



26 November 2019

Dear Member of the IRF Roundtable,

We at Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) write to you in advance of the [Middle East and North Africa \(MENA\) Region IRF Roundtable Event](#) in Bahrain, which is set to take place in early December. We are deeply concerned that an event on religious freedom is being held in a country known for its ongoing religious discrimination against the majority Shia Bahrainis, and would like to further express our concern about increasing restrictions on their religious expression. We therefore strongly encourage you, as an active member of the IRF Roundtable, to boycott this event in Bahrain, as it sends the wrong message and hinders the broader mission of the Roundtable. We also call on you to reach out to Greg Mitchell, Chair of the IRF Roundtable, and urge him to reconsider the location of the event.

The Government of Bahrain has long discriminated against its Shia majority community, which constitutes approximately 70 percent of the citizen population. Bahrain's political system is [engineered](#) in a manner as to make it impossible for Shia to obtain political power or to ascend to positions of political importance. The [security services](#) are an especially extreme example, where Shia employees are estimated to make up less than five percent of personnel. There is also evidence that security institutions like the police and military distribute [hyper-sectarian religious materials](#) and disseminate hate speech among the ranks. The government has additionally [suppressed](#) Shia political participation, forcibly dissolving the Al-Wefaq opposition group, which represented much of Bahrain's Shia population, and arbitrarily imprisoning Shia political leaders like Sheikh Ali Salman and Hassan Mushaima.

The Bahraini government has also targeted religious scholars, including Sheikh Mohammed al-Miqdad, Sheikh Abduljalil al-Miqdad, and Sheikh Saeed al-Noori, who are among the prominent prisoners known as the Bahrain 13. They were arrested in 2011 and 2012 for their peaceful activism and sentenced to life in prison. Many other clerics have been sentenced to prison for their activism and outspoken criticism of the government, including Sheikh Mirza al-Mahroos, Sheikh Abdulhadi al-Mukhodher, and Sayed Majeed Meshaal. Still others, including Sheikh Hasan al-Najati have been deported, and [Sheikh Isa Qassim](#), the most prominent Shia leader in Bahrain, was arbitrarily denaturalized.

Such longstanding repression targeting Bahrain's Shia population has increased within the past two years, with security forces and officials clamping down on celebrations surrounding the Shia month of Muharram and Ashura, the tenth day of Muharram. In September 2018, at least 14 Shia clergymen and orators were [harassed](#) by authorities, and several were arrested over the content of their sermons in the run-up to Ashura. In addition to clerics, officials arrested several activists, including [AbdulMajeed Abdulla Mohsen](#), a prominent pro-democracy activist, who was held for 15 days on charges of "illegal gathering." This pattern continued into 2019, with police cancelling religious ceremonies and prohibiting people from congregating and gathering. Due to



pent up frustration over restrictions surrounding Ashura, on 8 August 2019, almost 700 prisoners across Bahrain's Jau Prison and Dry Dock Detention Center launched a hunger strike in protest of a number of detention conditions. Among the conditions they protested was religious discrimination, including prohibitions on exercising their religious practices and verbal insults from officers based on prisoners' sect.

Both the Department of State (DoS) and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) have echoed our concerns regarding religious discrimination in Bahrain. In USCIRF's [annual report](#), the commission categorizing Bahrain again as a Tier 2 country "for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the 'systematic, ongoing, egregious' standard for designation as a 'country of particular concern,' or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA)," marking the third year in a row that USCIRF has categorized Bahrain as a Tier 2 country. Furthermore, in the DoS [Report on International Religious Freedom](#), multiple instances of government-sanctioned discrimination against members of Bahrain's majority Shia population, including the targeting of religious leaders, was noted.

On top of religious discrimination, the repressive Bahraini government forcibly silences peaceful activists – using arrests, citizenship revocation, and reprisals against family members to stop them from drawing attention to ongoing human rights violations. As an active participant of the IRF Roundtable myself, I have been invited to attend this event in Bahrain, but if I go my safety could be jeopardized. The Bahraini government has taken away my citizenship and members of my family are in prison because of my human rights works. This is the kind of country the IRF Roundtable is choosing to support, providing the AlKhalifa's with another public relations stunt to whitewash their abuses.

While the Bahraini government has long discriminated against its Shia majority community, the actions of its security forces over the past two years in the days and weeks leading up to Ashura represent a new and more concerning step in this pattern of discrimination. In light of this, holding an event in Bahrain focused on religious freedom is appalling and sends the message that the IRF Roundtable sees Bahrain as a positive example of religious freedom. We strongly encourage you to boycott the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region IRF Roundtable Event and to urge Greg Mitchell to reconsider hosting the event in Bahrain.

Sincerely,

Husain Abdulla
Executive Director
Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB)