



ASHURA IN BAHRAIN

Intimidation, Security
restrictions, and Media
Marginalisation

GDHR
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● Preamble

The revival of the Ashura by the Shi'a community in Bahrain is a devotional season, which has been observed for hundreds of years in Bahrain. It is part of the inherent religious rights and freedoms of everyone, which are guaranteed and recognised by international law. It is also an integral part of a Shi'a identity and beliefs.

The Kingdom of Bahrain has a population of no more than 1.5 million, the majority of which are foreign-born. Less than half of the population comprises of Bahraini nationals. Still, the majority of Bahrain's population are from the Shi'a sect of Islam. Despite the existence of constitutional and legal provisions that recognise the rights of the Shi'a community to freely practise religious rites and the obligations for the state to protect their processions, the Government of Bahrain (GoB) does not abide by these legal and constitutional responsibilities.

Bahrain does not differ from other nations in its practice of religious rites. However, the country deviates from governments that respect and protect the rights of their citizens residents to practising their religious rites. Every year, the Kingdom of Bahrain commits systematic violations that restrict and disrespect the Hussainiya (religious centres) rites of Shi'a Bahrainis. In more extreme cases, the GoB prevents or limits rites, as shown in this report.



● Official Restrictions on Shi'a expatriates During Ashura

On July 20, 2023, commenting on official policy related to Ashura, Bahraini Interior Minister Rashid bin Abdullah Al Khalifa announced during a meeting with the head of the Jaafari Endowments, that “Bahrain is not a religious tourist destination,” adding that this was the position of the GoB regarding Shi'a expatriates who wished to participate in Ashura ceremonies in Bahrain. In 2022, the Ministry of Interior deported visiting mourners, which included singers and carollers, who came to Bahrain specifically to participate in the Ashura ceremonies. Jaafari added in his position, “Bahrain does not need preachers and singers/carollers from abroad” despite the fact the GoB claims to pride itself on its religious tolerance, multiculturalism, and openness to foreign investment.



Attacks on Ashura Decorations



● Attacks on Ashura Outside the Capital

Our monitoring team logged several instances provocative practices against citizens participating in Ashura and other religious events, including:

- GoB and pro-government attacks on the Ashura decorations beginning in June, when a charity tent inscribed with “Love Al-Hussein (peace be upon him)” in the “Al-Kharijiyya” area of Sitra Island, were forcibly dismantled by workers from the Municipality of the Capital, and under the supervision of members of the security services, on June 12, 2023. On the following day, the remains of the charity tent were swept away with a bulldozer by the police.
- Banners raised for Ashura were removed in several areas: Al-Ghuraifa, Al-Markh, Abu Saiba, Barbar, Saar, Karana, Karzakan, Hamad Town - Fourth Circle, and A’ali.
- In A’alia, Ashura banners were removed on three separate occasions. The first two incidents took place on the 21st and 24th of July. However, area residents insisted on re-erecting them, and the police took them down for a third time on the 25th of July. This event prompted residents to protest and to insist on raising the banners yet again. Police officers photographed them while the banners were re-hung.
- In the Al-Qidam area, the Ministry of Interior ordered officials at the Sheikh Abdullah Mosque via phone call to remove the Ashura banners that were raised in the vicinity of the building.
- Security forces filmed Shi’a citizens while they were participated in the mourning councils in Al-Markh and Salmabad. They also monitored participants in the councils in Al-Maqsha and Hamad Town. The intimidating presence of security forces were prominent in the vicinity of obsequies in Abu Quwa (the obsequies of Imam Ali, peace be upon him), Al-Malikiyah (the obsequies of Imam Ali al-Ridha, peace be upon him), Al-Diraz (the obsequies of justice). These incidents were particularly numerous near Salmabad. Security forces were present in the vicinity of the obsequies on July 19th, and Shi’a participants were photographed during funeral gatherings on July 23rd. On July 25th, an armed group of security forces, led by officer Turki Al-Majed, threaten to ban the Ashura procession if the pictures of Sheikh Isa Qassim were not removed from the walls of the area. During the night, security forces removed Ashura banners.



Violation	Region	Date
The Ministry of the Interior obligated officials of the Sheikh Abdullah Mosque, in Al-Qidam, to remove Ashura banners raised in the vicinity of the mosque, through a phone call.	Al-Qidam	25/07/2023
A charity tent with “Love Al Hussain” faced forceful demolition by municipality workers.	Sitra- Alkharijiyya	12/06/2023
The charity tent of “Love Al Hussain” was bulldozed by the police.	Sitra- Alkharijiyya	13/06/2023
Ashura banners were removed	Al-Marakh	21/07/2023
	A’ali	21/07/2023
	Al-Ghuraifah	23/07/2023
	A’ali	24/07/2023
	Hamad City – 4 th Circle	24/07/2023
	Salmabad	25/07/2023
	Barbar	26/07/2023
	Sar	26/07/2023
	‘Abu Sbei	27/07/2023
	Karanah	27/07/2023
Karzkan	27/07/2023	
Ashura banners were re-removed after the police had initially taken them down the day before. This prompted residents to protest and to hang the banners a third time. Police officers filmed them re-hanging the banners.	A’ali	25/07/2023



Members of the security forces monitored an Ashura procession in a manner that participants claimed was intimidating and provocative.	Al-Diraz Justice obsequies	19/07/2023
	Salmabad	19/07/2023
	Abu Quwwa – Imam Ali obsequies	21/07/2023
	Al-Malikiyya – Imam Ali-Al-Ridha obsequies	27/07/2023
	Al-sanabis	29/07/2023
	Al-diyveh	30/07/2023
	A'ali	31/07/2023
Security forces filmed the citizens participating in a mourning procession.	Salmabad	23/07/2023
	Al-Marakh	25/07/2023
Security forces monitored citizens participating in an Ashura condolence gathering.	Hamad City – 17 th Circle	02/08/2023
	Al-Maqsha	27/07/2023
An armed contingent of security forces, led by officer Turki Al-Majed, threaten to ban an Ashura procession if the pictures of Sheikh Isa Qassim were not removed from the walls of the area.	Salmabad	25/07/2023

Legal comment: it is customary during Ashura for banners to be hung with religious phrases written upon them. This has long been accepted in Bahrain. Article 22 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bahrain states that “Freedom of conscience is absolute, and the state guarantees the sanctity of places of worship, and the freedom to perform religious rites, processions and religious meetings in accordance with the customs observed in the country.” Any assault on these manifestations is an explicit violation of the constitutional rule. Indeed, it is the duty of the state to protect these processions and hussainiyas, as made clear from this constitutional article.



● Police Summonses of Community Leaders

Sheikh Mahmoud Hassan Ali Habib Al-Aali and Mr. Ali Muhanna were summoned to police stations for their activities on the tenth day of Muharram, which is the most important Day of Ashura. Sheikh Al-Aali was summoned because of his participation with a group of religious scholars in trampling the Israeli flag underfoot during an Ashura march in Manama, while Mr. Ali Muhanna was summoned because of his participation in an Ashura march on the Day of Ashura.

Legal comment: The repeated summons of clerics and preachers from the Hussein pulpit, in an arbitrary and provocative manner that intimidates preachers and clerics is considered a form of police harassment as well as a restriction of freedom of speech, expression, assembly, and religion. Constitutional principles recognise freedom of conscience along with freedom of opinion and expression. The GoB has failed to adhere to these principles on a continuous and repeated basis.

● Four Arbitrary Arrests:

Four citizens were subjected to arbitrary detention for reasons related to holding Ashura rituals. They are:

- Muhammad Baqer Saeed Ashour, from Hamad Town. Arrested and detained for eight days for chanting “political” slogans prior to his participation in an Ashura mourning procession on July 24.
- Hussein Abdel-Zahraa and Mansour Abdel-Aziz, from A’ali. Arrested and detained for 24 hours because of their protest against the removal of Ashura banners in A’ali.
- Ali Hussein Al-Najjar, from Manama. Arrested and detained for four days for distributing water in the capital and cursing Yazid Ibn Muawiyah.



● Restriction on Religious Freedom in Jau Central Prison

Detainees in Jau Central Prison made artistic tools they planned to use for commemorating Ashura, such as hanging black bags. Prison administration confiscated all the tools made by the detainees on July 19, which prompted them to protest by refraining from entering their cells at end of the sunbathing period in the prison yard, and by hanging papers with written demands. Consequently, the prison administration made promises to return the tools, but never did so.

In addition, the prison administration restricted the number of participants in Ashura celebrations within each group. It did not allow a joint revival amongst all detainees and set limited number of detainees participating in each group. Such restrictions have become standard in Jau Central Prison, where the administration restricted detainees during Ashura every year.

Legal comment: Article 51 of Resolution No. 131 of 2015 regarding the executive regulations of the Correction and Rehabilitation Institution Law No. 18 of 2014 stipulates: “The inmate (prisoner/detainee) and one in pretrial detention has the right to perform his religious rituals on time, provided that this does not prejudice security and order.” The centre and its management must respect the religious practices of the inmates (prisoners/detainees) who follow monotheistic religions and enable them to perform their religious rites, all in accordance with the controls set by the institution.”

This is a clear text in the law and its executive regulations that this right is guaranteed and has a legal regulation for the prisoners’ exercise of their right to partake in Ashura ceremonies and others, and the prison administration’s failure to implement this regulation repeatedly gives it the character of systematic violations.



● Denying Official Media Coverage

Radio and Television (Radio and Television Corporation) is a public institution meant to serve all people in Bahrain and provides a general service to society. Its work is regulated by Decree-Law No. 1 of 1993 and its amendments. Article No. 2 of this Decree-Law states that “The Corporation (Radio and Television) aims to achieve the mission of broadcast media, audio and video, within the framework of the state’s general policy in accordance with the principles and requirements of modern science and its developments, in order to serve society and achieve its goals.

In Clause No. 1 of this article (2) working to achieve the objectives, including: “providing audio-visual broadcasting service, through the management and operation of Bahrain Radio and Television, within the framework of the authentic values and traditions of the people of Bahrain.” Paragraph No. 3 of the same article also states: “Planning and directing radio and television transmissions on national, social, religious, cultural and sports occasions, and introducing Bahrain news and its national achievements.”

These are clear legal texts that make the authority (Bahrain Radio and Television) obligated to cover and broadcast religious and cultural events for all citizens without discrimination. However, general monitoring of Bahrain Radio and Television has found that every year it ignored coverage of the Ashura season despite its importance and the size of ceremonies held by the Shi’a community.

This is a method of sectarian discrimination against the Shi’a community in Bahrain, where state owned media denies coverage to an event that observed by most of its citizenry.

● Denying Shi’a Advertisements on Public Streets:

Advertisements on public streets are regulated by Law No. 14 of 1973 and Resolution No. 2 of 1977, in the executive regulations of Law No. 14 of 1973 regulating advertisements. Article 3 of these regulations provides for the exception of the requirement to obtain a license for advertisements and installations that take place during public events, such as religious or national holidays or in sports, cultural or social festivals.



This means that advertisements for religious events are permissible and do not require a prior license from the Advertisement Licensing Committee of the Ministry of Works and Municipalities Affairs stipulated in Article 1 of this regulation.

Through general monitoring, Salam DHR found that advertising platforms in public streets include all religious and cultural events of sects and religions, except for the Shi'a community, which faces restrictions and denial of use for public platforms. Such advertisements have basically become a source of income for the state through fees paid to the Ministry of Municipalities.

For the Shi'a community, the Ministry of Works and Municipalities, in co-operation with the Ministry of the Interior, confiscated Hussein banners and flags that were installed and hung along public roads and lighting poles, as happened in e A'ali on July 21 and 24, during Ashura.

● Recommendations:

- The GoB must respect and protect human rights related to freedom of religion, expression of opinion, the right to participate in religious activities, and commitment to relevant international human rights standards.
- Bahraini authorities must stop restricting the freedom of travel and movement of expatriates to participate in the activities for Ashura season because of their religious beliefs or nationality.
- Authorities should abide by the principle of not arbitrarily detaining individuals for their participation in Ashura events or any other legitimate religious activity.
- The GoB must allow citizens to exercise their right to peaceful assembly and participation in religious events without unjustified security interference.
- Religious manifestations related to the Ashura season must be protected, and no encroachment or destruction of these manifestations should be permitted.
- Relevant legislation should be reviewed to ensure the protection of the rights to freedom of religion, belief, expression of opinion, and peaceful assembly.
- Media policies should be reviewed, and all religious communities should have guaranteed media coverage in official and government-supported media.



● Report summary:

As with every year, the Ashura in Bahrain receives its a share of practices that restrict religious freedoms, by attacking aspects of the celebration and intimidating organisers and participants in its activities. The most prominent example in 2023 in Ashura during this year was the position of the Bahraini Minister of Interior, who set clear restrictions for the occasion. Bahrain has been a religious destination for Shi'a Muslims, particularly from neighbouring countries, every year during the Ashura. The Minister of Interior met with the head of the Jaafari Endowments on the second day of Ashura this year to confirm that the GoB does not welcome foreign arrivals to commemorate the occasion of Ashura, which completely contradicts Bahrain's official position of religious plurality and tolerance, which was launched during the visit of the Pope of the Vatican and the Grand Mufti of Al-Azhar to Bahrain in November 2022, in which the GoB claimed that it is keen to uphold and respect religious freedoms.

In addition to the official position of the Minister of Interior, the Bahraini authorities arrested four citizens for several days; summoned Sheikh Mahmoud Hassan Ali Habib Al-Aali and Mr. Ali Muhanna and interrogated them because of their participation in Ashura activities. The authorities also attacked the Ashura manifestations in no less than 13 regions and carried out some acts of intimidation against the citizens participating in the events. In addition to restrictions on prisoners of conscience in prisons by confiscating the appropriate tools for reviving the occasion and not allowing them to hold Ashura councils, except with a limited number of detainees in each council.

Finally, several recommendations were made to protect human rights and promote tolerance and peaceful coexistence in Bahraini society to ensure respect for the religious rights of all citizens and residents.





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