

World Watch Research

# Bahrain: Background Information

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## Contents

Copyright and sources .....	1
Map of country .....	2
Recent history .....	2
Political and legal landscape .....	4
Religious landscape.....	6
Economic landscape.....	7
Social and cultural landscape.....	8
Technological landscape .....	10
Security situation .....	11
Christian origins .....	11
Church spectrum today.....	12
Further useful reports.....	13
External Links .....	13

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World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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## Map of country



Bahrain: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
1,499,000	184,000	12.3

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

## 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](#)). In April 2024, the government released more than 1,500 prisoners, including 650 political prisoners, in a surprise pardon related to the King's silver jubilee ([The Guardian, 9 April 2024](#)).

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 opposed 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](#)). In the meantime, the government has both condemned Hamas' attack against Israel, as well as Israeli offensives in Gaza and settlement expansion in the West Bank ([Times of Israel, 20 November 2023](#), [BNA, 9 May 2024](#), [BNA 30 June 2024](#)).

## 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 2023 Democracy Index ([EIU Democracy index 2023](#)) and Freedom House rates the country as 'not free' in its Global Freedom Index 2024. 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 Bertelsmann Transformation Index ([BTI 2024 Bahrain](#)):

- "Bahrain's authoritarian regime continued to restrict fundamental freedoms and to surveil social media for posts critical of the government. At the same time, it has continued to attack an unknown number of activists, dissidents, journalists, and parliamentarians with the notorious Pegasus spyware .... . Government authorities also did not take any meaningful steps to achieve reconciliation with outlawed opposition groups during the review period, but they did refrain from violently dispersing anti-government protests. For the first time in years, they appeared to have pursued de-escalation with regard to social unrest. Nonetheless, authorities intensified their attempts to silence dissidents abroad .... . Abuses and ill-treatment of people in police custody and in detention continued, while several inmates in Bahraini prisons went on hunger strikes, calling for adequate medical care, a retrial or the right to practice their religion."

According to Human Rights Watch ([HRW 2024 Bahrain country chapter](#)):

- "The government of Bahrain continued imposing restrictions on expression, assembly, and association. Elections are neither free nor fair, and opposition voices are systematically excluded and repressed. Many members of Bahrain's political opposition, as well as activists, bloggers, and human rights defenders, continue to be imprisoned for their roles in the 2011 pro-democracy protests and for more recent political activism. They have faced brutal treatment, including torture and denial of 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 2024 Bahrain](#)). The Economist Intelligence Unit ([EIU 2024 Bahrain summary](#)) predicts: "The political scene will remain strained owing to simmering discontent with the Sunni Al Khalifa ruling 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	184,000	12.3
Muslim	1,162,000	77.5
Hindu	126,000	8.4
Buddhist	3,300	0.2
Ethnic religionist	370	0.0
Jewish	53	0.0
Bahai	11,900	0.8
Atheist	1,200	0.1
Agnostic	10,200	0.7
Other	370	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Bahrain has a population of close to 1.5 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](#), accessed 29 August 2024). 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 allowed to advertise 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](#) (accessed 29 August 2024):

- **GDP per capita (PPP):** \$57,600 (2023 est.)
- **Real GDP growth rate:** 2.48% (2023 est.)
- **Inflation rate (consumer prices):** 0.07% (2023 est.)
- **Remittances:** 0% of GDP
- **Unemployment:** 1.16% (2023 est.), with youth unemployment at 5.8% (2023 est.).

According to the World Bank's [Macro Poverty Outlook 2024 Bahrain](#) (April 2024):

- **General situation:** "Notwithstanding the advancement of the diversification agenda, hydrocarbon revenues still account for more than 60 percent of total budget revenues which exposes the economy to the volatility of energy prices. Bahrain continues to face structural challenges, notably these relating to fiscal sustainability, as debt and gross financing needs remain elevated."
- **Economic growth:** "Bahrain's economy has moderated in 2023, amid limited hydrocarbon sector growth, and tight fiscal and monetary policies. Following a strong performance in 2022, economic growth has slowed down to an estimated 2.6 percent in 2023. Preliminary official data reveals that the economy grew by 2 percent in the first nine months of 2023 (9M-2023 y/y), driven primarily by 3.1 percent expansion in the non-oil sectors as a result of the ongoing diversification efforts"
- **Inflation:** "Inflation decelerated to 0.1 percent in 2023, mainly owing to fading base effects, lower global commodity prices, and lower transportation costs."
- **Outlook:** "Bahrain's economic outlook hangs on oil market prospects and the accelerated implementation of structural reforms. Growth is estimated to pick up to 3.5 percent in 2024 in line with higher oil output, while the non-oil sector remains the main growth driver."

Other sources report:

- The World Bank's [World by Income and Region report](#) (accessed 26 July 2024) puts the Bahraini economy in the high income category .



- The Fragile State Index ([FSI 2024 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 2024 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. A small surplus on the current account will be recorded throughout the forecast period. Public debt will average more than 100% of GDP in 2024-28, burdening the public purse as interest rates rise. A large number of mega-projects are being offered for tender and will get under way over the forecast period."

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.

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](#) (accessed 29 August 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** The majority of the Bahraini citizens are from Arab decent, with 47,4% being Bahraini. A wide variety of ethnicities can be found among the wider (expatriate) population, including Asians (43.4%), non-Bahraini Arabs (4.9%) 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 younger generation - up to 24 years of age - makes up 18.1% of the population.
- **Life expectancy:** 80.4 years on average; women (82.7 years), men (78.1 years).
- **Percentage of population below national poverty line:** No data available, but probably low among Bahraini citizens.

According to [UNDP's Human Development Report Bahrain](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** Bahrain ranks #34 out 193 countries. The combined ratio of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a very high score of 0.888 on the Human Development Index (HDI).
- **Gender inequality:** With a GDI (Gender Development Index) score of 0.937, 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 ([Amnesty International, Bahrain 2023](#)). 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 [DataReportal Digital 2024: Bahrain](#) (23 February 2024) / Survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 99.0% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 97.2% of the total population. As of January 2024, 39.0% of social media users were female, while 61.0% were male.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 156.6% of the total population

Bahrain is one of a handful of countries where nearly all (99.8%) women report having a mobile cellphone ([GIWPS Bahrain](#), accessed 29 August 2024).

Technologically, Bahrain is advanced with high levels of Internet access and modern ICT infrastructure. However media, including the Internet, is monitored. [BTI Bahrain Report 2024](#) reports:

- "The government systematically uses vaguely worded legislation to restrict and crack down on freedom of speech and freedom of the press. It also monitors online content and prosecutes individuals for criticizing authorities."

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 2024 Bahrain](#)):

- Bahrain is ranked at position #173 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.

## 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 (in: 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):

- "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."

At present, an estimated 12.3% of the total population of Bahrain is Christian (WCD 2024); 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	4.0
Catholic	147,000	79.9
Protestant	13,500	7.3
Independent	15,500	8.4
Unaffiliated	0	0.0
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>183,300</b>	<b>99.6</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		

Evangelical movement	4,100	2.2
Pentecostal-Charismatic	49,200	26.7

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

**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. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

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, accessed 29 August 2024](#)).

WCD 2024 estimates show that 184,000 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.

## 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/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

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

## External Links

- 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/>
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