citizens, constituting less than half of the total population. According to 2020 national government estimates, Muslims make up approximately 74 percent of the country's total population. Boston University's 2020 World Religions Database states 82 percent of the total (citizen and noncitizen) population is Muslim and 18 percent adheres to other religions and beliefs, primarily Christianity (12 percent), and Hinduism (6 percent). According to the database, other groups comprising less than 1 percent in total include Baha'is, Buddhists, Jews, agnostics, and atheists. According to Jewish community members, there are six Jewish Bahraini families with 20-40 Jewish members in total.

The government does not publish statistics regarding the breakdown between the Shia and Sunni Muslim populations. Most estimates from NGOs and the Shia community state Shia Muslims represent a majority (55 to 70 percent) of the citizen population.

Most foreign residents are migrant workers from South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, and other Arab countries. According to national government 2020 census data, approximately 401,500 foreign residents are Muslim; 387,800

are Hindu, Buddhist, Baha'i, Sikh, or Christian (primarily Roman Catholic, Protestant, Syrian Orthodox, and Mar Thoma Syrian 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 the constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion or creed. Per the constitution, citizens have equal rights, and all persons are equal without discrimination on the basis of gender, origin, language, or faith. The constitution states that sharia forms the principal basis for legislation, although civil and criminal matters are governed by civil and penal codes.

The labor law pertaining to the private sector prohibits discrimination against workers on grounds of gender, origin, language, religion, or belief. The labor law deems religion-based dismissal to be arbitrary and illegal but does not provide an automatic right to reinstatement. The law also prohibits wage discrimination based on religion, among other factors. The Ministry of Labor (MOL) investigates claims of discrimination where there is an existing labor relationship; it may escalate violations to the Public Prosecution Office (public prosecution) which refers labor violations to the labor court. The MOL does not have the authority to receive or manage complaints of religion based discrimination in hiring. There is no explicit law on discrimination in public sector employment, although such discrimination is governed by the constitution's broader provisions.

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 publications and broadcast media programs that violate the fundamentals of Islam, undermine national unity, or promote division and sectarianism. It 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.” The Ministry of Information Affairs determines which materials are governed by this law.

Islamic 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* (endowments), while Shia religious groups register through the Jaafari (Shia) *Waqf*. MOJIA endowment boards supervise, fund, and perform a variety of activities related to mosques and prayer halls. Non-Islamic religious groups must register with, and receive a license from, the Ministry of Social Development (MOSD) as a civil society organization in order to operate. Civil society organizations that are Islamic in nature must also register with the MOSD. To register, a group must submit an official letter requesting a license to operate; copies of minutes from the founders’ committee meeting; and a detailed list of founders and board members, including names, ages, nationalities, occupations, and addresses. It must also submit other information, such as the group’s bylaws, candidates who seek election to the organization’s governing board, a physical address, and evidence of a bank account in a bank registered with the Central Bank of Bahrain. Religious groups also may need approval from the Ministry of Education (MOE) if the public education curriculum is involved; the Ministry of Information Affairs if the group intends to issue religious publications; or the MOI, in coordination with the Central Bank of Bahrain, if the organization receives funding from foreign sources. Individuals affiliated with Islamic

organizations seeking to collect money for religious purposes must be citizens of the country and must receive approval from the MOJIA.

The law prohibits civil society organizations from engaging in politics. The law prohibits activities falling outside 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 dinars (\$130) for the individuals responsible for setting up the branch. Although it is illegal for unregistered religious groups to operate, in practice, the government often did not enforce this requirement.

The law prohibits any individual from being a member of a political society or becoming involved in political activities, including running in elections, while serving in a clerical role at a religious institution, including on a voluntary basis.

According to the MOSD's website, the following non-Islamic religious groups are registered with the ministry: the National Evangelical Church, Bahrain, Malaylee Church of South India Parish, Word of Life International Church, St. Christopher's Cathedral (Anglican), 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, House of Ten Commandments Synagogue, Shri Krishna Hindu Temple, and Baha'i Social Society. Some religious groups, including Shia religious education centers (*hawzas*), seek government licensing for their places of worship, while others operate in private residences without a license. There are 16 registered churches and numerous other Christian places of worship, mostly in Manama.

There is no legal prohibition against apostasy. The penal code calls for punishment of up to one year's imprisonment or a fine of up to 100 dinars (\$260) for offending one of the recognized religious groups or their practices or openly defaming a religious figure considered sacred to members of a particular group. It punishes an individual for desecration of religious books with up to one year in prison and a fine of 100 dinars (\$260). The law also prohibits any person from imitating in public a religious ritual or ceremony with the intention of ridiculing it. The law stipulates prohibitions on certain types of speech, which can apply to criticism or contempt related to religion, including of a religious practice or rite, or religious institutions or groups. Specifically, there are fines or imprisonment for encouraging others to show contempt for a different religious denomination or sect. More generally there are fines or imprisonment for insulting an institution, announcing false or malicious news, spreading rumors, illegally gathering, or advocating a change of government, among other offenses.

The MOI's Office of the Ombudsman, the Prisoners' and Detainees' Rights Commission, and the quasi-governmental National Institute for Human Rights (NIHR) address the rights of prisoners, including the right to practice their religion while incarcerated. The law guarantees inmates of correctional facilities the right to attend burials and receive condolences outside prison.

The MOJIA oversees the activities of both the Sunni Waqf and the Jaafari Waqf; the King appoints their governing boards with recommendations from the president of the government-run and funded Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (SCIA). The respective waqf 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. *Zakat* (Islamic tithes), income from property rentals, and other private sources fund the remainder of the waqf boards' operations. The waqf boards may pay flat commissions and bonuses to preachers and other religious figures.

By law, the government regulates and monitors the collection of money by religious and other organizations. Islamic organizations wishing to collect money must first obtain authorization from the MOJIA, which issues collection licenses valid for one year. Non-Islamic organizations must obtain authorization from the MOSD. The period specified for collecting money should not exceed two months from the date of issuance of the license, with the exception of Islamic and charitable associations, where the period of collection is six months. A 2021 amendment to a royal decree requires the Sunni and Jaafari Waqfs to submit annual reports to the MOJIA on funds they collect for religious purposes, including for the construction or renovation of places of worship. The amendment also bans the waqfs from receiving money from abroad without MOJIA approval.

The SCIA oversees general Islamic religious activities taking place within the country as well as the publication of Islamic studies curricula and official religious texts. The council consists of a chair, a deputy chair, 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 of 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 draft laws comply 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 outlets, such as official television and radio stations. The council also organizes interfaith conferences and workshops.

The government licenses houses of worship. Permission for construction of a new mosque, whether Shia or Sunni, requires a government determination of the need for a new mosque in the area based on population. The government also determines the need for non-Islamic houses of worship. The King has sole legal authority to allocate public land, including for religious purposes, although he may delegate this authority to government officials. Citizens may also offer private land to build mosques. By law,

construction of Islamic places of worship requires MOJIA approval. Non-Islamic groups must obtain MOSD approval. Municipal authorities provide final approval for construction. The law permits non-Islamic houses of worship to display crosses or other religious symbols outside their premises.

The law regulates Islamic religious instruction at all levels of the education system. In public schools, Islamic studies, based on Sunni doctrine, are mandatory for all Muslim students in grades one through 12 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 students may enroll in Quran recitation courses and religious studies sponsored by the MOJIA.

According to the government, the SCIA provides financial assistance to the six registered hawzas; other hawzas are privately funded. The government does not permit foreign donors to contribute to privately funded hawzas. There are no restrictions on religious studies abroad.

Specialized MOE-run religious schools provide more thorough religious instruction – by the Jaafari Institute for instruction in Shia Islam and the Religious Institute for instruction in Sunni Islam – for students from elementary through high school. The remainder of the curriculum is consistent with the nonreligious curriculum in other public schools.

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, depending on the religious affiliation of the parties, shall govern 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. Under sharia, Muslim men may marry Christian or Jewish women, but not women of other religions; the law considers offspring of such a marriage to be Muslim. Muslim women may not marry non-Muslim men. 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. A woman's court testimony is given equal weight to that of a man. The constitution states inheritance is a guaranteed right governed by sharia, meaning women are entitled to half the share of men.

Shia women seeking divorce are required to obtain their husband's consent or return their dowries and all expenses paid by the husband during the marriage, but the law does not specify or mandate how these amounts are to be calculated.

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 (Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or other), but not denomination. Hospital admission forms and school registration forms may also request information on an individual's religion.

According to the constitution, the state "strives to strengthen the bonds between the Islamic countries." It specifies that succession to the position of King is hereditary, passing from eldest son to eldest son. The royal family is Sunni.

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

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

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

NGOs and human rights activists continued to state some Shia prisoners received inadequate medical treatment. Shia Rights Watch reported in March that imprisoned dissident Shia clerics Sheikh Mirza al-Mahrous and Sheikh Mohammad Habib al-Muqdad were deprived of medical treatment despite deteriorating health. Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, a prominent imprisoned activist and Shia Muslim who suffered from cardiac and other health problems, was denied essential health care, according to Human Rights Watch and other NGOs and al-Khawaja's daughter. According to the government, al-Khawaja refused to attend medical appointments during the year on multiple occasions even after prison authorities met his demands to be transported without handcuffs and in a different vehicle than the normal inmate transportation van.

On August 7, inmates in Jau prison, the country's main prison and which holds many primarily Shia political dissidents, launched a hunger strike in which more than 800 prisoners participated. According to multiple press reports, the strikers were seeking more time outside of their cells, access to adequate medical care, and the right to pray together in groups. Demonstrators in Manama also reportedly marched in support of the strikers. According to the banned Shia al-Wefaq Political Society, authorities isolated prisoners participating in the strike and refused medical services for several of them. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that the prison authority said that all inmates had the same access to primary and secondary care as other citizens. Prisoners suspended the strike on September 11, after press reported authorities agreed to implement changes in prison conditions.

On September 18, in what it said was an effort to improve inmate health care, the government placed the Ministry of Health in charge of inmates'

health. The Ministry of Health placed medical facilities, doctors, and nurses in each building within Jau prison to increase access to health care and reduce wait times.

In February, according to Freedom House, two leaders and one member of the Al Tajdeed Society (Shia), also known as “al-Safara”, which is registered with the government as a cultural society and has a sizeable media following, were arrested because of videos they posted to their YouTube channel in which they discussed and questioned some tenets of Islam. They were charged with insulting religious texts and “violating foundations of Islam,” and in May, a criminal court sentenced them to one year in prison. The MOSD and several Shia clerics filed the case, alleging the group was “misinterpreting” the Quran and undermining Islamic values. The three men remained free on 500-dinar (\$1,300) bail while they appealed the sentence; in December, the King pardoned the three men, and the case was closed.

Several Shia clerics arrested during the country’s 2011 antigovernment protests, including al-Wefaq Secretary General Shaikh Ali Salman, remained in prison at year’s end, serving sentences ranging from 15 years to life in prison on charges related to terrorist activity, seeking to overthrow the monarchy, treason, or inciting hatred. Some human rights NGOs, including the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD), Salam for Democracy and Human Rights, and Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain, considered them to be political prisoners. Every week, peaceful protesters gathered in Shia villages to demand the release of the prisoners.

During the year, several inmates received permission to leave the prison to attend funerals.

On September 15, the MOI summoned a Shia woman for investigation on accusations of publishing videos on her social media account that “disrespected a figure revered by a religious group.” The MOI Electronic Crimes Directorate investigated her actions. Authorities released her on September 21 without charging her.

In March, the UN Human Rights Council adopted the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) outcome for the country, issued in November 2022. The UPR included recommendations that the country decriminalize blasphemy and advance comprehensive legislation against discrimination in all areas. The Bahraini representative stated the country would continue to put in place initiatives and legislation to protect human rights and combat hate, racism, terrorism, and violent extremism and develop its judicial system to ensure respect for civil and political freedoms. The representative also cited the King's call for the adoption of an international convention to criminalize religious and sectarian hate.

Since May 2018, the government said it had released 6,286 prison inmates, many of them Shia Bahrainis, after they received alternative sentences. The Minister of Interior inaugurated an open prison compound in December 2022. The open prison was a facility in which prisoners completed sentences with minimal supervision and security. Prisoners were permitted to take up employment while serving their sentence. According to MOI officials, the program provided an opportunity for criminals to reintegrate into society and reform their criminal behavior. On April 6, MOI transferred 48 prisoners to the new facility and reunited them with their families.

In December, on the occasion of Bahrain's National Day, the King pardoned 168 inmates, most of whom were Shia Bahrainis, according to Shia sources.

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

The MOI's anticybercrime directorate reported it continued to monitor social media for indecency, blasphemy, incitements to sectarianism, and offenses to the sanctity of religion. On March 8, the MOI's General Directorate of Anti-Corruption and Economic and Electronic Security warned against publishing social media posts that "undermine the country's security and stability" and stated that endorsing subversive content was punishable by law.

In October, the public prosecution interrogated an Indian doctor for describing Islam as a barbaric religion on his social media account, in the context of the Israel-Hamas conflict, and charged him with posting anti-Islamic publications on social media. The public prosecution referred the case to the criminal court. The defendant remained in a pretrial facility at year's end pending his trial.

The government continued to enforce Ramadan fasting restrictions in public spaces on non-Muslims. On March 30, the public prosecution stated that eating in public in Ramadan was punishable with a prison sentence not exceeding one year and/or with a fine not exceeding 100 dinars (\$260).

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

The government reported it did not receive any new requests during the year from religious groups seeking formal registration. Despite the law requiring religious groups to register, the government continued to permit both registered and unregistered religious communities to maintain identifiable places of worship, hold religious gatherings, and display religious symbols, such as crosses outside churches.

On July 20 and 23, respectively, the Office of the Ombudsman and the NIHR visited the Jau prison facilities. The NIHR officials said inmates told them they practiced their religious rites in conformity with the prison's regulations. The Office of the Ombudsman said it had checked prison closed circuit television cameras and confirmed that inmates had practiced their faith freely and organized Ashura group gatherings daily. The two entities said the purpose of their visits was to verify that prisoners were allowed to practice their religious traditions freely.

The government continued to closely monitor and control the collection of funds, including charitable donations, by religious organizations. In the first two months of the year, the government collected more than one million dinars (\$2.6 million) through the Charity and Zakat Fund operated under the

MOJIA. In 2022, the MOSD granted 178 permits to charity organizations to send funds abroad and 81 permits to receive money from abroad. In March, the Minister of Social Development stated the ministry had referred six organizations, including charities, to the public prosecution in 2022 for misusing collected funds. The MOJIA had a list of individuals authorized to collect funds for religious purposes that it displayed on its website. At year's end, there were 77 licensed fund collectors on the list.

The government continued to monitor and provide general guidance on the content of sermons by sending circulars to mosques. 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 on a weekly basis sermons preachers submitted to the government. The MOJIA continued to regularly visit mosques unannounced to ensure, according to the ministry, that preachers' sermons avoided discussing controversial topics, did not incite violence, and did not use religious discourse to serve political purposes.

On August 1, the government summoned for questioning Shia cleric Mahmood al-A'ali, who delivered a sermon during Ashura in which he criticized an incident in Sweden involving destruction of a copy of the Quran. According to the government, shortly after the sermon, hundreds of individuals shouted anti-Israel slogans that the authorities deemed violated public security. Authorities released al-A'ali the same day.

On April 12, authorities arrested Shia religious chanter Abdulameer al-Biladi at the airport upon arrival from Oman. Some opposition groups said that al-Biladi's arrest was related to the content of sermons and chants in Manama on the commemoration of Imam Ali's martyrdom, which occurred on that day. Others said he had been arrested because he chanted a pro-Palestinian poem. Authorities detained al-Biladi for seven days and then released him without charges.

On May 22, the public prosecution detained prominent Shia cleric Sheikh Mohammed Sangoor, preacher of the Imam al-Sadeq Mosque in Diraz, pending investigation into accusations of defamation and inciting hatred during his May 19 Friday sermon, in which he criticized normalization with Israel as well as the condition of prisoners and the domestic situation. According to NGO BIRD and media reports, his detention triggered protests for several days in predominantly Shia villages. Authorities did not charge Sangoor and released him on May 25.

Opposition sources reported that authorities took down religious banners in at least three villages during Muharram, a holy month for Shia that was observed from July 19 to August 17. Some oppositionists said authorities removed the banners because of their significance to Shia, while other commentators stated that certain banners were removed because they obstructed storefronts or otherwise limited visibility on public streets.

On July 20, in a meeting with Ashura organizers and officials, the MOI Minister said foreign preachers, religious chanters, and organized foreign tour groups would be banned from taking part in processions during Ashura, stating there were “qualified local preachers.” The Minister also called on the public to respect the spirituality of this occasion. Some local members of the Shia community stated the MOI’s ban of foreign preachers during Ashura was necessary for security, safety, and organizational reasons. Overseas groups, including NGOs Shia Rights Watch and BIRD, stated that authorities were violating religious freedom, interfering in Shia rites, and implementing a double standard, as prominent foreign religious figures such as Pope Francis and Grand Imam of al-Azhar Ahmed el-Tayeb, as well as various foreign Sunni preachers had been recently invited to the country on various occasions.

In January and May, Shia members of parliament (MPs) called on the national airline company to resume direct flights to Najaf and Baghdad in Iraq and to Iran and Syria that were suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The MPs stated the bans predominantly affected travel by Shia, who sought to visit holy sites in those locations. In January, the

Minister of Transportation and Telecommunications said Iraqi counterparts had not agreed to resuming flights to Iraq. Bahraini Shia visitors to religious shrines in Iraq and tour operators said on social media that they incurred high costs transiting through the UAE and Oman.

Two weeks before Ashura commemorations, government entities coordinated logistics for the processions with the Jaafari Waqf. MOI officials conducted preparatory inspections of participating *maatams* (Shia gathering houses for mourning, religious lectures, and other social functions such as wedding ceremonies), and the King donated food supplies, while other agencies provided logistical support and security for communities and participants.

The law prohibiting political activities at worship centers remained in effect. The government continued to prohibit individuals from using mosques, *maatams*, or other religious sites for political gatherings.

On June 10, the chairman of the Shura Council and the speaker of the Council of Representatives stated, separately, that places of worship should avoid political debates and should instead strengthen national unity and social partnership. The two statements followed a warning by the MOJIA against continuation of political slogans as those chanted at the Shia Imam al-Sadeq Mosque in Diraz beginning in June. Shia worshippers continued to chant political slogans, primarily after the Friday sermon, with no reports of police interference.

On June 12, weeks before the commemoration of Ashura, the Jaafari Waqf warned Shia preachers and religious chanters against politicizing Ashura and stated they should comply with government guidelines for religious discourse that promoted peace and national unity. A prominent human rights activist cautioned on social media against hate speech on the International Day for Countering Hate Speech, commemorated on June 18.

On June 16, according to posts on social media accounts, the MOI prevented Shia cleric Fadhel al-Zaki from delivering a Friday sermon in the Imam al-

Sadeq Mosque in Diraz, where worshippers had been chanting anti-Israel and anti-American slogans.

According to Human Rights Watch, authorities established roadblocks and prevented Shia who were not residents of the Diraz neighborhood from attending Friday prayers at the Imam al-Sadeq Mosque on June 9 and 16. The mosque is a main site for Shia Friday prayers in the country. Shia were, however, reportedly able to access mosques in the areas subject to roadblocks and other traffic control measures. The government's actions followed weekly, large-scale antinormalization marches in the Shia village of Diraz. Oppositionists said the MOI wanted to contain possible spillover of marches to the neighboring villages.

Social media accounts stated the MOI banned a prayer gathering in a maatam in A'ali that had been scheduled for Friday, June 9. The prayers were in honor of two Bahraini Shia men executed in May in Saudi Arabia on charges of terrorism.

Adherents of minority religious groups continued to produce religious media and publications and distribute them in bookstores and churches. The government did not permit publications it perceived as criticizing Islam or other religions. The Ministry of Information Affairs continued to review all books and publications prior to issuing printing licenses. The MOJIA also continued to review books that discussed religion.

According to representatives from the Christian and Hindu communities, the government did not interfere with their religious observances. Government officials made public statements and held meetings encouraging tolerance for minority religious beliefs and traditions. On May 28, The King Hamad Global Center for Peaceful Coexistence (King Hamad Center) published a research paper that highlighted the importance of religious dialogue between Muslims and Christians in the country and the region.

The cabinet approved on September 18 a new law regulating the construction of places of worship such as mosques, churches, synagogues,

temples, and maatams. The new law set the maximum height of places of worship to three floors or 15 meters (49 feet), and minaret heights to 25 meters (82 feet). The law also stipulated that annexation or use of conference halls or other buildings for religious purposes must first receive government approval. The political opposition, as well as a prominent Shia cleric during a sermon, said the law violated the rights of Shia to build places of worship, without specifying how it did so.

In March, the MOJIA said it was coordinating with the Sunni and Jaafari Waqfs to renovate and reopen 30 mosques in several governorates. Two more mosques, one Shia and one Sunni, reopened in March. The MOJIA's statement reflected continuation of the plan Crown Prince and Prime Minister (CP/PM) Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa announced in 2022 to restore 20 Sunni and Shia mosques in several governorates and build 12 new Sunni and Shia mosques in Salman City. The renovation and construction of the mosques was continuing at year's end.

The government allocated 1,251,856 dinars (\$3.3 million) during the year to the waqf boards for the building and maintenance of Islamic religious sites.

Awali municipality again did not approve requests, pending since 2014, from three Christian congregations to construct new churches on land donated by the King for that purpose.

Representatives of Christian religious groups and lay members of a cemetery working group campaigned to raise 86,000 dinars (\$228,000) to complete construction of a new Christian cemetery in Salmabad. It would be the second Christian cemetery in Salmabad and the third in the country. CP/PM Salman donated the land for the cemetery and sand to level the property.

In 2021, the Justice Minister stated that the Jaafari Waqf owned 2,831 investment properties compared to the Sunni Waqf, which owned 1,352. In February 2023, the Sunni Waqf said it had registered 204 new properties.

The King Hamad Center continued to offer student exchanges and educational programs that it stated were focused on dispelling ignorance, discrimination, and intolerance, including religious intolerance. These included the King Hamad Faith in Leadership Program and the Cyber Peace Academy. The center's board of trustees comprised representatives of the country's Sunni, Shia, Christian, Baha'i, Hindu, Jewish, and Buddhist communities. On June 11, the King issued a royal decree placing the King Hamad Center, which was run by the Royal Court, under the supervision of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The center's members are appointed every four years by the King. On October 30, the King issued a decree restructuring the center's Board of Trustees. The restructured board comprises 11 members (six Bahrainis and five foreigners) representing various religious faiths present in the country and a chairman.

The public University of Bahrain continued to offer degree programs in religious studies and Islamic jurisprudence for Shia and Sunni students.

All students, regardless of religious affiliation, were eligible to participate in the Crown Prince International Scholarship Program (CPISP); the government did not provide a statistical breakdown of participants by religious affiliation.

The Isa bin Salman Education Charitable Fund offered undergraduate and postgraduate scholarships to disadvantaged students "based on merit, without discrimination based on gender, origin, language, religion, or sectarian affiliation." The fund is chaired by the CP/PM's son, Shaikh Isa Bin Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa. On October 4, Shaikh Isa reviewed 75 bachelor's degree scholarships granted for the academic year 2023-2024, including both Shia and Sunni recipients.

On March 1, the Higher Education Council secretary general met with the international affairs advisor to the World Jewish Congress president. Discussions dealt with "enhancing cooperation in education and developing the Arabic language curricula within the Abraham Accords, including issues related to religious tolerance." Following the meeting, on March 7, 11

members of parliament issued a statement that called for safeguarding Arab and Islamic identity and protecting school and college curricula from “undesirable influences” and academic content that they perceived as inconsistent with Islamic values.

In May, the MOE undertook an initiative to eliminate antisemitic language and language critical of Israel from textbooks used in K-12 curricula. The changes included removal of content on the Israel-Palestinian conflict as well as of the “Jerusalem Poem” that criticized the “occupiers” (Israel) from a grade six Arabic language textbook and replaced it with a “National Unity” poem.

The changes, however, also included edits to verses and Islamic hadiths (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). When the textbooks were distributed that same month, there was a backlash on social media platforms and among Sunni and Shia clerics who opposed the MOE’s efforts, stating the changes were “harming the Islamic heritage.” There were concerns by parents, MPs, and Sunni and Shia clerics that certain Quranic texts should not be edited. A prominent Shia preacher objected to changing the curriculum “to fit the normalization plan.” Eighty-two Sunni and Shia religious scholars representing the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, judges, Shura members, and Council of Representatives members rejected the changes to the curriculum and stated that they viewed the changes as an attempt to minimize the dispute over the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

On May 9, CP/PM Salman announced a halt to the MOE’s curriculum reforms in light of growing public opposition. He said he would “halt any changes made to educational curricula that are not compatible with Bahrain’s national values to protect religion and its core pillars.” He also ordered that the curriculum “adhere to Islamic teachings, in line with the National Action Charter and the constitution.” CP/PM Salman established a committee to review changes to school texts and to respond to public comments. The content on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the Jerusalem Poem was not added back to the textbooks.

The online political opposition-affiliated site the Bahrain Mirror reported claims in August that the government's new methodology for awarding scholarships discriminated against Shia students. The MOE, however, reported that under the new methodology, it granted scholarships based on students' grade point average.

On September 25, the Jaafari Waqf stated that 10 scholarships sponsored by the Abdulla bin Khalid Faculty for Islamic Studies were open for Shia students who graduated from the Jaafari religious school as well as from public and private schools. The Sunni Waqf sponsored 1,193 Sunni students from 1998 to 2023 in different academic degrees, including Islamic degrees offered by the University of Bahrain and the Abdulla bin Khalid faculty for Islamic Studies.

On August 15, the Abdulla bin Khalid Faculty for Islamic Studies launched its first bachelor's degree program in Islamic studies for Sunni and Shia high-achieving students from public and private schools, and from the two MOE-run religious schools.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

The government-run television station Bahrain TV broadcast Friday sermons from the country's official al-Fateh Mosque and other Sunni mosques, such as Sabeeka bint Ebrahim Mosque and Sabeeka al-Nusf Mosque. The station did not broadcast sermons from Shia mosques. Prison officials permitted Shia inmates to access Shia sermon videos on their mobile devices.

According to Shia leaders and community activists, the government continued to give Sunni citizens hiring preference in government positions, and in state-owned businesses. Few Shia citizens served in leadership posts in the defense and internal security forces. According to Shia community members, senior civil service recruitment and promotion processes favored Sunni candidates.

Shia 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 MOSD organized expositions, job fairs, professional guidance, and assistance to needy families in predominately Shia neighborhoods.

The MOSD, which has a supervisory role in implementing labor law in the private sector, said there were no reported cases of religious or sectarian discrimination during the year. Shia community activists responded that they lacked confidence in the effectiveness of government institutions to address discrimination and therefore did not utilize them.

A January 26 ceremony in Rome recognized the European launch of the Kingdom of Bahrain Declaration, first formulated in 2017. The declaration calls on leaders, clerics, rulers, and citizens to “ensure that religious freedom and peaceful coexistence is a blessing to mankind and the foundation for peace in the world.” The declaration, according to Bahrain government statements, “reflects the King's vision to promote coexistence, peace, and tolerance and combat extremism and terrorism in the world.” The event in Rome, promoted by the King Hamad Center and the This is Bahrain organization, brought together more than 300 attendees from Bahrain, Italy, and elsewhere, in addition to more than 100 students involved with a program affiliated with the King Hamad Chair for Freedom of Religion and Peaceful Coexistence at Sapienza University in Rome.

In October, the King met with Pope Francis at the Vatican and discussed ways of promoting peaceful coexistence among religious groups. According to the Bahrain News Agency, the King said that Bahrain would remain a hub of coexistence for people of different faiths, promoting respect and freedom of religion.

In May, Bahrain held the first meeting of the Permanent Committee of the Muslim-Christian Dialogue between the Muslim Council of Elders and the Vatican. The committee was established in March between the Abu Dhabi-

based Muslim Council of Elders and the Vatican's Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue. The committee's establishment was the outcome of the Bahrain Forum for Dialogue: East and West for Human Coexistence, which was held in 2022, during Pope Francis' visit to Bahrain. Meeting participants said the committee aimed to coordinate efforts to promote coexistence and launch initiatives to foster interreligious and cultural dialogue among Muslims and Christians.

In March, the Bahraini Parliament hosted the 146th assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), a global organization of 143 parliaments. At the conclusion of the meeting, Speaker of the Council of Representatives Ahmad bin Salman al-Musalam said the IPU meeting supported the King's call to endorse an international convention to criminalize hate speech and contempt of religions. A declaration at the conclusion of the meeting cited what it described as the dangers of hatred and intolerance – including against marginalized national, ethnic, religious, and other groups – that could “also be expressed in the desecration of religious sites and symbols, actions that are deeply offensive to people of faith.” The IPU participants who attended the assembly in Manama pledged to use their legislative powers to criminalize acts of hate and violence linked to religion, belief, xenophobia, racism, and intolerance against marginalized groups, to speak out against intolerance and hatred, and encourage collaborative networks to foster dialogue and promote moderation and encourage “community and religious leaders to contribute to these goals.”

On March 14, Bahrain National Theater hosted the premiere of the documentary movie “Leap of Faith,” which featured Pope Francis's 2022 visit to the country and the Pope's advocacy of religious freedom. MOJIA Minister Nawaf bin Mohammed Al Maawda attended the event.

Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom

During the year, women's rights groups launched several campaigns urging authorities to amend articles in the family law, issued by the King in 2017, to expedite divorce proceedings for Shia women in Jaafari courts. In a sermon

delivered on September 29, a prominent Shia preacher reiterated Shia clerics' objection to any changes made to divorce procedures without Shia scholars' approval. Shia clerics and Shia political opposition figures consistently stated the original amendments issued were an attempt to interfere in Shia religious practices and emancipate Shia women. Shia women's rights groups campaigned to change the existing law, under which Shia women seeking divorce must obtain their husband's consent or otherwise repay the cost of their dowries and all their expenses paid by the husband during the marriage. The groups stated that Shia husbands often took advantage of legal ambiguities in determining these costs to demand unreasonable refund amounts.

The Kuwaiti Ministry of Interior stated that at the end of August, 30,000 Bahraini citizens crossed into Iraq through Kuwait to commemorate al-Arbaeen in Iraq, a Shia religious tradition. In 2022, there were reports that Shia had to obtain government approval or register their travel before attending al-Arbaeen ceremonies or traveling on certain other religious pilgrimages abroad.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Non-Muslim religious community leaders reported there was continuing societal pressure on individuals not to convert from Islam. Those who did so were unwilling to speak publicly or privately to family or associates about their conversions out of fear of harassment or discrimination.

Local observers reported local society continued to reject any forms of atheism.

Both anti-Shia and anti-Sunni commentary appeared in social media. Some anti-Shia posts described Shia critics of the government as "traitors" and "agents of Iran." Sunnis were often labeled as "the regime's apologists."

In a January 2 sermon, Shia cleric Mahmood al-A'ali warned against selling property to Jews. In a January 6 Friday sermon, Shia preacher Mohammed Sangoor stated that selling property to Jews was considered treason. This followed claims on social media of Jewish companies buying property in different areas of the country. In the same January 6 sermon, Sangoor condemned the Israeli National Security Minister's January 3 visit to the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem and said that it was part of "systematic provocations of Muslims." Sangoor also said in the sermon that Jews had had blood on their hands throughout history, and he criticized what he called their violations of rights, unfaithfulness, and contempt of other nations.

In their Friday sermons, on January 13, Shia scholars Abdulla al-Ghuraifi and Ali al-Sadadi warned against normalization with Israel. Al-Ghuraifi stated that "the Zionists are targeting the Muslim nation."

On January 1, the al-Wafa Islamic movement called for the boycott of Israeli businesses in the country. In a September 13 statement, al-Wafa urged its followers to identify Israeli businesses in Bahrain as well as local companies operating with Israel.

On March 10, Shia cleric Sheikh Abdulla al-Ghuraifi criticized "the hidden normalization motive" behind the Abraham Accords. He said, "The Abraham Accords' goal was not religious rapprochement [between Muslims and Jews] because the ultimate motive is normalization."

In a Friday sermon on March 31, Sheikh Ali al-Sadadi warned, while discussing the Abraham Accords agreement, against undermining the tenets of Islam. He said the term "Abrahamic Religion" was misleadingly used to suggest that "the foundational beliefs of Islam are problematic and need to be replaced by a new religion."

Following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel and Israel's military response in Gaza, anti-Israel and antisemitic demonstrations and rhetoric in sermons increased substantially, and newspapers continued to post

antisemitic cartoons. One cartoon depicted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as Adolf Hitler wearing a Nazi uniform with his right hand raised in a Nazi salute.

After October 7, there were weekly demonstrations against normalization in Shia-majority and other areas of the country. The Anti-Normalization Society, founded in 2001 by political activists with members from at least 15 civil society organizations and women's groups, expressed its opposition to the authorities' normalization with Israel, organizing several marches protesting normalization and calling for boycotting companies that supported Israel and pro-Israeli events.

Shia mosques and clerics continued to broadcast sermons on YouTube channels and social media platforms.

The Bahrain Foundation for Dialogue (BFD), an NGO working on civil discourse and interfaith dialogue that was established in 2012 following the CP/PM's guidance, conducted four social partnership and conflict resolution workshops funded with government grants. The workshops involved 120 participants, including Sunni and Shia MPs, civil servants, legal experts, journalists, politicians, members of civil society organizations, and academics. Participants collectively proposed solutions for resolving conflicts between religious communities and strategies for effectively managing religious institutions.

Minority religious groups continued to report a high degree of tolerance within society for them to freely express their beliefs and traditions, although not for conversion from Islam or for atheistic or secularist views. Traditions and symbols were widely and openly celebrated and displayed during major Christian, Jewish, and Hindu holidays, including in malls, restaurants, coffee shops, and hotels. The news media continued to provide coverage of non-Islamic religious holiday seasons and events, including Christmas, Hanukkah, and Hindu festivals such as Diwali, Onam, and Holi.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador, other senior U.S. government officials, and embassy representatives met with senior government officials, including CP/PM Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, Foreign Minister Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani, Minister of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments Al Maawda, and other cabinet officials, and at the MOSD, Ministry of Legal Affairs, and national human rights monitoring institutions to urge respect for freedom of religion and expression, including the right of clerics and other religious leaders to speak and write freely. The Ambassador and embassy officials regularly met with the newly appointed Chairman of the King Hamad Center, Shaikh Abdulla bin Ahmed Al Khalifa (who is also Undersecretary for Political Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and board members and others associated with the center. On July 27, the Ambassador observed processions and visited Shia maatams and art galleries during Ashura commemorations in Manama. In November, the Ambassador attended a Diwali Hindu celebration. Embassy officials encouraged continued government efforts to counter religious extremism and to ensure full inclusion of citizens of all faiths, including those of the Shia majority, in access to political, social, and economic opportunities. U.S. officials publicly and in private meetings advocated that the government pursue political reforms that take into consideration the needs of all citizens – regardless of existing or prior religious/political affiliation – by engaging civil society organizations in reconciliation dialogue, encouraging an impartial application process for government positions, and allowing individuals previously connected to religiously based opposition political groups to run for public office.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials met regularly with religious leaders, including from the Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Baha'i communities, as well as representatives of NGOs and political groups, to discuss freedom of religion and freedom of expression as it related to religious practices. Embassy representatives and U.S. government officials from Washington visited various houses of worship and attended religious events during the year, including observations of Ashura, Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, Christmas, Hannukah, 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 July 21, the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism met with Bahrain's Minister of Foreign Affairs in Washington. They discussed ways to promote religious tolerance and human coexistence, confronting extremism and hatred, spreading the culture of dialogue and pluralism, and supporting efforts aimed at spreading peace and security and ending conflicts in the region.

In October, the embassy hosted a discussion on antisemitism with local youth and university students; the students spoke positively of the presence of a Bahraini Jewish population and what the students described as the country's tradition of inclusion and respect for various religions.

The embassy regularly highlighted on social media high-level engagements with religious leaders and the embassy's participation in religious observances – for example, during Eid al-Fitr, Ashura, Diwali, and Ramadan – as part of its efforts to advance freedom of religion and belief.