

World
Watch
Research

Bahrain: Full Country Dossier

April 2024



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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Introduction

World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	35	34	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Bahrain

Brief country details

Bahrain: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
1,812,000	208,000	11.5

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Map of country



Bahrain: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	55	65
WWL 2023	55	66
WWL 2022	57	60
WWL 2021	56	60
WWL 2020	55	59

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Bahrain:	
Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Islamic oppression	Non-Christian religious leaders, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Government officials, Ethnic group leaders
Clan oppression	Ethnic group leaders, One's own (extended) family
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

A considerable number of expatriate Christians (mainly from South Asia) work and live in Bahrain and can practice their faith in private places of worship as long as they do not publicly proselytize Muslims or insult Islam. There is also a small number of indigenous Bahraini Christians. Local Shia converts face severe pressure from family and community to recant their Christian faith, leave the region or to be silent about their new faith. Converts from the dominant local Sunni community face significantly less hindrance. Especially Shia converts are alienated from their families as a result of their conversion. Expatriate Muslims converting to Christianity experience similar pressure as in their home countries, as they are often living within their own national or ethnic communities.

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- Converts from Islam to Christianity faced pressure from their families, local Islamic clerics and sometimes government officials. Several were physically and mentally abused.
- Migrant workers (including Christians) are vulnerable to mistreatment and abuse. However, migrants face a lack of access to legal protection and are often not aware of methods to report abuse. As a result, many incidents where Christian migrant workers are targeted most probably go unreported. In addition, victims feel vulnerable to possible retribution.

Specific examples of positive developments

- **November 2022:** Roman Catholic Pope Francis visited Bahrain for the Bahrain Dialogue Forum where he met with the Muslim Council of Elders ([Vatican News, 4 November 2022](#)). The Council is headed by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, with whom Pope Francis co-signed the Document on Human Fraternity in the adjacent United Arab Emirates in 2019. During the follow-up meeting in Bahrain, the Pope welcomed the Kingdom of Bahrain Declaration as a significant step forward (see below: *Religious landscape*), but also spoke out against the death penalty (which Bahrain still applies) ([Vatican, 4 November 2022](#); [Reuters, 3 November 2022](#)). Following the Forum in November 2022, the Permanent Committee for Islamic-Christian Dialogue was established, which met for the first time in Bahrain in May 2023 and consists of members of the Vatican and the Muslim Council of Elders ([Bahrain News Agency, 24 May 2023](#)).

Outside the WWL 2024 reporting period:

- **December 2021:** A new Roman Catholic cathedral was inaugurated in Awali, 20 kilometers south of the capital Manama. The 'Our Lady of Arabia' Cathedral is the largest in the Gulf and can seat 2,300 people. It will serve the 80,000 Catholics in the country ([The National, 10 December 2021](#)).
- **September 2020:** The government agreed to normalize relations with Israel in a deal (The Abraham Accords) brokered by the USA (despite protests by some Bahrainis). This move is generally viewed as being a step towards more openness and tolerance and away from Islamist influence.

External Links - Situation in brief

- Specific examples of positive developments: Vatican News, 4 November 2022 - <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-11/pope-francis-apostolic-journey-bahrain-prayer-fraternity.html>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Vatican, 4 November 2022 - <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/november/documents/20221104-forum-bahrain.html>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Reuters, 3 November 2022 - <https://www.reuters.com/world/bahrain-popes-message-may-get-caught-shiite-sunni-muslim-divide-2022-11-03/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Bahrain News Agency, 24 May 2023 - <https://www.bna.bh/en/BahrainhostsfirstmeetingofPermanentCommitteeforIslamicChristianDialogue.aspx?cms=q8FmFJgiscL2fwlzON1%2BDjk5VDrntIUotsBOwoWPiOM%3D>
- Specific examples of positive developments: The National, 10 December 2021 - <https://www.thenationalnews.com/gulf-news/bahrain/2021/12/10/gulfs-largest-roman-catholic-cathedral-opens-in-bahrain/>

WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Bahrain

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
BBC News Bahrain profile - updated 21 August 2023	BBC Bahrain profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14540571	12 September 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI Bahrain Report 2022	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/BHR	12 September 2023
Crisis24 Bahrain report (Garda World)	Crisis24 Bahrain report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/bahrain	12 September 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit 2023 Bahrain summary	EIU 2023 Bahrain summary	https://country.eiu.com/bahrain	12 September 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2023 Bahrain	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	12 September 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Bahrain not included	Democracy Index 2023	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 Bahrain	https://freedomhouse.org/country/bahrain/freedom-world/2023	12 September 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2023 Bahrain	https://freedomhouse.org/country/bahrain/freedom-net/2023	13 March 2024
Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries	GIWPS 2021 Bahrain	https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/bahrain/	12 September 2023
Girls Not Brides Bahrain report	Girls Not Brides country report	https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/bahrain/	12 September 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 - Bahrain country chapter	HRW 2023 Bahrain country chapter	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/bahrain	12 September 2023
International 2022/23 country report – covering 156 countries	AI Bahrain 2022	https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/bahrain/report-bahrain/	12 September 2022
Internet World Stats 2023 Bahrain	IWS 2023 Bahrain	https://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#bh	12 September 2023
Middle East Concern – covering 24 countries	MEC Bahrain profile	https://www.meconcern.org/countries/bahrain/	12 September 2023
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 Bahrain	https://rsf.org/en/bahrain	12 September 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2022 Bahrain	https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/bhr	12 September 2023
UNDP Human Development Report Bahrain - data updates as of 8 September 2022	UNDP HDR Bahrain	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/BHR	12 September 2023
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report Bahrain	IRFR 2022 Bahrain	https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bahrain/	12 September 2023
USCIRF 2023 country reports – covering 17 CPC / 11 SWL, Bahrain not included	USCIRF 2023	https://www.uscirf.gov/countries	12 September 2023
World Bank Bahrain data - 2021	World Bank Bahrain data	https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=BHR	12 September 2023
World Bank GCC overview - updated 13 February 2023	World Bank GCC overview	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/gcc/overview	12 September 2023
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook Bahrain - April 2023	Macro Poverty Outlook 2023 Bahrain	https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/65cf93926fdb3ea23b72f277fc249a72-0500042021/related/mpo-bhr.pdf	12 September 2023
World Factbook Bahrain - updated 29 August 2023	World Factbook Bahrain	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/bahrain/	12 September 2023

Recent history

Bahrain, a country where both Shiite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia exert significant influence, is ruled by an authoritarian regime. The current political landscape in the Middle East has been shaped by the Arab Spring which swept the region in 2010/2011. No other Gulf state was so severely hit by the uprisings as Bahrain. The 65% majority Shiite population has been discriminated against for a long time in the tiny island kingdom, led by the royal Sunni family of Khalifa. Shiites have less access to jobs and housing, less political rights and suffer from economic inequality and poverty. Inspired by the political unrest in the Middle East, these social frustrations grew into large demonstrations in February 2011. The government feared that Iran would use the demonstrations to extend its influence and dispersed all demonstrations violently, killing and wounding many. Other Gulf countries (all home to significant Shiite minorities) supported the Bahraini rulers by way of military intervention led by Saudi Arabia. Iran's action was limited to threatening rhetoric. More protests followed and continued even into 2013. The Bahraini government admitted using excessive violence and promised investigations into the abuse of prisoners, along with reforms and dialogue.

In February 2013, the National Dialogue between ruling and opposition groups was resumed after one-and-a-half years of deadlock, without any substantial result. However, when in 2013 moderate Crown Prince Salman was appointed deputy prime-minister (he became Prime Minister in November 2020), this was considered a positive development. Despite this, progress

failed to materialize. In contrast, due to heavy oppression by the government, "moderate voices among the Shi'a opposition have become weaker, while more radical forces, including ultra-conservative Sunnis, are on the rise" (BTI 2022 Bahrain, p.7). Further unrest, including minor bomb attacks, took place during 2017 and 2018, but did not form a major threat to the reign of the royal family. A July 2021 report found that the human rights situation further deteriorated over the last decade, with a marked rise in judicial executions and torture being 'endemic', confirming the oppressive nature of Bahrain's regime ([BIRD, 13 July 2021](#)). Hence, promises by the King for fundamental human rights reforms seem to have been hollow ([DAWN, 15 February 2022](#)). In August 2023, the lack of change resulted in the biggest prison hunger strike the country has ever seen, with more than 800 inmates, many of them political prisoners, joining the strike ([BIRD, 29 August 2023](#)). The strike was suspended following promises to improve prison conditions ([Reuters, 13 September 2023](#)).

Bahrain joined Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt in the [Qatari blockade](#) (2017-2021), cutting all ties and closing all borders with Qatar. The Bahraini government probably did not have a choice, as Saudi Arabia is its main protector (BBC News, 19 July 2017). The boycott did not have major consequences for Bahrain. Following the lifting of the blockade in 2021, Bahrain restored ties with Qatar in April 2023 ([Al-Monitor, 13 April 2023](#)).

In a surprising move, Bahrain joined the United Arab Emirates in signing the Abraham Accords with Israel (and the USA) in September 2020. Bahrain normalized its ties with Israel and business deals followed ([BBC News, 19 February 2021](#)). Some protests as well as online condemnation of the deal occurred, apparently mostly among the Shia community ([Times of Israel, 18 September 2020](#)). A 2022 survey found that the majority of Bahrainis oppose normalization with Israel, making it a potential issue for discontent between government and citizens, although it is unclear whether the ruling Sunni minority is as opposed to the Accords as the Shiite majority seems to be ([Washington Institute, 15 July 2022](#)). However, the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war and the subsequent invasion of Gaza in October 2023 put real strains on the relationship, with numerous public protests and even condemnation by the Bahraini parliament. Nonetheless, the government seems committed to the Abraham Accords ([Reuters, 24 November 2023](#)).

Bahrain responded swiftly to the COVID-19 pandemic, with its handling of the crisis being viewed as exemplary by the WHO ([The National News, 6 July 2022](#)). The crisis surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic affected Bahrain's economy significantly, particularly due to the lower oil prices on top of already weak macroeconomic conditions ([World Bank, Macro Poverty Outlook 2021](#)). The contact-tracing app used by the government to monitor the spread of the virus was criticized for its infringement on citizens' privacy and - as in many other countries in the world - there were fears that the government would use all collected data to increase its surveillance of the population ([BBC News, 16 June 2020](#)).

Political and legal landscape

Bahrain is a constitutional monarchy and became a kingdom only in 2002 when Sunni King Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa changed his title from emir to king. The rule of the Al-Khalifa family started when Sheikh Ahmed ibn Muhammed ibn Khalifa conquered Bahrain in 1783. In 1820, Bahrain became a British protectorate allowing the Khalifa's to continue their rule under British protection. In 1971, following Britain's withdrawal, the country declared its independence ([Britannica, accessed 12 February 2024](#)). The incumbent king has been in power since 1999 and holds the country under tight control. As a result, the Economist Intelligence Unit classifies the kingdom as 'authoritarian' in its 2022 Democracy Index (EIU 2022 Bahrain) and Freedom House rates the country as 'not free' in its Global Freedom Index 2023. The Sunni rulers continue to hold power over the majority Shia Muslim population. This has caused tension and clashes between protesters and the government. Human rights groups consider the country a hostile place for dissent, peaceful political protest and independent press.

The National Assembly is the legislative body and is bicameral, with the lower house (Council of Representatives) being elected and the upper house (Shura council) being appointed by the king. Legislation needs approval by both houses of parliament, while the cabinet is appointed by the king. Hence, despite promises for democratic rule when ascending to the throne, the king and the Al-Khalifa family hold a tight grip on all branches of government. Moreover, all prominent opposition groups and candidates have been prohibited from contesting in the elections for the lower house, effectively reducing voter impact to zero (Freedom in the World 2023 Bahrain). Latest elections were held in November 2022, which saw a record eight women being elected ([France24, 20 November 2022](#)).

According to BTI 2022 Bahrain:

- "Despite the easing of Bahrain's crackdown against the opposition, authorities continued to arrest, prosecute and sentence opposition figures and dissidents on dubious charges, and increasingly restricted freedom of expression. The execution of three men in 2019 and the widespread torture and abuse of suspects and prisoners during the review period illustrate that the regime persistently continued to pursue a hardline approach in dealing with dissent."

According to Human Rights Watch (HRW 2023 Bahrain country chapter):

- "Bahrain's 2022 parliamentary elections, held in November, were neither free nor fair. All members of previously dissolved political groups were barred from running in the elections. Authorities also have sought to restrict former opposition members from participating in civil society organizations. Independent media has been banned since 2017. Twenty-six Bahrainis remain on death row. At least eight of these men were convicted and sentenced following manifestly unfair trials based primarily, or in some instances solely, on coerced confessions. Prominent opposition figures and human rights defenders, including Abdulhadi al-Khawaja and Abdel-Jalil al-Singace, remained in prison without access to adequate medical care. Authorities failed to hold officials accountable for torture and ill-treatment in detention."

Fragile State Index indicators are stabilizing at quite a high level overall, but especially the indicator 'Group Grievances' scores exceptionally high due to Shia-Sunni tension and mean that the situation could easily lead to unrest (FSI 2023 Bahrain). The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU 2022 Bahrain summary) predicts: "The political scene will remain strained owing to simmering discontent with the Sunni ruling Al Khalifa royal family among the predominantly Shia population."

An example of ongoing government pressure on Bahraini society can be found in King Hamad's ratification of an amendment to the Constitution at the beginning of April 2017. It empowered military courts to bring civilians to trial if they were involved "in acts of terrorism or violent crimes". According to the government, this step was needed to fight terrorism, but the wording of the amendment is so vague, that it can be easily used against any perceived opposition (which could include Christians).

Gender perspective

The Bahraini legal landscape has long been restrictive towards women and girls. Whilst it acceded to the CEDAW Convention in 2002, it maintained a [reservation](#) to Article 16, which provides for the elimination of discrimination against women as they enter or exit a marriage (UNDP, 2019, "Bahrain: Gender Justice and the Law"). Under Article 26 of the Personal Status Code, women require the consent of a guardian before entering into marriage, and under Article 353 of the penal code perpetrators of rape are exempted from prosecution if they marry their victims (Bahrain's parliament proposed a full repeal of that article in 2016, but this was rejected by the cabinet). Only [20%](#) of seats in national parliament were held by women in 2022 (World Bank, Gender Data Portal, accessed 12 September 2023). This, however, is about 3% higher than the average proportion of national seats held by women in the Middle East and North African region.

Bahrain's family laws further discriminate against women in relation to divorce, inheritance and custody rights (HRW 2023 Bahrain country chapter). Article 334 of the penal code is a particular cause for concern since it reduces the penalties for perpetrators of so-called 'honor crimes'. Representing more positive developments, in 2015 Bahrain introduced domestic violence legislation (Law on the Protection Against Domestic Violence), and in 2018 Bahrain amended its labor law to ban discrimination and harassment in the workplace on the basis of sex (Gulf Business, 10 December 2018).

Religious landscape

Bahrain: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	208,000	11.5
Muslim	1,481,000	81.7
Hindu	105,000	5.8
Buddhist	3,900	0.2
Ethno-religionist	470	0.0
Jewish	54	0.0
Bahai	4,600	0.3
Atheist	590	0.0
Agnostic	7,700	0.4
Other	410	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Bahrain has a population of close to 1.8 million, of which only half are national citizens (most of whom are Shiites). The rest of the population consists of migrant workers, of which a considerable number (about 25%) are Christian. The majority of migrant workers come from South Asia and the Philippines.

The Constitution affirms the principle of non-discrimination (also on the basis of religion), and guarantees the ‘inviolability of worship’, including freedom to perform religious rites provided these are in accordance with national customs. Public defamation of an officially recognized religious group or of their practices is a criminal offence. Churches must be registered with the Ministry of Social Development and, in practice, there is relative freedom for both indigenous and expatriate Christians to practice their faith as long as they refrain from activities involving evangelism. The indigenous Christian community is well respected and some of them have held government positions. Churches are typically overcrowded and new plots of land have been allocated for building new churches: In October 2016 the king [donated land](#) for the construction of a second Coptic church (Agenzia Fides, 13 October 2016). In July 2018, the building of a new Roman Catholic church complex outside the capital Manama was [announced](#); the church, the largest Catholic cathedral in the Gulf region, was inaugurated on 9 December 2021 ([Bahrain Cathedral, 9 December 2021](#)). However, for the most part, receiving permission to build new or to expand existing churches remains difficult to obtain (MEC Bahrain profile). As a result, recognized churches often function as umbrella organizations for many different denominations, with various church congregations using the same building. They are not permitted to advertize their services in Arabic, but they can in English.

In September 2017, King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa released "the Kingdom of Bahrain declaration" which highlighted religious pluralism and unequivocally rejected compelled religion, while emphasizing the freedom of choice in religious matters. Also in 2017, the King Hamad [Center for Global Peaceful Coexistence](#) was set up to promote interfaith dialogue and religious diversity. The center regularly organizes interfaith activities and roundtable meetings on religious freedom (News of Bahrain, 15 September 2017).

According to the [2020 Freedom of Thought Report](#) (Humanists International, 7 August 2020):

- The Constitution does not fully guarantee the Freedom of Religion and Belief, but "it does make some provision for the freedom of conscience, the inviolability of places of worship, and the freedom to perform religious rites and hold religious parades and meetings, in accordance with the customs observed in the country. However, the Constitution also states that Islam is the official religion and that the principles of Islamic law are a main source for legislation."

Economic landscape

According to the World Factbook Bahrain and World Bank Bahrain data:

- **GDP per capita (PPP):** \$49,400 (2021 est.)
- **Unemployment:** 1.9% (2021 est.), with youth unemployment at 9.9% (2021).
- **Percentage of population below national poverty line:** No data available, but probably low among Bahraini citizens.

According to the World Bank's Macro Poverty Outlook 2023 Bahrain:

- **General situation:** "Bahrain's economy is the most diversified in the GCC region with strengths in heavy industry (including the world's largest aluminum smelter), financial services, manufacturing, retail business, and tourism. As such, the non-oil sector dominated, at over 85 percent of GDP (2021). Renewed fiscal reform momentum under the revised Fiscal Balance Program (FBP) announced in October 2021 and high hydrocarbon prices are mitigating Bahrain's fiscal and external vulnerabilities."
- **Economic growth:** "Growth is projected to moderate around 3.1 percent in 2023 before averaging 2.8 percent during 2024-25 as fiscal adjustments continue. Growth in the hydrocarbon sector is expected to slow down to 0.1 percent in 2023 while the non-hydrocarbon sectors will continue expanding (by 4.3 percent) supported by the recovery in the tourism and service sectors and the continuation of infrastructure projects."
- **Inflation:** Inflation is anticipated to hover around 2.8 percent in 2023 to reflect softening global commodity prices, tighter monetary conditions, and the dissipating impact of doubling the VAT rate."
- **Outlook:** "Bahrain's economic outlook hangs on oil market prospects and accelerated implementation of structural reforms agenda under the revised FBP. ... Declining oil prices, rising global interest rates, and higher cost burden of debt are projected to widen the fiscal balance deficit to 4.5 and 5.2 percent of GDP in 2023 and 2024, respectively. This will in turn keep the debt and financing needs elevated in the absence of sufficient fiscal adjust-

ment. High hydrocarbon prices are estimated to support maintaining the current accounts in surplus throughout 2023-24, albeit moderating in 2025, as oil prices follow a projected decline. The comfortable external position will boost foreign reserves and strengthens resilience against future external shocks."

Other sources report:

- The World Bank's [World by Income and Region report](#) (accessed 12 February 2024) puts the Bahraini economy in the high income category .
- The Fragile State Index (FSI 2023 Bahrain) shows slight improvement in the economic indicators on average following initial decline during the COVID-19 pandemic. The 'Economy' indicator shows further improvement, but 'Social Inequality' increased strongly, probably showing that government support during the pandemic only reached part of society. 'Human Flight and Brain Drain' remained low.
- The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU 2023 Bahrain summary) writes: "The expansion of the Sitra oil refinery will support GDP growth, and keep the fiscal deficit relatively low throughout the forecast period, despite falling oil prices. The current account will move back into a small deficit. Public debt will average more than 100% of GDP in 2023-27, burdening the public purse as interest rates rise."

Bahrain was the first Gulf country to produce oil, but is now faced with dwindling oil reserves. This has prompted the government to start a program of economic diversification. Bahrain has become a banking and financial services center and its economy is less dependent on oil than that of most other Gulf States. Bahrain is now placing a particular focus on Information technology, health care and education.

According to BTI Bahrain Report 2022, p.22:

- "The COVID-19 crisis and its economic repercussions unequivocally illustrated Bahrain's exceptionally high and structural vulnerability to external shocks. The temporary but sharp decline in oil prices in early 2020 seriously affected Bahrain's fiscal stability. However, due to the country's geopolitical importance for its GCC allies and Western partners, the government quickly attracted external support that mitigated fiscal repercussions of the pandemic, in particular related to the substantial drop in foreign reserves. ... Prior to the pandemic, Bahrain's deficit had been rising consistently. The deficit reached an all-time high of \$2.4 billion in 2018, following a shortfall of \$1.6 billion in 2017, but shrunk back to \$794 million in 2019 with the help of financial aid provided by Bahrain's GCC allies."

The country is still dependent on financial assistance from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partners and received a 10 billion USD bailout by GCC members in 2018. New-found oil and gas fields offer hope for the future. However, no investor has been found to develop the unconventional, offshore oilfield since the announcement of its discovery in 2018. The developing costs might be too great, even if oil prices were to remain high ([S&P Global, 16 May 2022](#)).

Thousands of expatriate Christians have found employment in Bahrain. Christians are generally treated respectfully. However, labor abuses persist, with Bahrain continuing to enforce the

kafala system. This especially affects domestic workers, who are excluded from protections in the labor law such as weekly rest days, minimum wages and limited working hours (HRW 2023 Bahrain country chapter). Combined with racism, this especially affects Christians from Asian and African countries working in low-paid jobs.

Gender perspective

Women and girls remain economically disadvantaged compared to men, primarily due to patrilineal inheritance laws and reduced employment opportunities. The female labor force participation rate was 44.3% in 2022, compared to 86.6% for men. On a positive note, girls have good access to education, reflected by a female literacy rate of 90.7%, and the female labor force participation rate is steadily rising ([World Bank, Gender Data Portal, accessed 12 September 2023](#)).

Social and cultural landscape

According to the World Factbook Bahrain:

- **Main ethnic groups:** The majority of the Bahraini citizens are from Arab descent. A wide variety of ethnicities can be found among the wider (expatriate) population, including Asians (45.5%), non-Bahraini Arabs (4.7%) and many others.
- **Main languages:** The official language is Arabic, with English being widely spoken as well. Other languages include Farsi (among the Shiites) and Urdu.
- **Urban population:** In 2023, 89.9% of the population lived in urban areas, with the urbanization rate standing at 1,99%.
- **Literacy rate:** 97.5% of the population can read and write; with more men (99,9%) than women (94,9%) being able to read and write.
- **Education:** On average, Bahrainis are expected to have 16 years of schooling, with women enjoying 17 years and men 16 years of schooling on average (2019).
- **Population/age:** The total population is around 1.55 million, with immigrants making up 45% of the total population (2019 est.). The younger generation - up to 24 years of age - makes up 33% of the population.
- **Life expectancy:** 80.1 years on average; women (82.5 years), men (77.9 years).

According to the UNDP HDR Bahrain:

- **HDI score and ranking:** Bahrain ranks #35 out 191 countries. The combined ratio of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a very high score of 0.875 on the Human Development Index (HDI).
- **Gender inequality:** With a GDI (Gender Development Index) score of 0.927, women are slightly disadvantaged in comparison to men. The GDI measures the differences in life expectancy, years of education and GNI per capita per gender.

Bahrain is a conservative Muslim country, despite the pluriform population and a modern economy. Ethnic strife and conflict between the majority Shiites and the ruling Sunnis continue to simmer under the surface and there is considerable social injustice towards the rights and freedoms of migrants living in the country. Although not primarily faith-related, it is very likely that many Christian expatriates experience (sexual) abuse, especially female domestic workers.

The treatment of Christians in Bahrain is not so much based on their faith, as on their skin color and ethnic background. Western (white) Christian expatriates are far less likely to experience harassment than African or Asian Christian expatriates. The latter can also face discrimination and mistreatment from their fellow (Muslim) expatriates. In addition, high-skilled workers will face less difficulties than low-skilled ones. Hence, a low-skilled Christian migrant from an African or Asian background will be most vulnerable in Bahrain.

In general, conversion from Islam to Christianity will be seen as betrayal by the Bahrainis and can lead to high levels of family and societal pressure, especially among the Shia community. The pressure on expatriate converts from a Muslim background will be comparable to the norms in their home countries, as many expatriates live together in migrant camps or in the same areas (which explains why expatriate children often go to schools belonging to their own community group).

Gender perspective

Women continue to be seen in traditional roles, although women have increasingly been allowed to participate in public life. For instance, a Bahraini Christian, Alice Samaan, was appointed ambassador to the UK for the period 2010-2015 (Gulf News, 30 December 2010). Noted as a regressive step by [Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index \(2019/20, p.39\)](#) however, a directive was introduced stating that women could only leave the house with their husband's permission. An ongoing threat for women is the risk of domestic abuse and gender-based violence. Despite the introduction of the Law on the Protection Against Domestic Violence in 2015, victims of violence rarely report crimes for fear of social reprisals. Unlike other countries in the region, however, domestic violence is not believed to have risen during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the authorities did not impose a complete lockdown ([Wilson Centre, 10 June 2020](#)). Bahrain's nationality law, which prevents Bahraini women from passing their nationality to their children, has led to the government restricting access to public healthcare for families with stateless children (AI Bahrain 2022). Since April 2022, government health clinics have implemented a policy requiring these families to apply for free public health treatment each time they seek medical services.

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2023 Bahrain):

- **Internet usage:** 97.4% penetration - survey date: January 2022
- **Facebook usage:** 88.5% penetration - survey date: January 2022

According to the World Bank Bahrain data:

- **Mobile phones:** 131.4 per 100 subscribers

Bahrain is one of a handful of countries where nearly all (99.8%) women report having a mobile cellphone (GIWPS 2021 Bahrain).

Technologically, Bahrain is advanced with high levels of Internet access and modern ICT infrastructure. However media, including the Internet, is monitored.

BTI Bahrain Report 2022 reports: (p.11):

- "The government systematically uses vaguely worded legislation to restrict and crack down on the freedom of speech and freedom of the press, monitors online content, and prosecutes people for criticizing authorities. The Press Law allows the state to prosecute anyone who criticizes or insults the king or threatens national security. ... [S]ince 2019, authorities have increasingly widened online surveillance and the prosecution of free speech in social media."

Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report rates Bahrain as 'not free':

- "Internet freedom in Bahrain remains restricted. Authorities frequently block websites and force the removal of online content, particularly social media posts criticizing the government. While social media remains a key space for activism and dissent, self-censorship is high due to the fear of online surveillance and intimidation from authorities. Journalists and activists who work online continue to face criminal penalties, extralegal harassment, and invasive surveillance by the state."

According to Reporters without Borders (World Press Freedom 2023 Bahrain):

- Bahrain is ranked at position #171 out of 180 countries
- "Ruled with an iron fist by the royal family, Bahrain is notorious for imprisoning many journalists. ... Freedom of expression does not exist in Bahrain. The situation worsened during the 2011 pro-democracy protests. The government reduced the space available for independent journalism, and the media became a mouthpiece for the royal family and its supporters. ... Several Bahraini journalists who have criticized the government on the internet from abroad have been accused of "cybercrimes". ... After being charged with participating in protests or supporting terrorism, professional and citizen journalists have been sentenced to long terms – sometimes for life – in prison, where they are mistreated. Some have had their citizenship revoked. Since 2016, Bahraini journalists working for international media outlets have encountered difficulties in renewing their accreditation."

Like all residents of Bahrain, Christians also have to be careful in their online communication. They can, in general, share expressions of faith as long as it is not critical of or contradicting Islamic beliefs.

Security situation

Bahrain – which literally means 'two seas' – hosts the most important American military presence in the Middle East. The US Navy's Fifth Fleet is located on a sectarian fault line where Shiite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia vie for dominance. Since 2016, the British Royal Navy also opened a base in Bahrain. The archipelago of 33 islands is also mentioned by observers as being a potential military target for Iran in the event of conflict.

Christians in Bahrain are generally safe. Crime rates are low and it is unlikely that Christians will be specifically targeted. If violence takes place, it is often on the sectarian fault line between Shiites and Sunnis.

Unlike neighboring Gulf countries, Bahrain has no major military involvement in any (international) conflict.

Trends analysis

1) Both Iran and Saudi Arabia seek to influence politics in the country

Bahrain is very prone to changes in regional politics and both Iran and Saudi Arabia seek to influence the politics of the country. Hosting a large US Navy presence forms a strong protection on the one hand, but it also puts Bahrain at risk if tensions between the USA and Saudi Arabia and Iran were to boil over.

2) The Shia majority is seen as a potential threat to the government

The key ongoing internal issue is the oppression of political opposition and other groups considered dissident. The oppressed Shia majority is seen as an internal threat which could be influenced by Iran, making Bahrain potentially vulnerable to intensified internal instability or to unpredictable regional currents. For now, the royal family from the minority Sunni group seems to have consolidated its power with the help of Saudi Arabia. However, a vicious circle has developed in which strong oppression leads to increasing radicalization and vice versa. Hence, the Sunni-Shia tensions could be a ticking time-bomb, endangering the stability of Bahrain, which would likely have an adverse effect on the Christian presence, if unrest were to break out. At the moment, however, the government is more interested in dealing with Shia dissidents than in restricting Christian church activities.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: BIRD, 13 July 2021 - <https://birdbh.org/2021/07/bird-reprieve-report-exposes-escalation-in-bahrains-use-of-the-death-penalty-and-torture-since-the-arab-spring-targeting-pro-democracy-protectors/>
- Recent history: DAWN, 15 February 2022 - <https://dawnmena.org/11-years-after-bahrains-uprising-impunity-still-reigns/>
- Recent history: BIRD, 29 August 2023 - <https://birdbh.org/2023/08/bahrains-largest-ever-hunger-strike-continues-for-23-days/>
- Recent history: Reuters, 13 September 2023 - <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/bahrain-prisoners-suspend-hunger-strike-crown-prince-heads-washington-2023-09-13/>
- Recent history: Qatari blockade - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-40173757>
- Recent history: Al-Monitor, 13 April 2023 - <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/04/us-welcomes-bahrain-qatar-deal-restore-relations>
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- Recent history: BBC News, 16 June 2020 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-53052395>

- Political and legal landscape: Britannica, accessed 12 February 2024 - <https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Bahrain>
- Political and legal landscape: France24, 20 November 2022 - <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20221120-bahrain-elects-more-women-in-parliament-vote-without-opposition>
- Political and legal landscape: reservation - <https://arabstates.unfpa.org/en/publications/gender-justice-law-bahrain>
- Political and legal landscape: 20% - <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/countries/bahrain>
- Religious landscape description: donated land - http://www.fides.org/en/news/60961-ASIA_BAHRAIN_The_King_of_Bahrain_donates_land_for_the_construction_of_a_new_Coptic_church#.WXnfAn-WwkE
- Religious landscape description: announced - <http://asianews.it/news-en/Bahrain%E2%80%99s-Our-Lady-Cathedral-to-become-the-heart-of-the-Catholic-community-in-Arabia-44433.html>
- Religious landscape description: Bahrain Cathedral, 9 December 2021 - <http://bahraincathedral.org/?p=2526>
- Religious landscape description: Center for Global Peaceful Coexistence - <https://www.newsofbahrain.com/epaper/15-09-2017/single/page-01.pdf>
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WWL 2024: Church information / Bahrain

Christian origins

According to ancient [church traditions](#), it was the Apostle Bartholomew who brought Christianity to Arabia (WRMEA, March 2000). Many believe that the reference to 'Arabs' in the New Testament (Book of Acts 2:11) may point to substantial growth in eastern regions within the early stages of the church.

By the mid-3rd century, a Christian bishopric was established in the Bahrain Islands; during the 4th century the number of Christians began to increase significantly. This may have been due to the persecution of Christians in Persia that began with the reign of Shahpur in 339 AD. Bahrain was an attractive safe haven, as it played an important role in the region's pearl trade. Those who brought Christianity to Bahrain were Nestorians, the branch of Christianity that flourished in southern Iraq and Persia.

Foundations of a monastery from the 4th century have been found in the coastal village of Samaheej. Another monastery may have existed in a village called al-Dair, as that is the Aramaic word for 'monastery'. Nestorian records show a consistent Christian presence in the region between the 5th and 7th centuries, as evidenced by the regular attendance of Bahraini bishops at synods. For example, the records from the Council of Nicea (325 AD) include mention of Arab bishops who were present. When the Arab armies conquered Bahrain in 633 AD (paving the way

for the introduction of Islam), Bahrain had two bishops. This suggests that many on the islands had adopted the Christian faith. The two bishoprics survived until 835 AD.

By the end of the 19th century, Great Britain made Bahrain into a protectorate. This made it possible for Christianity to return to Bahrain, initially through the mission work of the Arabian Mission of Samuel Zwemer. His founding of the American Mission Hospital in 1903 is still appreciated by both government and society today.

Oil was discovered in the 1930s and the resulting economic growth, especially after the oil boom of 1973, resulted in a great influx of foreign workers from around 1950 onwards. Thousands of expatriate Christians came to Bahrain and a flourishing and very diverse Christian community came into existence.

Theologian Dr Hrayr Jebejian writes:

- "St. Christopher's Anglican Cathedral, founded in 1953, for example, hosts more than 40 different language and ethnic groups. Other examples are the National Evangelical Church, which in 1906 became the first church to hold public services in Bahrain, and the Sacred Heart Catholic Church, built in 1940, which is considered to be the principal worship center in Manama. It is the biggest church in the country and serves around 140,000 people, mainly Indians, Filipinos, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Sri Lankans."

(Source: Jebejian, H: The Gulf - Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, in: Edinburgh Companion to Global Christianity, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, pp. 177-189).

At present, an estimated 11.5% of the total population of Bahrain is Christian (WCD 2023); almost all of those are expatriate workers. But Christianity in Bahrain has historical roots since Bahrain (unlike other Gulf countries - with the exception of Kuwait) also has an indigenous Christian community of around 500-1000 people. This makes Bahrain the only GCC country besides Kuwait to have a local Christian population who hold citizenship, according to [Al-Arabiya](#) (Al-Arabiya News, 27 December 2016).

Concluding with the words of Hrayr Jebejian: "From the fourth century onwards, Christianity flourished in the Gulf, and even when it did not flourish but only survived, it remained a spiritual and cultural force in the Gulf, right up to the present day." *(Source: Jebejian, see above)*

Church spectrum today

Bahrain: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	7,300	3.5
Catholic	171,000	82.2
Protestant	13,700	6.6
Independent	15,900	7.6
Unaffiliated	0	0.0
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	207,900	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	4,300	2.1
Renewalist movement	48,000	23.1

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

There is a small number of indigenous Bahraini Christians, who are the descendants of Arab Christians who migrated to Bahrain before it became an independent nation state. The presence of foreign Christians in modern-day Bahrain goes back to the Arabian Mission, which opened a bookshop in the country in 1893 and a hospital in 1903. The [American Mission Hospital](#) (AMH, accessed 12 February 2024) is still functioning today.

The National Evangelical Church consists of seven congregations ([ELCNEC Bahrain, accessed 12 February 2024](#)). A number of other churches serve the expatriate Christian communities, including Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Mar Thoma, Coptic Orthodox and Anglican churches (MEC country profile).

WCD estimates show that over two hundred thousand Christians are resident in the country today. As a result of the crisis surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of expatriates lost employment and had to leave the country, including many Christians. However, despite plans to nationalize the workforce, it is likely that the expatriate Christian community will remain present for the foreseeable future.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Bahrain is a very small country with the capital city, Manama, being the center of activity. Bahraini converts primarily face the highest risks from family members as ties are strong and pressure to conform is great. However, the risks which converts from Islam to Christianity face from their community vary; opposition is stronger in Shia communities than in Sunni communities. Some communities are known to be strict, while others are known to be more moderate.

Converts from an expatriate background often face similar pressure as in their home countries, as they are often living in compounds together with fellow compatriots.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Of the four WWL categories of Christianity, three types exist in Bahrain:

Communities of expatriate Christians: The majority of expatriate Christians are workers from Southeast Asia (e.g. from the Philippines), Africa and Western countries. They belong mainly to Roman Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox congregations. Western Christian expatriates are most often free to practice their beliefs, as long as they refrain from proselytizing. Non-Western Christians like the Filipinos are more likely to face discrimination and abuse, especially female domestic workers. It is a matter of debate how much their non-Muslim faith adds to their vulnerability to abuse.

Historical Christian communities: Bahrain has a small group of indigenous Bahraini Christians, descendants of Arab Christian clans from an area which covers Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

Converts to Christianity: In Bahrain, Christians with a Muslim background are under considerably more pressure than the expatriate communities are. Traditionally, society is intolerant towards conversion and converts have to be careful not to talk about their new faith openly. Pressure comes mostly from family and community, and to a lesser extent from the state.

Non-traditional Christian communities: There are no non-traditional Christian communities in Bahrain except those involving expatriates.

External Links - Church information

- Christian origins: church traditions - <https://www.wrmea.org/000-march/hristianity-in-the-gulf.html>
- Christian origins: Al-Arabiya - <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2016/12/27/An-inside-look-at-a-Gulf-Christian-community.html>
- Church spectrum today - additional information: American Mission Hospital - <https://www.amh.org.bh/>
- Church spectrum today - additional information: ELCNEC Bahrain, accessed 12 February 2024 - <https://elcnecbahrain.org/about-us.html>

WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Bahrain

Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

Position on the World Watch List

Bahrain: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	55	65
WWL 2023	55	66
WWL 2022	57	60
WWL 2021	56	60
WWL 2020	55	59

The overall score remained unchanged in WWL 2024. Pressure rose in the *National sphere of life* but fell in all other spheres. Violence rose from 0.9 points to 1.1 points due mainly to there being more physical attacks than in WWL 2023. Especially Shia converts to the Christian faith face significant pressure from family and community to recant their Christian faith, leave the region or to be silent about their new faith.

Persecution engines

Bahrain: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Medium
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Medium
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Medium
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Islamic oppression (Medium)

Islamic oppression in Bahrain should be seen in line with what is happening in the whole region, where there are many sources of tension and conflict. This causes both government and society to be vigilant, suspicious of new influences and therefore conservative. The legal framework is also a manifestation of this conservative Islamic view. The Constitution provides for freedom of conscience, the inviolability of places of worship, the freedom to perform religious rites, and the freedom to hold religious parades and religious gatherings as long as they are “in accordance with the customs observed in the country”. Given the fact that the Constitution also declares that the state religion is Islam and that Sharia (Islamic law) is the principal source for legislation, it actually means that freedom of religion is limited. The situation is therefore similar to that of other Gulf countries: Christians are free to practice their belief as long as they do it privately.

Islamic oppression is most keenly felt by converts as their families will put pressure on them to recant their faith and return to Islam. This pressure is not only exerted because of religious reasons, but is clearly mixed with tribal values (see below).

Clan oppression (Medium)

Tribalism still plays a major role in Bahraini society. Despite the incorporation of modern technology and architecture, age-old norms and values continue to be enforced. This tribalism is clearly mixed with Islam and especially affects converts. As in the rest of the Middle East, religion is connected to family identity. Therefore, leaving Islam is interpreted as betraying one’s family. In general, families put social pressure on converts to make them return to Islam, leave the region or to be silent about their new faith. In many cases, converts are alienated from their families as a result of their conversion.

Dictatorial paranoia (Medium)

The government endeavors to stay in power at all costs. A Sunni-family is ruling a Shiite majority with the help of Saudi Arabia and other Sunni majority countries in the region. Freedom of assembly, freedom of association, due process or law and other fundamental rights are constantly violated by the government.

Drivers of persecution

Bahrain: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	MEDIUM			MEDIUM				MEDIUM	
Government officials	Medium							Medium	
Ethnic group leaders	Medium			Medium					
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong								
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Medium								
One's own (extended) family	Strong			Medium					

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Islamic oppression

- **One's own (extended) family (Strong):** Family hostility is often rooted in both *Islamic oppression* and *Clan oppression*, with conversion from Islam to Christianity being seen as both a betrayal of Islam and family. Family hostility and the fear of provoking violent reactions is the main form of pressure faced by Bahraini converts.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** Although the Bahraini government regularly monitors preaching in mosques to check for any statements inciting violence, Muslim religious leaders keep society conservative and encourage family and society to take action against converts. This seems to be particularly true for Shia religious leaders.
- **Government officials (Medium):** The government can easily expel expatriate Christians, which forces them into self-restraint since opposing the government or infringing “fundamental beliefs of Islamic doctrine” is forbidden, as [Article 23](#) of the Constitution states. Churches have to be careful therefore when it comes to proselytizing activities and cannot criticize the government or Islam. In the case of converts from Islam to Christianity, the government also sometimes puts pressure on converts by detaining them for a short period to quell public unrest and to pressurize the convert into recanting their faith.
- **Ethnic group leaders (Medium):** In addition to protecting the honor of the family, tribal leaders will try to uphold Islam and Islamic norms, which are closely linked to the Bahraini family identity. They will put pressure on a convert to recant his or her new faith.
- **Citizens (Medium):** The conservative nature of Islamic society in Bahrain is causing most of the pressure experienced by Christians, especially converts. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is socially totally unacceptable. Additionally - although mixed with racial bias - poor and low-skilled Christian workers from South East Asia and Africa can face discrimination and abuse from their employers and other citizens. Especially foreign workers who convert from Islam to Christianity face persecution from their employers and peer workers.

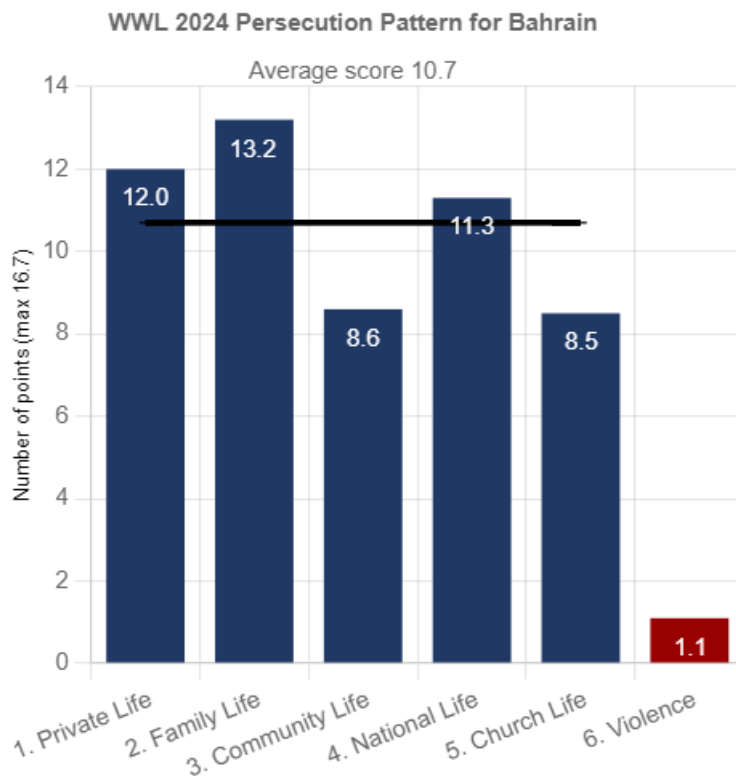
Drivers of Clan oppression

- **One's own (extended) family (Medium):** Bahraini families will try to protect the honor of the family. Converts face the risk of being ostracized by their families and might even be killed for shaming their families.
- **Ethnic group leaders (Medium):** Tribal leaders, often the eldest sons of their families, have a duty to protect the (extended) family and look after the well being, as well as the family honor of the whole group. They see it as their duty to put pressure on a convert to recant Christianity or to pressurize the family into taking action against an apostate family member. In the case of converts from expatriate communities, community leaders might apply pressure in line with the cultural norms of the home country.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- **Government officials (Medium):** The Bahraini government is oppressive, especially against the Shia majority. As [Human Rights Watch](#) put it (in its Bahrain country summary, accessed February 2024): “Independent media has been banned since 2017. ... Authorities have arrested, prosecuted, and harassed rights defenders, journalists, and opposition leaders, including for their social media activity. Bahrain continues to deny access to independent rights monitors and the UN special rapporteur on torture.” It goes without saying that Christians have to be careful in such an environment, especially if making statements which could be understood as criticism of the ruling elite.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for Bahrain shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a high level (10.7 points), decreasing from 10.8 points in WWL 2023.
- Although all *spheres of life* show high or very high levels of pressure, pressure is highest in the *Family* and *Private spheres*. This reflects the difficult situation experienced by converts in daily life as they face very high pressure from their (extended) family.
- The score for violence increased very slightly from 0.9 points in WWL 2023 to 1.1 in WWL 2024. It is probable that there were a number of unreported incidents occurring.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2024 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (3.25 points)

Expatriate Christians can share their beliefs on social media, as long as their comments do not contradict Islamic principles. Criticizing Islam is not possible and could lead to deportation. Converts from Islam to Christianity have to be very careful, as it could reveal their new faith or lead to an increase in repercussions.

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.25 points)

Expatriate Christians have to be careful that any discussions about their faith with (Bahraini) Muslims are not viewed as an attempt to proselytize, which is socially unacceptable. Converts face the biggest risk, as they are often pressured into keeping a low profile. Hence, discussing their faith with others can lead to extra pressure, including arrest and detention (probably on charges related to public order or security). However, growing tolerance among some groups for different religious views mitigates risks to some extent.

Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.00 points)

The Constitution imposes no restriction on the right to choose, change or practice one’s religion. In comparison to other Gulf countries, Bahrain is relatively tolerant when it comes to conversion cases. Nonetheless, conversion from Islam to Christianity is not well received by the community at large and this attitude is rooted in the apostasy provisions of Islamic law and as such represents a permanent source of pressure, especially within the Shia community. Although there are reports of growing numbers of Bahraini converts from Islam, numbers remain very small. This is therefore a significant source of pressure for a small number of Christians.

Block 1.10: Christians have been isolated from other family members or other like-minded Christians (e.g. house arrest). (3.00 points)

Social isolation by family members is a common reaction and punishment in the wider Gulf region for those choosing divergent paths, deviating from cultural and Islamic norms. Some are even put under house arrest, although this is less common. This is especially true for young converts from Islam to Christianity.

Block 1 - Additional information

Members of non-Muslim religious groups that practice their faith privately do so without government interference. However, particularly Christians with a Shia Muslim background face serious difficulties. For those of them who live with their families or parents, worshipping and displaying Christian symbols (such as crosses) is likely to attract serious persecution. Hence, privately possessing a Bible or other Christian materials mainly represents a risk for converts from Islam to Christianity. If caught in possession of a Bible by a disapproving member of the family or community, this could lead to negative repercussions. Many converts find ways to cope with such risks, especially since new technological developments such as Bible apps are available.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.1: Babies and children of Christians have automatically been registered under the state or majority religion. (3.50 points)

Within Bahrain's small indigenous Christian community children are registered as Christian. In accordance with the principles of Islamic law, the children of Bahraini converts from Islam to Christianity would automatically be registered as Muslim.

Block 2.2: Registering the birth, wedding, death, etc. of Christians has been hindered or made impossible. (3.50 points)

The religion of the child is registered on the birth certificate application, although not displayed on the birth certificate itself or any identity documents. Converts from Islam to Christianity cannot register their child as Christian. A female Bahraini convert from a Muslim background is only permitted by law to marry a man also born a Muslim. While a man born Muslim would in principle have freedom to marry a non-Muslim - in both cases, Islamic marriage rites would be applied. Similarly, Islamic burial rites would be applied for anyone who was born Muslim, including converts to Christianity. For the small indigenous Christian Bahraini community, and for expatriate Christians, civil wedding ceremonies or church weddings (within some traditions) are possible, provided requirements set out by the Bahraini authorities and the relevant foreign government are met.

Block 2.5: Burials of Christians have been hindered or coercively performed with non-Christian rites. (3.50 points)

For Christians from a Muslim background, Islamic burial rites apply. For indigenous and expatriate Christians there are two cemeteries, but both have very little remaining capacity. An

application by churches for new land for burials was filed in 2014, with land being allocated in February 2022 (IRFR 2022 Bahrain, p.20). However, this third cemetery has not been opened yet. The original generation of Bahrain Christians is now growing old so the issue is seen as becoming increasingly urgent.

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.50 points)

For indigenous and expatriate Christian children, Islamic classes in school are optional; schools may apply to the Ministry of Education for permission to provide non-Islamic instruction for non-Muslim students. However, Islamic instruction is compulsory for all children considered to be Muslim, including therefore for the children of Christians from a Muslim background. In addition, state school curricula include Islamic studies and there are no similar Christian classes for Christian students.

Block 2 - Additional information

In Bahrain, where Sharia law governs personal and property matters, Christian converts from Islam face many challenges. As mentioned above, Muslim women cannot marry a non-Muslim man. Any such marriage will not be recognized. Therefore, any child custody or inheritance issues arising from such marriages will not even be considered and have serious implications for those involved, especially women. It is most likely that pressure will be exerted on spouses of converts to divorce their husband or wife. Raising children according to Christian values is particularly challenging for converts as they are surrounded by an Islamic environment. There are no explicit laws restricting Christian parents from raising their children according to their Christian faith, but it can be difficult for Christian parents to raise their children in an Islamic environment, both for converts and expatriates.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (3.00 points)

Known converts from Islam to Christianity are monitored by their local communities. This forces them not only to act carefully among their immediate family members, but also in public. Converts have to take precautions when meeting with other Christians.

Block 3.9: Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education). (3.00 points)

Bahraini converts from Islam to Christianity can face limited access to higher education due to their new faith. Especially in the case of young converts, their families can decide to halt their education as part of a wider measure to isolate them.

Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (2.75 points)

Converts from Islam to Christianity will feel obliged to participate in Islamic practices and traditions (for example, observing fasting during Ramadan) in order not to draw negative attention to themselves and to avoid the discovery of their new faith.

Block 3.7: Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith. (2.75 points)

Known converts from Islam to Christianity are likely to be put under pressure by the wider community to return to Islam, for example through social isolation.

Block 3 - Additional information

Although converts from Islam to Christianity experience higher levels of social hostility, expatriate Christians and indigenous Bahraini Christians belonging to the Historical Christian Community can usually live their lives without experiencing social hostility because of their faith. This is also due to the government's active promotion of tolerance. Nonetheless, Bahraini converts to Christianity often keep a low profile to avoid any negative repercussions, including, but not limited to, disadvantages in education, not being allowed to participate in communal activities and other ways of social exclusion.

If Bahraini converts are open about their new faith, it is not unlikely that they will end up being interrogated by the police. It is also likely that converts from Islam to Christianity will lose their job when their new faith becomes known. Nepotism is widespread in Bahraini society and getting a job often depends on relationships and social standing. The latter is lost when one turns from Islam to Christianity, making it difficult to keep or find employment.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (3.75 points)

The Constitution of Bahrain enshrines Islam as the religion of the State and Islamic law as a principal source of legislation. However, the Constitution also affirms the principle of non-discrimination, including on the basis of religion. Although indigenous and expatriate Christians enjoy a certain amount of freedom, Bahraini nationals or other Muslims who are considered apostates could face imprisonment under the Penal Code's defamation provisions, and under sanctions such as forcible divorce and removal of child custody under personal status laws overseen by Sharia courts. Hence, despite guaranteeing some elements of Freedom of Religion or Belief, the Constitution and other state laws are not aligned with the Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (3.50 points)

Most Christians exercise precautionary 'self-censorship' to avoid any form of provocation, particularly in relation to criticism of Islam or proselytizing.

Block 4.2: Officials have refused to recognize an individual's conversion as recorded in government administration systems, identify cards (etc.). (3.25 points)

Religious affiliation is not displayed on identity documents, nor on birth certificates, but the government does record a person's religion. Converts do not dare to request changes to this registration out of fear of reprisals (mostly from their family members).

Block 4.13: Christians have been accused of blasphemy or insulting the majority religion, either by state authorities or by pressure groups. (3.25 points)

All Christians exercise caution and a degree of self-censorship. Criticism of Islam can lead to prosecution, for example under Article 309 of the Penal Code which states that "any person who commits an offence by any method of expression against one of the recognized religions" faces a sentence of up to one year's imprisonment. In practice, expatriates who are found guilty will most likely be deported after completing their sentence. Converts from Islam to Christianity have to be even more careful, as accusations of blasphemy lead not only to prosecution but also to hostility from family and community members.

Block 4 - Additional information

National policies and laws often address issues aimed to help the Muslim population and ignore Christians and other minorities. The fact that the country is divided between Shia and Sunni groups puts Christians in an awkward position: They are often perceived as siding with the opposing group.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.3: Christian communities have been hindered in building or renovating church buildings or in claiming historical religious premises and places of worship which had been taken from them earlier. (3.50 points)

Even though the government has at times allotted land for church compound construction, in the majority of cases it is difficult for a church community to build a new place of worship. The registered places of worship that exist in the country are too small to accommodate the large expatriate population.

Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (3.25 points)

Churches are being monitored, sometimes even in visible ways. Such monitoring can protect churches against threats, but can also be a way of identifying whether converts from Islam to Christianity are attending church activities.

Block 5.7: Churches have been hindered from openly integrating converts. (3.00 points)

Churches need to be careful with activities that could be considered proselytization. The inclusion of a Bahraini convert in an expatriate church community is a sensitive issue. Both the Bahraini government and the family members of the convert may try to hinder this.

Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (3.00 points)

The expatriate churches in Bahrain often have a good relationship with the government, but they have to apply self-censorship and cannot openly criticize government policies or social issues relating to Islamic culture and norms. This limits the churches in how far they can speak up about issues of social justice in the country.

Block 5 - Additional information

Churches are in general able to organize meetings for worship, although lack of church space is often an issue. Producing and distributing religious materials is permissible, provided it does not criticize Islam; however, publicly distributing Bibles or Christian materials could provoke a serious reaction from the local population.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced

Possible reasons for this may be:

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons

- *Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).*
- *In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.*

- *Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.*

3. The use of symbolic numbers

In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWL chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.*

4. The symbol “x” in the table

This denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security concerns.

Bahrain: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	x	0
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	0	0
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	0	10 *
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	10 *	2
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0

(Table continued below)

Bahrain: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	1	0

In the WWL 2024 reporting period:

Christians attacked

- Several Bahraini converts from Islam to Christianity experienced domestic abuse from family members, including both physical and mental abuse. At least one Christian had to relocate abroad due to family pressure.
- It is widely known that house-maids working in the domestic sphere are vulnerable to incidents of abuse. However, statistics are scarce as almost all persons, organizations and states involved have no interest in revealing the true situation: Bahrain needs the domestic staff to work in households, but has a shame culture and does not want a bad reputation. Also, the home countries of the housemaids need the money coming in from the thousands of migrants working in the Gulf states and do not want to put their economic interests at stake. The employers of abused house-maids are either the perpetrators of the abuse themselves or have no real interest in their well-being. The house-maids themselves feel often ashamed because of the abuse. In addition, many provide a very much needed source of income for their families in their home countries. The home families are proud of the work being done in Bahrain, and the house-maid does not want to disappoint her family. Therefore, statistics and evidence of abuse are very difficult to provide. It is also difficult to prove that any abuse is due to the house-maid being a non-Muslim. Despite this, given the high number of Christian expatriates in the country, conservative estimates agree that at least 10 Christian house-maids were abused in the WWL 2024 reporting period, with their faith being one of the factors making them more vulnerable.

5 Year trends

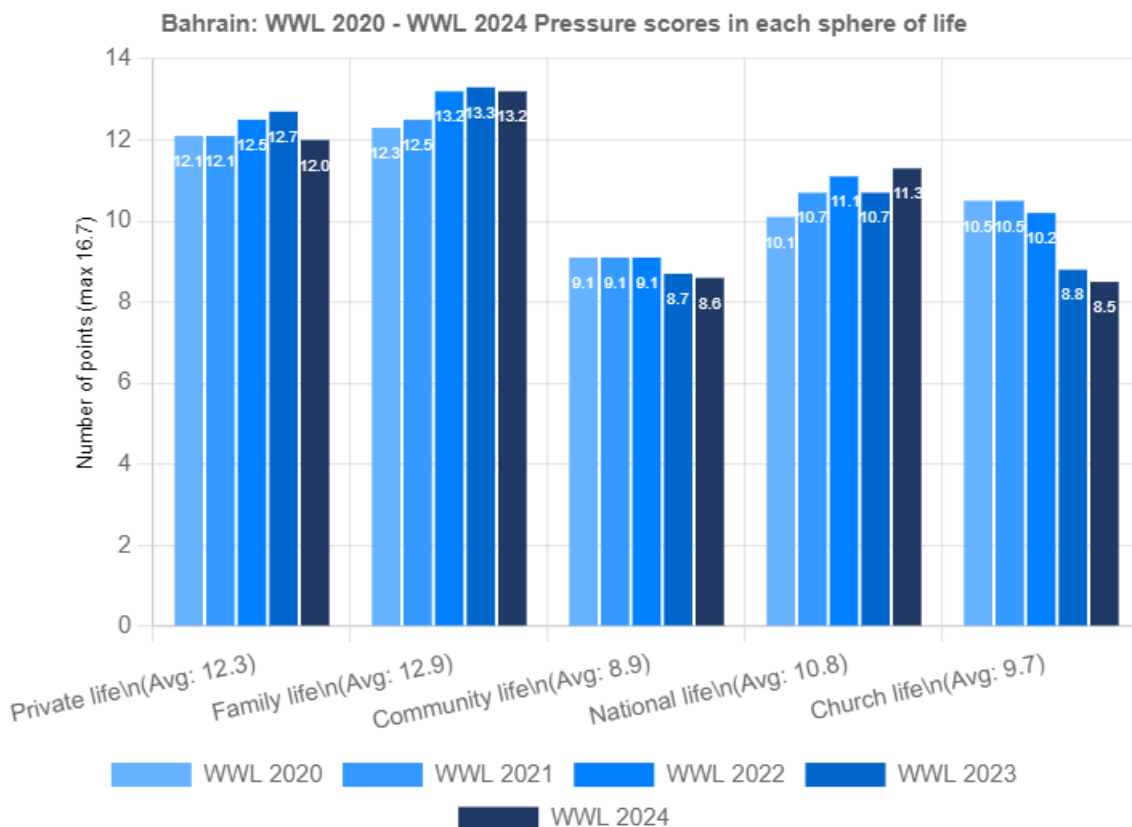
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

The average pressure on Christians has remained high/very high over the last five reporting periods and would seem to have stabilized around the 11 point mark, as can be seen in the table below. This reflects the difficulties experienced by converts in particular.

Bahrain: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	10.7
2023	10.8
2022	11.2
2021	11.0
2020	10.8

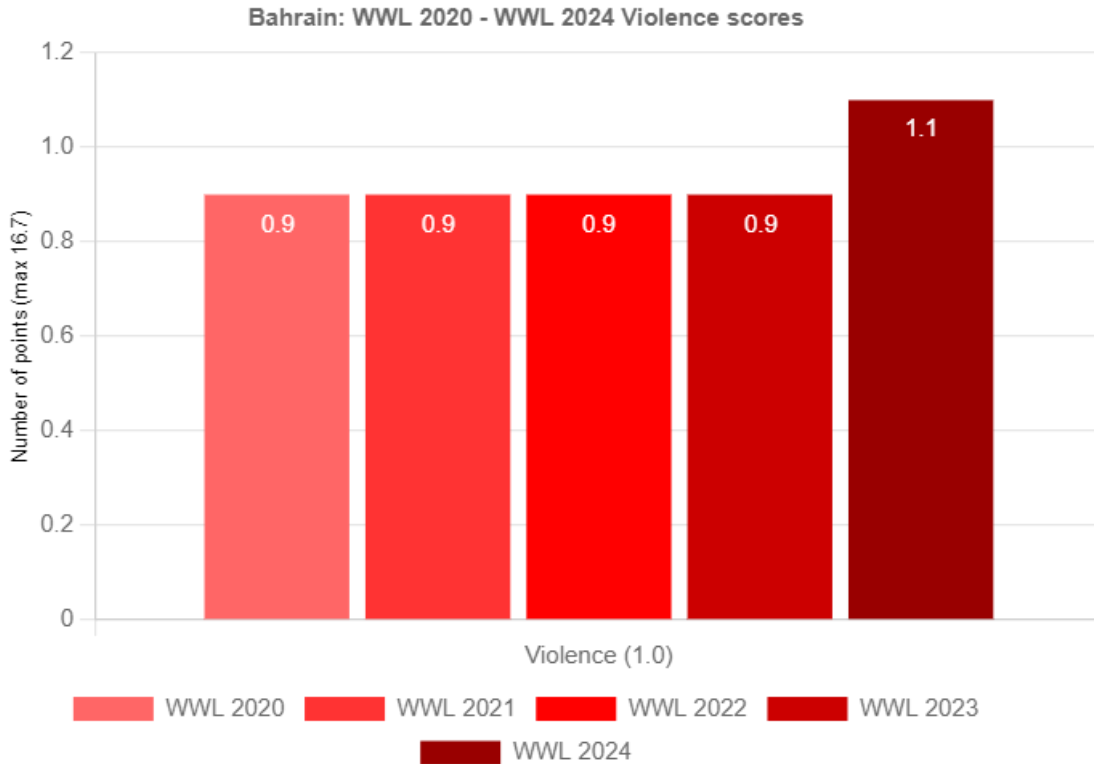
5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



The average pressure per sphere of life, as seen in the chart above, shows that pressure is consistently highest in the *Family* and *Private spheres*, reflecting the pressure converts from Islam to Christianity have to deal with.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians

As can be seen in the chart below, the number of recorded violent incidents against Christians have always been very low/low. This pattern of high pressure and low violence targeting Christians is typical for a Gulf country. The high levels of pressure ensure that many 'do not cross the line' and hence avoids provoking a violent reaction.



Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites; Denied custody of children; Forced divorce; Forced marriage
Security	Incarceration by family (house arrest); Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

Despite some moves towards legal equality, women and girls continue to be [viewed as inferior](#) in Bahraini society (Wilson Center, 8 March 2020). Among the small number of converts to Christianity, pressure is most keenly felt by women and girls, followed by younger men, then older men (reflecting levels of status and freedom within the culture). A key challenge that women from a Muslim background experience is the legal marriage restriction that prevents them from marrying a non-Muslim; only Muslim men are permitted to marry a non-Muslim. A marriage between a formerly (and still officially registered) Muslim woman who has converted to Christianity to a non-Muslim will not be recognized. If a Christian woman is married to a Muslim man, her custody and inheritance rights will also not be considered (HRW 2023 Bahrain country chapter). As a country expert describes, “divorce and custody laws favor the majority religion, and men. So female indigenous converts face a dual vulnerability”.

In addition to these challenges, female converts face oppression from their families. An expert shares that “Bahraini Muslim converts from a Shia background to Christianity face extreme pressure from their families, clans, and tribes to repent and return to Islam. ... Although this dynamic is placed upon all Bahraini Muslim converts to Christianity, Bahraini Muslim women who convert to Christianity are especially at great risk”. They are likely to be beaten by family members, placed under house arrest, and may be threatened with honor killing (although no such cases have been reported in the WWL 2024 reporting period). They can also face other violent threats, such as that of forced marriage. Financial dependence on male family members, which can be common among female Bahrainis, provides another opportunity for persecution.

The ill-treatment of foreign workers, including sexual abuse, remains a major issue. House-maids working in Bahrain often face sexual harassment or slave-like treatment. The ill-treatment of migrant workers, including sexual abuse, has become a high-profile issue at the international level. Although not primarily faith-related, many Christian domestic migrant workers, almost all of whom are female, experience (sexual) abuse. More broadly, there is also pressure to adhere to Islamic style of dress in order to avoid harassment, and women in more conservative families may be monitored in their internet use in order to prevent them accessing Christian materials and teachings.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Denied inheritance or possessions; Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Political and Legal	Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites; Forced marriage; Imprisonment by government
Security	Forced out of home – expulsion
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

Persecution of male Christian converts in Bahrain typically manifests itself in the workplace. As a country expert describes, male converts are “likely to face repercussions in work, direct/public action from family, [and] quick pressure to recant”. Men may lose out on promotion, or in some instances, lose their jobs altogether. This can lead to serious economic hardship which has major implications on the whole family, as the man is normally the financial provider of the family. Converts may also be ostracized from their families, threatened, beaten, intimidated and expelled from the family home. Their status and role in the family will come under threat. In light of such pressure, it is extremely challenging for Christians from a Muslim background to meet for fellowship.

Persecution of other religious minorities

Hindus, Buddhists, Jews and adherents of Bahai are relatively free to practice their faith and there are no reports of interference with their religious practices. There are however reports showing that the country’s majority Shia Muslim group does face discrimination.

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Bahrain):

- "[T]here was a high degree of tolerance within society for minority religious beliefs and traditions, although not for conversion from Islam or for atheistic or secularist views."
- "Non-Muslim religious community leaders again reported that there was ongoing 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."

According to the [USCIRF 2021 annual report](#) (p.3):

- Although Bahrain is the only Gulf state to officially recognize the Shiite Ashura commemoration as a public holiday, the Shia community remains under surveillance by the authorities and several arbitrary interrogations of Shia clergy have taken place. In addition, numerous Shia citizens had their citizenship revoked. This oppression has a political element since Bahrain's Sunni government regularly accuses Shiites of cooperating with Iran. Hence, the Shia communities are treated far more unfavorably than Christians in Bahrain.

According to BTI Bahrain Report 2022: (p.7):

- "Meanwhile, discourses about national identities are inconsistent and sectarian identities do not solely reflect religious affiliations. The conflict between privileged Sunnis and marginalized Shi'ites is predominantly shaped by the politically motivated discrimination against Shi'ites. Thus, the royal family's strategy to preserve its power translates into a controversial policy regarding citizenship and naturalization. The government encourages foreign Sunnis to immigrate and allows Arab nationals to apply for citizenship after 15 years of residence and non-Arab foreigners after 25 years of residence. At the same time, the state continues to revoke the citizenship of Shi'ites, which undermines their ties to the state, deepens rifts within society and violates international law."

According to [BTI Bahrain Report 2020](#) (p.7):

- "Shi'ite Muslims, however, are subjected to state interference and face restrictions regarding the exercise of their religion. The government maintains supervision of religious textbooks and preaching, and monitors mosques and prayer halls. Clerics and activists claim that authorities have demolished places of worship and restricted Shi'ite ceremonies. ... The state continues to extensively revoke the citizenship of Shi'ite opposition figures, which further undermines people's ties to the state and deepens rifts within society."

According to [BTI Bahrain Report 2018](#) (p.3):

- "Al-Wefaq, the largest opposition party representing the mainstream of Bahrain's Shi'a majority, was banned and its secretary-general, Ali Salman, sentenced to nine years in prison for attempting to overthrow the regime. The government has also revoked the citizenship of the party's spiritual leader, Sheikh Isa Qassim."

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Islamic oppression

The continuing relative tolerance towards Christians - as illustrated, for example, in the recent construction of the largest Catholic cathedral in the Gulf - means that there is little discernible anxiety among expatriate Christians. Within the regional context of the Gulf, Bahrain's relatively liberal society continues to be a magnet for other citizens in the region, particularly from Saudi Arabia. However, this does not mean that it is likely that indigenous converts from Islam to Christianity will receive equal treatment in the near future.

Clan oppression

With the current levels of globalization and modernization, as well as an openness to other (Western) influences via the Internet, the younger generation is growing up in a world that is different from their parents' experience. However, family ties remain strong and it has yet to be seen whether these modern influences will change the tribal attitude of many Bahraini families. Bahraini society as a whole may follow the trends noted but, within tight-knit Shia neighborhoods, it is likely that conservative values will be reinforced in order to keep out influences not in line with Islamic religious and cultural values.

Dictatorial paranoia

The Bahraini government does not allow any dissent and it is unlikely that this attitude will change in the near future. Although Christians are definitely not main targets for government action - in contrast to the Shiite population - they have to live carefully and not cause public unrest through proselytizing activities.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Drivers of persecution description: Article 23 - https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Bahrain_2012.pdf?lang=en
- Drivers of persecution description: Human Rights Watch - <https://www.hrw.org/middle-east/n-africa/bahrain>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: viewed as inferior - <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/we-have-achieved-lot-bahrain-we-strive-more>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: USCIRF 2021 annual report - https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-04/2021%20Annual%20Report_0.pdf
- Persecution of other religious minorities: BTI Bahrain Report 2020 - https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2020_BHR.pdf
- Persecution of other religious minorities: BTI Bahrain Report 2018 - https://www.bti-project.org/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2018_BHR.pdf

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Bahrain>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.