

# Bahrain

	2016	2017		
<b>Internet Freedom Status</b>	<b>Not Free</b>	<b>Not Free</b>	<b>Population:</b>	<b>1.4 million</b>
Obstacles to Access (0-25)	10	11	<b>Internet Penetration 2016 (ITU):</b>	<b>98 percent</b>
Limits on Content (0-35)	27	27	<b>Social Media/ICT Apps Blocked:</b>	<b>Yes</b>
Violations of User Rights (0-40)	34	34	<b>Political/Social Content Blocked:</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>TOTAL* (0-100)</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested:</b>	<b>Yes</b>
			<b>Press Freedom 2017 Status:</b>	<b>Not Free</b>

\* 0=most free, 100=least free

## Key Developments: June 2016 – May 2017

- Starting in June 2016, broadband connections were suspended from 7pm to 1am in a daily “internet curfew” in the besieged town of Diraz, home to the persecuted Shiite cleric Isa Qassim (see **Restrictions on Connectivity**).
- Popular among local dissidents, secure communications app Telegram was permanently blocked that same month (see **Blocking and Filtering**).
- The websites of prominent political and religious societies belonging to the country’s marginalized Shiite majority were blocked (see **Blocking and Filtering**).
- Bahrain’s only independent newspaper, *al-Wasat*, was banned from using electronic media for three days in January and later suspended altogether for its critical reporting (see **Content Removal**).
- The Ministry of Information Affairs issued a decree to restrict news outlets from supplementing their online reporting through user-generated live video (see **Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation**).
- From June 2016 to May 2017, at least 12 internet users received prison sentences that amounted to a combined total of 148 months. Many more were arrested or interrogated for insulting the king or defaming the government (see **Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities**).

## Introduction

Internet freedom remained “Not Free” in 2017 as authorities restricted internet connections in Diraz, censored opposition websites, and detained dozens of activists for social media posts.

Although Bahrain has some of the best internet penetration and speeds in the world, online freedoms have suffered from government moves to quell unrest. In June 2016, the government renewed its widespread crackdown on Shiite leaders and the political opposition, intensifying censorship.<sup>1</sup> Authorities shut down Shiite religious organizations accused of illegal fundraising. A court also shuttered al-Wefaq, the kingdom’s primary political opposition group.

Bahrain’s leading Shiite cleric Isa Qassim was stripped of citizenship for “serving foreign interests” and “promoting sectarianism and violence.” In a bid to prevent his arrest, supporters gathered around Qassim’s home in the town of Diraz. Authorities established checkpoints to restrict access to the town and implemented a daily “internet curfew,” disrupting broadband connectivity between 7pm and 1am. Qassim was given a suspended prison sentence for illegal fundraising and money laundering, and security forces forcibly dispersed his supporters in Diraz on May 23, 2017, leaving at least five dead and dozens injured.

The secure messaging app Telegram—popular among the country’s dissidents—was blocked nationwide in June 2016 and remained inaccessible in mid-2017. Authorities blacklisted the websites of Shiite-led organizations, which joined hundreds of opposition outlets and forums blocked since prodemocracy protests escalated in 2011. Those demonstrations called for greater representation of the majority Shiite population in the country’s Sunni-led government, but were violently disbanded by military forces from neighboring Saudi Arabia.

Bahrainis still use social media to organize further protests and call attention to rampant abuse by security forces, but the government has severely restricted related news coverage. News outlets have been banned from embedding user-generated videos, and their editorial line is vigorously policed. *Al-Wasat*, the only independent newspaper in the country, was banned from using electronic media in January after it posted articles related to a violent uprising in the town of A’ali and the controversial execution of three Shiite men in the first use of the death penalty since 2010.<sup>2</sup> A court suspended the newspaper entirely in June after one of its articles referred to the “legitimate grievances” of protestors in Morocco.

While social media has proven harder to censor, authorities often use social media posts as evidence in order to interrogate or jail prominent opposition leaders. From June 2016 to May 2017, 148 months of prison sentences were collectively passed in cases involving 12 internet users. Many more have been arrested or interrogated on charges such as insulting the king or defaming the government under the country’s harsh penal code. Human rights groups have documented widespread accounts of torture, including to extract confessions of wrongdoing.

---

1 For a more complete overview of developments in Bahrain related to political rights and civil liberties, please see “Bahrain,” *Freedom in the World*, Freedom House, 2017, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/bahrain>.

2 Ben Hubbard, “Bahrain Executes 3 Shiites Convicted in Deadly Attack on Police,” *The New York Times*, January 15, 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/15/world/bahrain-shiites-executions.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/15/world/bahrain-shiites-executions.html?_r=0).

## Obstacles to Access

*Bahrain is one of the most highly connected countries in the world. Competitive prices for broadband data services have led to high levels of mobile internet penetration. However, a partial internet shutdown has been ongoing since June 2016 in Diraz, and the regulator has ignored calls to resolve the situation.*

### Availability and Ease of Access

Key Access Indicators		
Internet penetration (ITU) <sup>a</sup>	2016	98.0%
	2015	93.5%
	2011	77.0%
Mobile penetration (ITU) <sup>b</sup>	2016	217%
	2015	185%
	2011	131%
Average connection speeds (Akamai) <sup>c</sup>	2017(Q1)	7.9 Mbps
	2016(Q1)	5.2 Mbps

<sup>a</sup> International Telecommunication Union, "Percentage of Individuals Using the Internet, 2000-2016," <http://bit.ly/1cblxxY>.

<sup>b</sup> International Telecommunication Union, "Mobile-Cellular Telephone Subscriptions, 2000-2016," <http://bit.ly/1cblxxY>.

<sup>c</sup> Akamai, "State of the Internet - Connectivity Report, Q1 2017," <https://goo.gl/TQH7L7>.

Bahrain has risen rapidly in the International Telecommunication Union's (ITU) ICT Development Index (IDI),<sup>3</sup> and ranked first in the Arab region in 2016.<sup>4</sup> Bahrain had 2.67 million mobile subscriptions by mid-2017, representing a penetration rate of 184 percent. Broadband penetration was at 166 percent or 2.4 million subscriptions, of which 93 percent consisted of mobile broadband, as opposed to fixed broadband.<sup>5</sup>

Prices for mobile broadband are among the lowest in the region.<sup>6</sup> Fixed-line broadband subscriptions cost BHD 20 (US\$ 26), less than one percent of the average monthly income, for a 20Mbps connection, with similar prices for mobile internet.<sup>7</sup> Speeds have also increased, and the portion of subscribers with speeds of 10Mbps or above has grown significantly according to a 2016 report by the national regulator.<sup>8</sup> An audit indicated that 100 percent of the population are within reach of 3G and 4G mobile networks.<sup>9</sup> Batelco, a state-controlled internet service provider (ISP)

3 International Telecommunication Union (ITU), *ITU releases annual global ICT data and ICT Development Index country rankings*, 2015 <https://goo.gl/doJ1lc>.

4 International Telecommunication Union, "Measuring the Information Society Report 2016", <http://bit.ly/2f1vtSK>.

5 Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Bahrain, "Quarterly Market Indicators – Q2 2017," October 17, 2017, <http://www.tra.org.bh/media/document/MCD%2010%2017%20097%20Quarterly%20Market%20Indicators%20Q2%202017%20public.pdf>.

6 TRA, "Bahrain compared well with developed countries in the telecom prices", December 28, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1PyGTWT>.

7 See Batelco, "Mobile Internet Packages," accessed March 14, 2017 <http://batelco.com/internet/mobile/packages/#1460968152589-bf57c4c1-aacc>, and Batelco, "Home Internet Packages," accessed March 14, 2017 <http://batelco.com/internet/home/packages/#1456127273735-02d47f66-4418>.

8 TRA, "Telecommunications Market Indicators in the Kingdom of Bahrain, February 2016, slide 30" <http://goo.gl/XfzgpZ>.

9 TRA, "4G Download Speed increases to 23% Compared to 2014 According to TRA's latest Kingdom-wide Mobile Audit Reports," December 19, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2hQEwo1>

began offering “superfast” 500 Mbps speeds to residential subscribers in 2016,<sup>10</sup> while 4G LTE mobile subscriptions have been available since 2013.

Internet access is widely available in schools, universities, shopping malls, and coffee shops, where Bahrainis often gather for work and study. Adult literacy was at nearly 95 percent and Bahrainis possess a high level of English-language proficiency.<sup>11</sup> The government provides free computer training programs, which had served 15,000 citizens by November 2015.<sup>12</sup>

## Restrictions on Connectivity

Since June 23, 2016, authorities have implemented an “internet curfew” in town of Diraz. The curfew was implemented as security forces placed the town under siege when protestors staged a sit-in around the house of Shiite cleric Issa Qassem, according to Amnesty International.<sup>13</sup> Mobile data connections were disabled and fixed-line connected heavily disrupted every day from the hours of 7pm to 1am.<sup>14</sup> ISPs initially claimed the disruptions were due to a technical error, although later informed customers to contact the TRA.<sup>15</sup> One report estimated that residents spent over US\$ 570,000 on telecommunications services that they never received over eight months of daily internet shutdowns.<sup>16</sup> The report did not calculate the additional impact on small businesses which cannot process payments during the hours when service is shut down.<sup>17</sup> No action has been taken by the TRA to address consumer complaints about the shutdowns, despite widespread criticism from the media,<sup>18</sup> nongovernmental organizations,<sup>19</sup> and individuals.<sup>20</sup>

On May 23, 2017, authorities staged a violent crackdown on the sit-in,<sup>21</sup> leaving at least five dead

---

10 “Batelco First and Only Telecom to Provide Superfast Fibre Internet 500Mbps,” BizBahrain, August 2, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2qsjMVY>

11 International Telecommunication Union (ITU), *Measuring The Information Society*, 2014 <http://bit.ly/1xrVMi8>.

12 Bahrain e-government, “Qudurat Training Program”, accessed July 31, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1IQ1YMI> and “E-government: we trained 15 thousand citizens on computers,” [in Arabic] *Alwasat*, November 30, 2015, <http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/1051215.html>.

13 “Bahrain: at least one dead and hundreds injured as government violently cracks down on opposition,” Amnesty International, May 23, 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2017/05/bahrain-at-least-one-dead-and-hundreds-injured-as-government-violently-cracks-down-on-opposition/>.

14 Press Release, “New Investigation Finds Bahrain ISPs Imposing “Internet Curfew” in Protest Area,” Bahrain Watch, August 4, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2s6xlX6>, and Faten Bushehri, “Ongoing Internet Curfew in Diraz for more than 100 Days,” Bahrain Watch, October 7, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2s0huiX>.

15 “The TRA and the telecommunications companies claim that there is a defect in the network to cover the isolation of Diraz by authorities,” [in Arabic] Bahrain Mirror, July 12, 2016, <http://bahrainmirror.org/news/32464.html>.

16 Bahrain Watch, “250 Days of Internet Shutdown Costs Residents Over \$500,000”, Accessed May 10, 2017 <http://bit.ly/2lbnDjJ>

17 “Shutting down the Internet from Northwest Bahrain is damaging Bahrain’s drive towards a knowledge economy,” [in Arabic] *Alwasat*, July 4, 2016, <http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/1133752.html>.

18 “Shutting down the Internet from Northwest Bahrain is damaging Bahrain’s drive towards a knowledge economy,” [in Arabic] *Alwasat*, July 4, 2016, <http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/1133752.html>.

19 Bahrain Watch, “Coalition of NGOs sign a Letter Demanding Internet Restoration in Diraz,” August 28, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2r82pxl>

20 “Telecommunications Regulatory Authority Receives 7 Complaints about Internet Cut off in Diraz,” Bahrain Mirror, November 3, 2016, <http://bahrainmirror.org/en/news/34545.html>

21 “Security developments in Al-Daraz and the closure of roads leading to the area,” [in Arabic] *Alwasat*, May 23, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2r1Lbjg>

and dozens injured.<sup>22</sup> The shutdowns were ongoing through the coverage period, and reportedly came to a halt in July.<sup>23</sup>

Although there is no centralized internet backbone in Bahrain, all ISPs are indirectly controlled by the government through orders from the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA). Service providers connect to numerous international cables and gateways provided by Tata, Flag, Saudi Telecom, Etisalat and Qatar Telecom, among others, making the country more resilient to unintentional internet outages.<sup>24</sup> In April 2017, the chairperson of the TRA board announced a plan to establish a national fiber-optic broadband network, allowing all service providers to share fiber optic infrastructure built by Batelco.<sup>25</sup>

## ICT Market

Batelco, Zain, and VIVA are the three mobile phone operators in the country, and also serve as its main internet services providers (ISPs), along with Menatelecom, the fourth largest ISP. In total, around 12 ISPs were in business as of 2016.<sup>26</sup> The government has a controlling stake in the largest ISP, Batelco, while other ISPs are owned by investors from the private sector, including non-Bahraini investors.

## Regulatory Bodies

Mobile phone services and ISPs are regulated by the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) under the 2002 Telecommunications Law. The TRA is responsible for licensing telecommunication providers and for developing “a competition led market for the provision of innovative communications services, available to all.”<sup>27</sup> Although the TRA is theoretically an independent organization, in practice its members are appointed by the government and its chairman reports to the Minister of State for Telecommunications. The Information Authority, which regulates press and publications,<sup>28</sup> merged with the Ministry of Information Affairs (MIA) in December 2016.<sup>29</sup> In August 2016, the TRA issued a decision ordering all telecommunication companies in Bahrain to purchase and use a unified technical system for blocking websites (see Blocking and Filtering).

There have been no reported instances of ISPs being denied registration permits. However, in early 2015 the TRA revoked the licenses of 14 small information and communication technology (ICT) companies, including some that voluntarily requested the cancellation. In February 2016, the TRA revoked the license of the small mobile and fixed-line provider 2Connect.<sup>30</sup> Among other issues, the

---

22 “5 killed, 286 held in Bahrain raid on Shiite cleric’s town,” ABC News, May 23, 2017, <http://abcn.ws/2qYDBry>

23 LuaLuaTV, Twitter post, May 25, 2017 <https://twitter.com/LuaLuaEnglish/status/867698923229646848>

24 TRA, *Renesys Internet Ecosystem Report (December 2012)*, <http://bit.ly/2qsaPwd>

25 “Technical committees from Batelco and the Telecommunications Authority in preparation for the liberation of the terrestrial network,” [in Arabic] *Alwasat*, April 7, 2017, [www.alwasatnews.com/news/1227945.html](http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/1227945.html)

26 TRA, *Telecommunications Market Indicators in the Kingdom of Bahrain*, slide 6 <https://goo.gl/05CDuh>

27 TRA, “Vision & Mission,” accessed March 30, 2014, <http://tra.org.bh/en/about-us/vision-mission.html>.

28 In June 2013, Mohamed al-Rumaihi was named President of the IAA, replacing Fawaz al-Khalifa who remained Minister of State for Telecom.

29 “Royal decree regulating the Ministry of Information Affairs,” [in Arabic] *Alwasat* newspaper, December 1, 2016, <http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/1186132.html>

30 TRA, “Revocation of telecommunication licenses granted by the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority,” press release, February 25, 2016, <http://goo.gl/ZRgbnY>.

company had failed to “provide a lawful access capability plan”<sup>31</sup> which would allow security units to access metadata about communications sent over its network.<sup>32</sup>

## Limits on Content

*Expanding a crackdown on the opposition, authorities blocked the websites of two of the country’s largest Shiite political and religious organizations and closed down the only independent news outlet in the country. Telegram, an encrypted messaging app used by the political opposition and human rights community, was also blocked. Meanwhile, the government undertook moves to centralize web filtering, ordering all ISPs to install new equipment. Self-censorship is rife, particularly on issues related to the monarchy, religion, and relations with the neighboring countries of the Arabian Peninsula.*

## Blocking and Filtering

New censorship incidents were documented in response to recent political developments in Bahrain and neighboring countries. Political content is widely blocked, and authorities ramped up censorship after the 2011 protests, in which online media played a decisive role.

A crackdown on Shiite groups was felt online. In June 2016, a court suspended the country’s main Shiite opposition group, al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, and dissolved it altogether in September, ruling it was “harboring terrorism,” inciting violence, and fomenting sectarian strife.<sup>33</sup> The government also ordered the closure of the Islamic Enlightenment Society (al-Taweya), a prominent Shiite religious organization accused of “illegal fundraising.”<sup>34</sup> The websites of both the organizations were blocked.<sup>35</sup> Accounts belonging to al-Wefaq on Twitter,<sup>36</sup> Instagram, and Facebook posts also stopped posting.<sup>37</sup>

Also in June, authorities blocked the communications app Telegram, which was popular among independent media, political opposition, and protest groups in Bahrain.<sup>38</sup> LuaLua TV, an opposition news outlet based overseas, had four associated websites blocked within one week.<sup>39</sup>

In May 2017, authorities blocked a number of Qatari media websites, including al-Jazeera, *al-Sharq*, and *Raya*.<sup>40</sup> The move coincided with a diplomatic crisis between Qatar and several Middle Eastern countries after hackers posted a fake report on the Qatar News Agency website and social media accounts, in which the emir of Qatar appeared to admit providing support to groups who oppose

31 TRA, Article 35 Order No.2 of 2016 2Connect’s breach of Article 24(b), 53 and 78 of the Telecommunications Law, February 4, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2bldqnG>.

32 TRA, Lawful Access Regulation, accessed August 14, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2b5Xyb3>.

33 “Bahrain court upholds dissolution of main Shiite opposition group al-Wefaq,” Deutsche Welle, September 22, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/bahrain-court-upholds-dissolution-of-main-shiite-opposition-group-al-wefaq/a-19568009>.

34 Bahrain Center for Human Rights, “Bahrain: Authorities Escalate Crackdown on Shia Clerics and Freedom of Religion,” June 17, 2016, <http://bahrainrights.org/en/node/7914>

35 “Blocking the website of Alwefaq Society,” [in Arabic] Alayam newspaper, June 14, 2016, <http://www.alayam.com/online/local/584797/Index.html>

36 The Twitter account of Alwefaq Society, accessed May 25, 2017 <https://twitter.com/ALWEFAQ>

37 The Facebook account of Alwefaq Society, accessed May 25, 2017 <https://web.facebook.com/AlwefaqNews>

38 Bahrain Watch, “Leading Bahraini ISPs are Blocking Telegram Traffic” June 28, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2qpuw8l>.

39 LuaLuaTV, Twitter post [in Arabic], “The Bahraini authorities blocks LuaLuaTV website for the fourth time in a week,” June 30, 2016, <https://twitter.com/LuaLuaTV/status/748646223972827141>

40 “Bahrain Follows Suit after UAE and Saudi Arabia, Blocks Qatari Media Outlets,” Bahrain Mirror, May 25, 2017, <http://bahrainmirror.org/en/news/38932.html>

other leaders in the region. Several countries cut off diplomatic relations with Qatar following the incident.<sup>41</sup>

YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and international blog-hosting services are freely available. However, several livestreaming services remain blocked,<sup>42</sup> such as PalTalk and Matam.tv, which have been used to conduct political seminars<sup>43</sup> and broadcast Shiite religious ceremonies, respectively.<sup>44</sup> The livestreaming service Periscope was still available in mid-2017. A crowdsourced list of 367 blocked websites indicated that 39 percent of sites blocked as of May 2017 were related to politics, while 23 percent related to the use of various internet tools, such as anonymizers and web proxies.<sup>45</sup>

Other blocked websites include Bahrain Online, a prominent online forum;<sup>46</sup> the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI); the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR); *Bahrain Mirror*, a popular news site; and *al-Quds al-Araby*, a London-based newspaper.<sup>47</sup> A report from November 2015 indicated that more than 85 percent of Bahraini websites are hosted outside of the country,<sup>48</sup> despite excellent infrastructure. Even if they are blocked, websites hosted overseas are less liable to being removed by local hosting providers in compliance of government orders and remain accessible to Bahrainis with access to censorship circumvention tools.

Multiple state organizations, including the Ministry of Information Affairs (MIA) and the Ministry of Interior, can order the blocking of a website without a court order. The MIA blocks websites that violate Articles 19 and 20 of the country's Press Rules and Regulations, which include material judged as "instigating hatred of the political regime, encroaching on the state's official religion, breaching ethics, encroaching on religions and jeopardizing public peace or raising issues whose publication is prohibited by the provisions of this law."<sup>49</sup> Thus, any site that criticizes the government, the ruling family, or the country's status quo is subject to blocking. An updated list of blocked websites is regularly sent to ISPs, which are instructed to "prohibit any means that allow access to sites blocked."<sup>50</sup> Licenses of ISPs may be revoked by the TRA for failing to cooperate with the MIA's blocking orders.<sup>51</sup>

In August 2016, the TRA ordered all telecommunications companies to employ a centralized system for blocking websites managed by the TRA.<sup>52</sup> The order may relate to a US\$ 1.2 million contract

---

41 Karen DeYoung and Ellen Nakashima, "UAE orchestrated hacking of Qatari government sites, sparking regional upheaval, according to U.S. intelligence officials" *Washington Post*, July 16, 2017, <http://wapo.st/2yRxiX>.

42 These sites include bambuser.com, ustream.tv, and other websites that stream directly to Twitter like twitcasting.tv, see, *Bahrain Freedom Index* (blog), <http://bit.ly/2b8aYNJ>.

43 Reporters Without Borders, "Crackdown continues in Bahrain, Bloggers go on trial in Emirates," June 16, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1OUsOae>.

44 BCHR, "Bahrain: The 'Cyber Safety Directorate' Monitors Internet Activity In Style Similar to Big Brother," November 25, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1FleBho>.

45 "At a Glance: Bahrain," Herdict, accessed on February 22, 2015, <http://www.herdict.org/explore/indepth?fc=BH>.

46 Ben Birnbaum, "Bahrain continues crackdown on Shi'ite opposition," *The Washington Times*, September 14, 2010, <http://bit.ly/1JQCXLS>.

"WebStatsDomian - Mail.bahrainonline.org," WebStatsDomain, accessed March 19, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1L7Fyla>.

47 Bahrain Center for Human Rights, "ANHRI condemns blocking Al-Quds Al-Arabi newspaper website," May 24, 2011, <http://bahrainrights.org/en/node/4126>

48 Ahmed AlDosari, "Bahraini websites migrate from their homeland ... Will they come back one day?," [in Arabic] (blog), November 21, 2015, <http://bit.ly/2bSztUN>.

49 Decree—by—Law No. 47 Regarding organizing the press, printing and publishing, October 23, 2002, <http://bit.ly/2blcAaB>.

50 Reporters Without Borders, "Authorities Step Up Offensiv Against Journalists and Websites," May 14, 2009, <http://bit.ly/1hDJh2l>.

51 Reporters Without Borders, "Authorities Step Up Offensiv Against Journalists and Websites."

52 TRA, Resolution No. (12) of 2016 Promulgating the Internet Safety Regulation, accessed May 25, 2017 <http://bit.ly/2r6vqbf>.

awarded earlier in the year to Canadian company Netsweeper to provide a “national website filtering solution.”<sup>53</sup> Netsweeper has since been identified on nine ISPs in the country, and filter political content on at least one.<sup>54</sup> It was not clear if the new technology will increase the amount of content subject to blocking, or just change the mechanisms involved.

The decision-making process and government policies behind the blocking of websites are not transparent. The list of all blocked websites is not available to the public. In addition, webmasters do not receive notification or explanations when their websites are banned. When trying to access a blocked site, users are only informed that the website has been “blocked for violating regulations and laws of Kingdom of Bahrain.” Although the law does technically allow affected individuals to appeal a block within 15 days, no such case has yet been adjudicated.

## Content Removal

Website administrators are held legally responsible for content posted on their platforms, including libel. In February 2016, the interior ministry stated that WhatsApp group administrators may be held liable for spreading false news if they fail to report incidents that occur in their group.<sup>55</sup> Spreading false news is a criminal offense. In addition, news emerged in April 2015 of plans to create a Bahraini national search engine with the help of Russian technology experts, based on Russia’s “Sputnik” search engine. The move would enable authorities to easily remove unwanted search results without the need to secure cooperation from U.S.-based search engines, such as Google.<sup>56</sup>

In January 2017, the government claimed that it had met with Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat to remove unidentified “inappropriate content.” According to transparency reports, neither Google, Facebook, Twitter, nor Snapchat removed any content based on requests from the Bahraini authorities. Twitter did receive two removal requests in the first half of 2017, but did not withhold any content.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, local observers complained that inappropriate content continued to be widely available on social media.<sup>58</sup>

Authorities also use extralegal measures to forcibly remove online content. Through arrests,<sup>59</sup> prosecutions,<sup>60</sup> and torture,<sup>61</sup> security forces have coerced many online forum moderators to

53 Bahrain Tender Board, “Awarded Tenders Monthly Report From 1/1/2016 to 1/31/2016,” page 5, [in Arabic] <http://goo.gl/iUJIF>.

54 Citizen Lab, “Tender Confirmed Rights At Risk: Verifying Netsweeper in Bahrain,” September 21, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2cCUQVO>.

55 “Interior Ministry: Group Admin in Bahrain, is responsible to the authorities for everything published,” [in Arabic] Lualua TV, February 19, 2016, <http://lualuatv.com/?p=33529>.

56 “Russia could help Bahrain in establishing a national search engine”, *UNLOCKPWD*, July 30, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1LNLSRJ>.

57 “Bahrain,” *Transparency Report*, Twitter, <https://transparency.twitter.com/en/countries/bh.html>.

58 “Culturally inappropriate content on social media blocked,” Bahrain News Agency, January 3, 2017, <https://www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/764204> and iProtestbh, Twitter post, January 13, 2017, 11:45AM <https://twitter.com/iprotestbh/status/819993775158231041>

59 Non exhaustive list of forum moderators who were subject to arrest found at: <http://bit.ly/1He9SYQ>; accessed via: BCHR, “Bahrain: After destruction of the actual protesting site at “the Pearl,” the government shifts to eliminate virtual protests,” May 17, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1LmOd7Y>.

60 Bahrain Gateway farewell tweet, accessed August 14, 2016, <https://twitter.com/b4bhcom/status/622400160346341376>.

61 Mona Kareem, “Bahrain: Twitter User Jailed for 66 Days for Tweeting,” *Global Voices*, December 5, 2011 <http://bit.ly/1JXimWe>.

permanently shut down their websites.<sup>62</sup> After being interrogated by security forces on May 24, 2017, activist Adel a-Marzooq deleted all the content he posted on Twitter between March and May 2017. He had reported extensively on a deadly crackdown on protestors in Diraz (see Restrictions on Connectivity).<sup>63</sup> Accounts operated by the opposition can also be temporarily shut down on Twitter because government supporters organize to report them for violating the platform's policies.<sup>64</sup>

## Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation

Decree 68/2016, passed by the MIA in July 2016, restricted use of electronic media by press outlets. Newspapers must now obtain licenses from Bahrain's mass media directorate in order to disseminate electronic media on websites or social media.<sup>65</sup> The law does not detail what criteria would be used to provide or renew the one-year license. Additionally, newspapers may not post videos over two minutes in length and are forbidden from live-streaming video. The law also stipulates that electronic media must reflect the same content as their printed counterparts, effectively limiting other multimedia content. Furthermore, outlets must provide a list of their social media accounts and website addresses, as well as the names of those who oversee them as part of the license application, exposing employees to possible monitoring and coercion. Under the existing press law, media professionals face six months' imprisonment and/or a fine of BHD 5,000 (US\$ 13,260) for publishing without a license.

Pressure also mounted on *al-Wasat*, Bahrain's only independent newspaper, which was separately banned from sharing YouTube content in early 2016.<sup>66</sup> In January 2017, the MIA temporarily barred *al-Wasat* from using electronic media tools, effectively shutting down its website and social media accounts for three days.<sup>67</sup> The move occurred one day after *al-Wasat* published a headline story about the execution of three political prisoners. The ministry claimed the outlet was "inciting a spirit of division and harming national unity." The MIA ordered the indefinite suspension of the entire publication in June.<sup>68</sup>

The authorities are known to manipulate online content in order to fabricate greater public support for government policies. According to the watchdog group Bahrain Watch, the government has hired 18 public relations (PR) firm for promotional campaigns since February 2011, representing at least US\$ 32 million in contracts.<sup>69</sup> At least one PR agency was contracted to provide "web optimization and blogging" services,<sup>70</sup> while others were hired for online reputation management.<sup>71</sup>

62 Moderator of the AlDair Forum talks about his detention, saying he was forced to show the interrogation officer how to close the website: "Ahmed al-Dairi Moderator of AlDair Forums in the first episode of his testimony: thus eased voice of Zakaria AlAsheeri forever," [in Arabic] *Bahrain Mirror*, January 4, 2012, <http://bahrainmirror.com/article.php?id=2678&cid=117>.

63 iProtestbh, Twitter post, May 26, 2017, 04:49AM <https://twitter.com/iprotestbh/status/868071510661095424>

64 Bahrain Detainees, Twitter post, May 12, 2015, 8:23 AM, A tweet mentioning one opposition accounts that has been suspended due to reports, accessed July 31, 2015 <https://twitter.com/BH14Detainees/status/598146464934547456>.

65 "Information Minister issues edict 68/2016," Bahrain News Agency, July 16, 2016, <http://bna.bh/portal/en/news/736106>

66 "IAA prevents Alwasat from using "Video" and YouTube," [in Arabic] *Alwasat*, January 25, 2016, <http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/1072283.html>.

67 "The Ministry of Information Affairs decided to stop the circulation and use of Al-Wasat newspaper for electronic media immediately..." [in Arabic] *Bahrain News Agency*, January 16, 2017, <http://bna.bh/portal/news/766017>

68 "Bahrain: Only Independent Newspaper Shut Down," Human Rights Watch, June 18, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/18/bahrain-only-independent-newspaper-shut-down>.

69 Bahrain Watch, "PR Watch – keeping an eye on the Kingdom's PR," <http://bahrainwatch.org/pr/>.

70 "Trippi & Associates Manipulate Internet Content on Behalf of Bahrain Government," *Bahrain Freedom Index* (blog), July 20, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1L7nCqI>.

71 Marcus Baram, "Lobbyists Jump Ship in Wake of Mideast Unrest," *Huffington Post*, March 25, 2011, <http://huff.to/1ePbiw>.

In October 2014, one of these PR companies tried to force *The Huffington Post* not to write about the United Kingdom's investigation of torture allegations against the Bahraini king's son.<sup>72</sup> Progovernment blogs like *Citizens of Bahrain* also spread propaganda.<sup>73</sup> Authorities have urged progovernment users to post about certain topics, sometimes with unintended consequences.<sup>74</sup> In January 2014, the prime minister and the minister of telecommunications held several public meetings with progovernment users to encourage them to "defend Bahrain's ruling system."<sup>75</sup>

Similarly, an "army of trolls" has been active on Twitter since February 2011,<sup>76</sup> when hundreds of accounts suddenly emerged to collectively harass and intimidate online activists,<sup>77</sup> commentators, and journalists who voiced support for protests and human rights.<sup>78</sup> The progovernment trolls have been moderately effective in silencing or reducing the activity of opposition voices both inside Bahrain<sup>79</sup> and abroad.<sup>80</sup> The trolls have also played a vital role in spreading information that is controversial, offensive or false,<sup>81</sup> in order to distort the image of protesters, spread hate and conflict or discredit information posted on social networks.<sup>82</sup> These troll accounts usually have few or no followers and tend to appear and disappear in coordination with one another. In one recent incident, trolls sprang into action in June 2016 after a decision to revoke the nationality of Isa Qassim, the foremost Shiite religious authority in Bahrain. Researchers said 50 percent of tweets distributed with the #Bahrain hashtag derived from bots and trolls tweeting anti-Shiite messages. In a period of 12 hours on June 22, over 5,000 sectarian tweets were registered on the hashtag.<sup>83</sup> Twitter suspended 1,800 bot accounts related to the manipulation campaign.<sup>84</sup>

In August 2013, Bahrain Watch revealed evidence of connections between the Bahraini government and "extremist" accounts on Twitter and Facebook, which advocated violence against both the government and protesters.<sup>85</sup> It was also revealed that the government impersonates opposition

72 James Dorsey, "Bahrain rattled by UK court's opening of door to investigation of torture allegations," *The World Post*, October 21, 2014, <http://huff.to/10vinw>.

73 Citizens for Bahrain website, accessed May 26, 2017, <https://www.citizensforbahrain.com>

74 "Bahrain's Interior Minister Launched Hate Campaign..Sectarian Takfir Discourse Returned Under Hashtag #No\_to\_Iranian\_Intervention," *Bahrain Mirror*, August 22, 2015, <http://bahrainmirror.org/news/25858.html>.

75 "HRH Premier calls for the need to use social networks to defend the nation," *Bahrain News Agency*, January 14, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1L7p6S3>.

76 Bob Hooker, "Bahrain's Troll Army," *Web 3.0 Lab* (blog), February 17, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1W8HJN3>.

77 See Brian Dooley, "No Stamp Required: All Too Easy for #Bahrain Twitter Trolls," *Huffington Post*, September 25, 2015 <http://huff.to/1WmSue>, and Brian Dooley, "'Troll' Attacks on #Bahrain Tweets Show Depth of Government Attempts to Silence Dissent," *The World Post*, November 17, 2011, [http://huff.to/1i\\_mxf9](http://huff.to/1i_mxf9).

78 J. David Goodman, "'Twitter Trolls' Haunt Discussions of Bahrain Online," *The Lede* (blog), *The New York Times*, October 11, 2011, <http://nyti.ms/1NBI3Sv>.

79 iManamaa, Twitter post, May 13, 2011, 7:39am, <http://bit.ly/1iCuvtJ>; Sultan al-Qassemi, "Pioneer Bloggers in the Gulf Arab States," *Jadaliyya*, December 20, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1k4jzR5>; Bob Hooker, "Disturbing Drop in Tweeting in Bahrain," *Web 3.0 Lab* (blog), March 22, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1OcDDik>.

80 "Twitter Trolling as Propaganda Tactic: Bahrain and Syria," *Jillian C. York* (blog), December 10, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1hXiMFN>.

81 "So Many Trolls but so Few Leaders: The Information War in Bahrain," *Marc Owen Jones*, March 14, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1V0gq5c>; Hussein Ibish, *The Bahrain Uprising: Towards Confrontation or Accommodation?*, The Henry Jackson Society, November 2011, 9, <http://bit.ly/1P8SNpf>.

82 David Wheeler, "In the Arab Spring's Wake, Twitter Trolls and Facebook Spies," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (blog), November 29, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1Kx8zdJ>.

83 Marc Owen Jones, "The Automation of Sectarianism: Are Twitter Bots Spreading Sectarianism in the Gulf?," June 21, 2016, <http://bit.ly/28TQtwT>, and Marc Owen Jones, "Around 51% of Tweets on #Bahrain Hashtag Created by Automated Sectarian Bots," June 22, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2s0Jcfm>.

84 Marc Owen Jones, "New Sectarian Bots Still Flooding Twitter with Anti-Shia Hate Speech," June 28, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2qYtiUs> and Video by Erin Kilbride, Twitter post, July 4, 2016, 14:20PM [https://twitter.com/neo\\_chlo/status/750076928846159872](https://twitter.com/neo_chlo/status/750076928846159872)

85 Bill Marczak, "Is Bahrain's Government running extremist accounts?" Bahrain Watch, August 5, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1UpiYil>.

figure on social media in order to send malicious links, such as IP trackers, to anonymous government critics that can be used to identify and prosecute them.<sup>86</sup>

The state also issues official statements warning against the discussion of certain subjects and the “misuse” of social media.<sup>87</sup> On January 3, 2016, the interior ministry threatened to take action against any insult or “negative discussion” of the Saudi executions of Nimr al-Nimr, a prominent Shiite cleric, and 42 other men.<sup>88</sup> On March 26, 2015, the interior ministry also issued a warning that it would take steps against anyone expressing opinions against Bahrain’s involvement in the Saudi-led coalition conducting airstrikes in Yemen<sup>89</sup> (see Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities).

There are some government restrictions on online advertising, but many opposition websites continue to operate nonetheless. While it is difficult for blocked websites to secure advertising, popular sites such as *Bahrain Mirror* (390,000 views monthly) have not faced significant financial pressures. This is due to the fact that most Bahraini opposition websites are run with limited resources, and are often self-funded. Furthermore, the websites continue to receive large amounts of traffic from users within Bahrain through the use of proxy services, dynamic IP addresses, and virtual private network (VPN) applications. While the government does block access to circumvention tools, including workarounds such as Google Page Translate, Google cached pages, and online mobile emulators, internet savvy Bahrainis tend to bypass the restrictions.

The internet remains the main source of information and news for many Bahrainis, particularly those active on Twitter and Facebook.<sup>90</sup> However, internet users exercise a higher degree of self-censorship, particularly as investigations of users’ online activities have been launched at workplaces and universities.<sup>91</sup> On Twitter, online forums, and comment sections, most people use pseudonyms due to the fear of being targeted by the authorities.<sup>92</sup> Many share content privately on social media instead of publicly. At least some have temporarily withdrawn from Twitter after receiving threats to their personal safety.<sup>93</sup>

## Digital Activism

Activists rely on digital tools to bring attention to protests and human rights violations, given restrictions on press freedom and the lack of international media coverage, which is compounded by the fact that many prominent journalists are barred from the country.<sup>94,95</sup> Online campaigns were

---

86 Bill Marczak, “Bahrain Govt using fake Twitter accounts to track online critics,” *Bahrain Watch*, press release, July 31, 2013, <http://bit.ly/1hXjfrJ>.

87 “MOI: legal action against anyone who abuses the use of social media and raises sectarian strife,” [in Arabic] *Alwasat*, June 27, 2015, <http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/1003344.html>.

88 “Ministry of Interior (MOI): legal actions against any misuse or abuse on the implementation of the Saudi judicial rulings,” [in Arabic] *Alwasat*, January 3, 2016, <http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/1063913.html>.

89 “MOI warns against division, sedition,” March 26, 2015, *Bahrain News Agency*, <http://www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/660794>.

90 “Two million and 200K accounts in the social networks in Bahrain in 2015,” [in Arabic] *Alwasat*, December 15, 2015 <http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/1057013.html>.

91 Simeon Kerr, “Manama fight back in cyberspace,” *Financial Times*, May 23, 2011, <http://on.ft.com/maUYxm>.

92 Nancy Messieh, “Online anonymity: A gateway to freedom or abuse?” *The Next Web*, August 14, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1PNCI8x>.

93 “Bahrain doctor @BAHRAINDOCTOR threatened with arrest because of her tweets,” *Bahrain Freedom Index* (blog), accessed July 31, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1DhPISu>.

94 “Access Denied,” a project of the independent research and advocacy organization Bahrain Watch, chronicles the many journalists, researchers, academics, and NGO workers that were expelled from or denied access to Bahrain from the 2011 uprising until now. See, <http://bahrainwatch.org/access/>.

95 Amira al Hussaini, “Bahrain: Tweeting Appalling Conditions at Jaw Prison,” *Global Voices*, July 19, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1ikgVuE>.

picked up by international media in the past year. Over ten thousands tweets were posted with the #save\_Bahrain\_prisoners hashtag, resulting in a BBC report on prison conditions in the country.<sup>96</sup> Over 40,000 tweets have been posted under another hashtag, #Diraz, as citizen journalists covered local violence in 2017.<sup>97</sup> Social media posts were used by experts to identify the types of weapons used by security forces against the protestors.<sup>98</sup>

In addition, the “Coalition of February 14 Youth” protest movement continues to use social networks<sup>99</sup> to organize protests and bring international attention to local causes.<sup>100</sup> YouTube videos are uploaded to document police attacks on civilians and torture testimonies,<sup>101</sup> and relatives or friends of detainees regularly use Twitter to campaign for their release and to provide updates about prison conditions.<sup>102</sup>

## Violations of User Rights

*Violations of user rights in Bahrain were rampant, with at least 18 users arrested, detained, or prosecuted over the coverage period. Collectively, 148 months of prison sentences were passed down to 12 users, while others remain on trial or in arbitrarily detention for charges like insulting the king or defaming the government. Bahraini law does not contain adequate protections for free speech, given provisions that ban criticism of the royal family, the spread of false news, or insults to foreign nations. A new law was passed to allow for the trial of civilians in military tribunals.*

## Legal Environment

Bahrain’s legal environment presents many obstacles to internet freedom. According to Article 23 of the constitution, freedom of expression is guaranteed, “provided that the fundamental beliefs of Islamic doctrine are not infringed, the unity of the people is not prejudiced, and discord or sectarianism is not aroused.”<sup>103</sup> Article 26 states that all written, telephonic, and electronic communications “shall not be censored or their confidentiality be breached except in exigencies specified by law and in accordance with procedures and under guarantees prescribed by the law.”<sup>104</sup> The Press and Publications Law of 2002 promises free access to information “without prejudice to the requirements of national security and defending the homeland.” Bahraini journalists have argued that these qualifying statements and loosely-worded clauses allow for arbitrary interpretation and, in practice, the negation of the many rights they seek to uphold.<sup>105</sup>

96 “BBC Trend,” [in Arabic] BBC, June 12, 2016 [http://www.bbc.com/arabic/blogs/2016/06/160612\\_social\\_media\\_12\\_june?ocid=socialflow\\_twitter](http://www.bbc.com/arabic/blogs/2016/06/160612_social_media_12_june?ocid=socialflow_twitter).

97 “#Diraz: Bahraini anger on social networking sites,” [in Arabic] BBC, January 27, 2017, [http://www.bbc.com/arabic/trending-38771006?ocid=socialflow\\_twitter](http://www.bbc.com/arabic/trending-38771006?ocid=socialflow_twitter).

98 Bahrain Watch, “Critical Injury as Armed Men Fire 9mm Rounds and Shotguns at Civilians in Diraz,” January 26, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2n9Cnpe>.

99 Coalition 14 Feb, Twitter Account, <https://twitter.com/COALITION14>.

100 Toby C. Jones and Ala’a Shehabi, “Bahrain’s revolutionaries,” *Foreign Policy*, January 2, 2012, <http://atfp.co/1JBnf7R>; U.S. Embassy Bahrain, “Demonstration Notice 3 – January 17, 2013,” news release, January 17, 2013, <http://1.usa.gov/1JDUPMH>.

101 BCHR, “Blocking the Documentary ‘Systematic Torture in Bahrain’ on YouTube,” February 8, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1NBlaO4>.

102 BahrainDetainees, Twitter Account, <https://twitter.com/FreedomPrayers/lists/bahraindetainees>.

103 Constitution of the Kingdom of Bahrain, art. 23, <http://www.shura.bh/en/LegislativeResource/Constitution/Pages/default.aspx>.

104 Constitution of the Kingdom of Bahrain, art. 26.

105 IREX, “Bahrain,” *Media Sustainability Index 2008, 2009*, [https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/MSIMENA08\\_Bahrain.pdf](https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/MSIMENA08_Bahrain.pdf).

In April 2017, the king approved a constitutional amendment to allow for the trial of civilians in military courts.<sup>106</sup> When military courts last operated in this manner during a state of emergency in 2011, judges passed long sentences of 15 years and life imprisonment to bloggers. In addition, the public prosecutor has begun to use a legal provision that calls for the prosecution of teenagers' parents when their children are arrested for criminal activities, such as "misusing social media."<sup>107</sup>

Online censorship and criminal penalties for online speech are currently enforced under the 2002 Press and Publications Law,<sup>108</sup> which does not specifically mention online activities but was extended to mobile phones in 2010.<sup>109</sup> The law allows for prison sentences from six months to five years for repeat offenders for publishing material that criticizes Islam, its followers, or the king, as well as content that instigates violent crimes or the overthrow of the government.<sup>110</sup> In addition, the 2002 Telecommunications Law contains penalties for several online activities, such as the transmission of messages that are offensive to public policy or morals.<sup>111</sup> However, sentences can be longer if users are tried under the penal code or terrorism laws, especially when it comes to social media cases, where the current press and publication law is not used.<sup>112</sup> For instance, under the penal code, any user who "deliberately disseminates a false statement" that may be damaging to national security or public order may be imprisoned for up to two years.<sup>113</sup> Under Article 309 of the Penal Code, any "expression against one of the recognized religious sects" or ridicule of their rituals may be punished by a fine of BHD 100 (US\$ 266) or prison term of one year. The government has used these vague clauses to interrogate and prosecute several bloggers and online commentators.

## Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

Between June 2016 and May 2017, at least 22 individuals were arrested, detained, or prosecuted for their online activities.<sup>114</sup> While many were still on trial as of May 2017, 148 months of prison sentences were collectively passed down on 12 Bahraini users during the coverage period.

The Electronic Crimes Directorate publishes official statistics of cybercrime cases each year, although it is difficult to determine which cases are related to political, social, or religious speech that is protected under international norms. A total of 682 cases were noted in 2016, including 73 cases of defamation, 57 cases of "insulting a statutory body," 9 cases of "inciting hatred against the regime," 7 cases of "dissemination of false news," 3 cases of "insulting a foreign country," and 339 cases of

106 "Bahrain King approves military trials for civilians," The Hindu, April 3, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2r8qggR>.

107 "MOI: arrest of number of those who abused social media," [in Arabic] *Alwasat*, January 4, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2b9ULdQ>.

108 For cases where the authorities have used the 2002 press law to censor online websites, see BCHR, "Website accused of violating press code, BCHR concerned that move is aimed at silencing critical voices," October 1, 2008, <http://bahrainrights.org/en/node/2446>.

"Closing a blow to freedom of opinion and expression," [in Arabic] *Alwasat*, April 25, 2010, <http://bit.ly/1JQ3ahA>; "Blocking users 'Twitter' caused by a violation of the Copyright Act," [in Arabic] *Alwasat*, January 3, 2010, <http://bit.ly/1JQ3ahA>.

109 Habib Toumi, "Bahrain imposes blackout on BlackBerry news sharing," *Habib Toumi* (blog), April 8, 2010, <http://bit.ly/1IBqIM4>.

110 Press and Publications Law of 2002 of the Kingdom of Bahrain (No.47 of 2002).

111 The Telecommunications Law Of The Kingdom Of Bahrain, Legislative Decree 48.

112 "Alhammedi: No dereliction in dealing with the complaints of the misuse of social media," [in Arabic] *Alwasat*, August 4, 2015, <http://bit.ly/2bqEFfV>.

113 Bahrain Penal code, 1976, art. 168, <http://bahrainrights.org/BCHR/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Bahrain-Penal-Code.doc>.

114 List of prosecuted online users 2016-2017: <http://bit.ly/2rrAWYQ>, accessed via [bahrainrights.org](http://bahrainrights.org).

“misuse of electronic devices.” Additionally, there were 54 cases of “hacking.”<sup>115</sup> Multiple users have also been arrested for calling for “illegal assemblies”.<sup>116</sup>

Several people were prosecuted for “insulting the king” over the coverage period:

- Soccer player Mohammad al-Alawiyat was arrested on June 9, 2016 for his tweets.<sup>117</sup> He was held in pretrial detention until September 2016. A trial had not been publicly reported by mid-2017.
- On June 27, 2016, Bahraini artist Khalil al-Madhoon was arrested in relation to a controversial Instagram comment on whether the word “majesty” applies better to God or the king.<sup>118</sup> He was released one month later.
- On August 31, 2016, two users who tweeted under pseudonyms were sentenced under Article 214 of the Penal Code.<sup>119</sup> Taiba Ismaeel, who was arrested on 26 June 2016, received a one-year prison sentence and a fine of BHD 1,000 (US\$ 2,650). Hameed Khatam, who was arrested on July 25, 2016, received a sentence of two years in prison.<sup>120</sup> The sentence was later reduced by one year in November.<sup>121</sup>
- On February 9, 2017, Younis al-Shakouri was sentenced to one year in prison for a tweet. He had been arrested on July 25, 2016.

Others were prosecuted for criticizing the government:

- On June 8, 2016, Khalid Abdulaal, a former member of parliament, was sentenced to one year in prison for “insulting the ministry of interior” on Twitter in 2014. He had received an earlier one-year sentence in May 2015 for denouncing the use of torture to extract confessions. As an MP, he was immune from prosecution at the time he published the statements.<sup>122</sup>
- On June 16, 2016, Habeeb Jaafar Ahmed, a 45-year-old military officer was sentenced to three months in prison for “inciting hatred against the regime and security forces” on Twitter and Facebook.<sup>123</sup> He had been arrested on April 10, 2016.

115 “Combating cybercrime attends to 682 reports in 2016, half of which are misuse of communications devices,” [in Arabic] *Alayam*, February 26, 2017, <http://www.alayam.com/alayam/Variety/634778/News.html>

116 “Interior Ministry: the arrest of people who posted inflammatory material to call for unauthorized sit-ins through the means of communication,” [in Arabic] *Alwasat*, July 26, 2016 <http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/1141385.html>.

117 “Bahraini Authorities Charge Football Player over “Insulting Bahrain’s King,” Bahrain Mirror, June 10, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2rISlfn>.

118 “On Eve of UN Resolution for Internet Freedom: Websites blocked, Internet Disrupted, and Social Media Posts Continue to Lead to Arrests in Bahrain,” BCHR, July 3, 2016, <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/7969>.

119 Article 214 proscribes “a punishment of imprisonment for a period of no less than one year and no more than seven years and a fine of no less than BD1,000 and no more than BD 10,000 will be inflicted upon any person who offend in public the Monarch of the Kingdom of Bahrain, the flag or the national emblem.” BCHR, “Bahrain King: Up to 7 Years Imprisonment if You Insult Me!,” February 9, 2014, <http://bahrainrights.org/en/node/6747>.

120 “Bahraini Authorities Sentence More Activists to Prison Terms for Criticising the King,” BCHR, September 9, 2016, <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/8148>

121 “Hameed Khatam’s prison sentence reduced from two years to one year on charges of “insulting the king,” [in Arabic] Manama Post, November 17, 2016, <http://www.manamapost.com/news.php?name=2016041622>

122 “More arrests and jail sentences in Bahrain over social media posts,” BCHR, June 20, 2016, <http://bahrainrights.org/en/node/7919>

123 “More arrests and jail sentences in Bahrain over social media posts,” BCHR, June 20, 2016, <http://bahrainrights.org/en/node/7919>

- On November 10, 2016, human rights lawyer Mohamed al-Tajer was charged with “insulting government institutions, inciting hatred of a religious sect, and misusing a telecommunications device” under Articles 172, 216, 290 of the penal code. He had sent a private voice message over WhatsApp stating “It’s clear that there is a team in the public prosecution and cybercrimes division whose only job is to sit at computers and intercept every word about Sunnis, Saudi Arabia, hatred of the regime, or insults against the king.” Additionally, he was interrogated over a tweet that said, in English, “History tells stories of falling dictators, but the lesson is never learnt #bahrain” and for retweeting a post that referred to the government as “the regime of prohibition.”<sup>124</sup>
- On January 15, 2017, the same day Bahrain executed three political prisoners,<sup>125</sup> opposition leader Ebrahim Sharif was interrogated for criticizing the executions on Twitter.<sup>126</sup> On March 20, he was charged with “inciting hatred” against the regime (Article 165 of the penal code) and against “factions of society” (Article 172),<sup>127</sup> over a separate Twitter post which criticized the authorities for dissolving political opposition societies. He had also shared information about human rights violations.<sup>128</sup>
- In February 2017, a cleric was fined BHD 50 (US\$ 133) for insulting parliament on Instagram.<sup>129</sup> He had called the institution “a joke.”

Several individuals have been arrested or fined for defaming local figures and institutions:

- In July 2016, a board member of Bahrain’s Chamber of Commerce and Industry lodged a complaint against the board’s chairperson over a message sent over a WhatsApp group dedicated to board members. The board chair was ordered to pay a fine of BHD 50 (US\$ 133) in October.<sup>130</sup> Separately, Mohamed al-Aradi, a businessman active on Twitter was summoned twice in February and March 2017,<sup>131</sup> for allegedly defaming the same Chamber.<sup>132</sup>
- On 15 August 2016, police arrested Ghada Jamsheer, a human rights defender and blogger, when she returned to Bahrain from overseas.<sup>133</sup> Despite ill health, she was required to serve part of a 10-month prison sentence handed down in relation to allegations about corrupt

124 “Bahrain: Human Rights Lawyer Charged,” HRW, December 1, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/01/bahrain-human-rights-lawyer-charged>

125 “Bahrain Executes three Stateless Torture Victims Following King Hamad’s Authorisation,” BCHR, January 15, 2017, <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/8434>

126 Bahrain Mirror, Twitter post, January 15, 2017, 09:36AM <https://twitter.com/BahrainmirrorEN/status/820686137807306752> and original tweet, Ebrahim Sharif, Twitter post [in Arabic], January 14, 2017, 07:45AM <https://twitter.com/ebrahimsharif/status/820295702878134272>

127 “BAHRAIN: Political Opposition Leader Ebrahim Sharif Charged With ‘Inciting Hatred,’” BCHR, March 20, 2017, <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/8611>

128 “Authorities release Ebrahim Sharif after questioning him about his tweets on martyr Abdullah Al-Ajouz,” [in Arabic] Bahrain Mirror, March 20, 2017, <http://bahrainmirror.org/news/37311.html>

129 “The cleric Bashar al-Ali was fined 50 dinars for insulting the House of Representatives,” [in Arabic] *Alwasat*, February 8, 2017, <http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/1208401.html>

130 “The former chief executive of the Chamber of Commerce was convicted of insulting over Whatsapp,” [in Arabic] Bahrain Mirror, October 2, 2016, <http://bahrainmirror.org/news/33983.html>

131 Mohamed AlAradi, Twitter post [in Arabic], March 22, 2017, <https://twitter.com/mohamedaradi/status/844480302504464384>

132 “Tweeting leads the Activist AlAradi to the prosecution,” [in Arabic] *Alwasat*, May 12, 2017, <http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/1212841.html>

133 “BCHR Condemns Imprisonment of Women’s Rights Defender Ghada Jamsheer,” BCHR, October 7, 2016, <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/8232>

management at King Hamad University Hospital that she published on Twitter in 2014.<sup>134</sup> In December 2016 she was released and given a government job in lieu of the remainder of her sentence.

- On November 29, 2016, Social media activist Faisal Hayyat was sentenced to three months in prison<sup>135</sup> over a tweet deemed to “insult a sect and a religious figure.”<sup>136</sup> Local NGOs speculated that the real reason for his arrest may have been his publishing of a letter to the minister of interior over Facebook,<sup>137</sup> in which he claimed he had been tortured by security forces in 2011.<sup>138</sup>

Nabeel Rajab, one of Bahrain’s most prominent human rights defenders and Twitter users,<sup>139</sup> has been in and out of prison since 2012 for various cases linked to online speech.<sup>140</sup> Rajab is the president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, a nongovernmental organization that remains active despite a 2004 government order to close it.<sup>141</sup> As of May 2017, he had been in pretrial detention for almost a year,<sup>142</sup> and had undergone 13 hearings on charges including “spreading false news during a time of war” and “insulting a statutory body.”<sup>143</sup> The charges were based on Twitter posts about the Saudi-led coalition airstrikes in Yemen and the alleged torture of detainees at Jaw prison.<sup>144</sup> In July, he was sentenced to 2 years in prison for ““for disseminating false news, statements and rumors about the internal situation in the kingdom that would undermine its prestige and status,” and remains detained as his appeal has been repeatedly delayed.<sup>145</sup>

At least eight other internet users are still serving prison sentences from previous years, including

134 “Bahrain: Human rights defender Ghada Jamsheer freed from prison, allowed to work off remainder of her sentence,” GCHR, December 12, 2016, <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1448>.

135 “The imprisonment of the media activist «Faisal Hayat» 3 months with effect, [in Arabic] Manama Post, November 29, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2rJ721S>.

136 “Journalist Faisal Hayyat Facing Prison for “Defamatory” Tweets,” BCHR, November 3, 2016, <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/8292>.

137 Faisal Hayyat, Facebook post of letter to the minister of interior [in Arabic], October 1, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/faisal.hayyat.16/posts/10154731342476162>.

138 “Journalist and Social Media Activist Arrested after Writing Critical Letter to Minister of Interior about Torture Suffered in 2011,” BCHR, October 10, 2016, <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/8238>.

139 Rajab was ranked the “most connected” Twitter user in Bahrain according to a survey, with over 260,000 followers as of May 2015. See: Wamda, *How the Middle East Tweets: Bahrain’s Most Connected Report* December 3, 2012, <http://bit.ly/1Jf8vdo>.

140 Nabeel Rajab was first arrested on May 5, 2012 and held for over three weeks for “insulting a statutory body” in relation to a criticism directed at the Ministry of Interior over Twitter. On June 9, 2012, he was arrested again after tweeting about the unpopularity of the Prime Minister (also a member of the royal family) in the city of Al-Muharraq, following the sheikh’s visit there. A group of citizens from the city promptly sued Rajab for libel in a show of obedience to the royal family. On June 28, 2012, he was convicted of charges related to his first arrest and ordered to pay a fine of BHD 300 (\$800). Shortly after he was released on bail, he was re-arrested on July 9, 2012 after a court sentenced him to three months imprisonment for the Al-Muharraq incident. The court of appeals later acquitted Rajab, although he had already served most of his sentence. He was kept in prison until May 2014 to serve two-year sentence for “calling for illegal gatherings over social networks.” He was then arrested and imprisoned from April 2, 2015 to July 13, 2015 as part of a six-month sentence on charges of insulting public institutions under article 216 of the penal code for a tweet in which he questioned whether Bahraini security institutions are “ideological incubators” for the so-called “Islamic State” terrorist group. He was released that July for health reasons but placed on a travel ban.

141 BCHR, “About BCHR,” <http://bahrainrights.org/en/about-us>.

142 “Updates: Arrest and Detention of BCHR’s President Nabeel Rajab,” BCHR, accessed May 26, 2017, <http://bit.ly/28MiH7o>

143 Nabeel.Rajab, Instagram post, August 2015, <https://instagram.com/p/5aXVEGyGET/>.

144 BCHR, “Nabeel Rajab’s case update,” May 6, 2015, <http://bahrainrights.org/en/node/7517>.

145 Joe Stork, “Bahraini Rights Critic Imprisoned for Yemen Tweets,” Human Rights Watch, September 28, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/28/bahraini-rights-critic-imprisoned-yemen-tweets>.

Ahmed Humaidan, Hussain Hubail, Sayed Ahmed al-Mousawi,<sup>146</sup> Fadhel Abbas,<sup>147</sup> Hussain Khamis, Yousif al-Amm,<sup>148</sup> and Abduljalil al-Singace. Al-Singace, a prominent human rights defender and blogger, has been serving a life sentence since 2011 on charges of possessing links to a terrorist organization aiming to overthrow the government,<sup>149</sup> disseminating false news, and inciting protests against the government.<sup>150</sup>

## Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

Several reports have documented the use of spyware by the government against dissidents. In November 2015, new evidence showed that Bahrain had used Remote Control System (RCS) from Italian cybersecurity firm Hacking Team. The spyware allows remote monitoring, including recording phone calls, logging keystrokes, taking screenshots, and activating cameras, among other functions.<sup>151</sup> Malicious links are often sent from Twitter and Facebook accounts impersonating well-known opposition figures' friends,<sup>152</sup> or even accounts of arrested users.<sup>153</sup> In October 2015, at least four cases were recorded in which opposition members received emails containing malicious spyware.<sup>154</sup>

Given that the authorities have been quick to identify social media users who operate under a pseudonym, many users are concerned about restrictions on the ability to use ICTs anonymously. The TRA requires users to provide identification when using Wi-Fi and WiMax connections, and the government prohibits the sale or use of unregistered prepaid mobile SIM cards.<sup>155</sup> Further restrictions on the sale of SIM cards were introduced in December 2015. The TRA issued a regulation that limits individuals from purchasing no more than 10 pre-paid SIM cards from a single service provider. Individuals must be physically present when registering SIM cards and providers must verify the identity of all subscribers on an annual basis, including through fingerprinting.<sup>156</sup> Additionally, SIM cards are only available from service providers, not third parties.<sup>157</sup> The move came after the recent prosecution of individuals accused of using SIM cards to carry out bomb attacks.<sup>158</sup>

In January 2017, the government ratified the Arab Treaty on Combating Cybercrime, a set of

146 For further details refer to FOTN 2016 Report.

147 "Amendment of the penalty of former Wahdawi Fadhil Abbas to three years," [in Arabic] *Alwasat*, October 27, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2e0aldp>.

148 "3 years instead of 5 for twitter account owner of «Haji Ahmed»,» [in Arabic] *Alayam*, November 12, 2016 <http://bit.ly/2s1fnvd>.

149 Reporters Without Borders, "Detained blogger Abduljalil Al-Singace on hunger strike," September 6, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1N5BjuP>.

150 Reporters Without Borders, "Detained blogger Abduljalil Al-Singace on hunger strike."

151 Bahrain Watch, "How The Government of Bahrain Acquired Hacking Team's Spyware," November 13, 2015, <http://bit.ly/2bVNSQ5>.

152 Bahrain Watch, "The IP Spy Files: How Bahrain's Government Silences Anonymous Online Dissent", May 15, 2013, accessed March 31, 2014, <https://bahrainwatch.org/ipspy/viewreport.php>.

153 Bahrain Watch, Twitter Post, March 13, 2015, 12:28 PM, <https://twitter.com/BHWatch/status/576464787422339072>.

154 Bahrain Watch, "Urgent Security Alert for Bahraini Activists," October 18, 2015, <http://bit.ly/2ba422J>.

155 Geoffrey Bew, "Technology Bill Rapped," *Gulf Daily News*, July 20, 2006, <http://bit.ly/1UduN5E>.

156 "Adoption of the use of fingerprint to record phone chip," [in Arabic] *Alayam*, July 28, 2016, <http://goo.gl/ytz8Zu>.

157 TRA, "TRA issues SIM-Card Enabled Telecommunications Services Registration Regulation," February 7, 2016, <http://bit.ly/1Q1eK8l>.

and TRA, "Resolution No. (13) of 2015, Promulgating the SIM-Card Enabled Telecommunications Services Registration Regulation," accessed August 14, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2bv8bmV>.

158 "7 and 3 years imprisonment for three Bahrainis who have registered phone chips in the names of Asians," [in Arabic] *Alayam*, November 9, 2015, <http://goo.gl/hHqupc>.

standards developed several years ago to stem the misuse of telecommunications devices, financial fraud, the promotion of terrorism, and access to pornographic content online. While Bahrain already passed a computer crimes law containing many of the provisions in 2014, the treaty establishes new rules on the retention of user data and real-time monitoring of activities, as well as a mechanism for sharing information between signatories to help combat transnational crime. The lack of strong human rights standards in the treaty may increase the scope for privacy infractions once it is transposed into local law.<sup>159</sup>

Since March 2009, the TRA has mandated that all telecommunications companies keep a record of customers' phone calls, emails, and website visits for up to three years. The companies are also obliged to provide the security services with access to subscriber data upon request from the public prosecution, while the provision of the data content requires a court order.<sup>160</sup>

Cybercafes are also subject to increasing surveillance. Oversight of their operations is coordinated by a commission consisting of members from four ministries, who work to ensure strict compliance with rules that prohibit access for minors and require that all computer terminals are fully visible to observers.<sup>161</sup>

A Cyber Safety Directorate at the Ministry of State for Telecommunications Affairs was launched in November 2013 to monitor websites and social media networks, ostensibly to "ensure they are not used to instigate violence or terrorism and disseminate lies and fallacies that pose a threat to the kingdom's security and stability."<sup>162</sup> Officials had earlier created a unit to monitor social media and foreign news websites to "respond to false information that some channels broadcast" in 2011.<sup>163</sup>

A 2014 computer crimes law (60/2014) criminalizes the illegal access of information systems, illegal eavesdropping over transmission, and the access and possession of pornographic electronic materials.<sup>164</sup> It also criminalizes the encryption of data with criminal intentions at a time when encryption is often considered a criminal act.

## Intimidation and Violence

Typically, arrests of Bahraini users involve extralegal methods of intimidation, such as physical violence and torture.<sup>165</sup> In April 2017, the family of Najah Habeeb reported that she was subjected to beating and sexual harassment in order to extract confessions on charges including "running accounts on Twitter and Telegram" that she used for "insulting the king" and spreading "hatred of the regime." As of mid-2017, she was still in pretrial detention.

Rights activist Ebtisam al-Saegh, who with the advocacy group Salam for Democracy and Human

159 "Law No. (2) of 2017 on the ratification of the Arab Convention to combat technical crimes of information," [in Arabic] Official Gazette, January 26, 2017, <http://www.legalaffairs.gov.bh/Media/LegalPDF/K0217.pdf>.

160 Geoffrey Bew, "Big Brother Move Rapped," *Gulf Daily News*, March 25, 2009, <http://bit.ly/1MUlfsL>.

161 Reporters Without Borders, "Countries Under Surveillance: Bahrain."

162 "Shaikh Fawaz praises Cyber Safety Directorate," *Bahrain News Agency*, November 18, 2013 <http://www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/588716>.

163 Andy Sambridge, "Bahrain sets up new units to monitor media output," *Arabian Business*, May 18, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1JmHKqP>.

164 General Directorate of Anti-Corruption & Economic & Electronic Security, Law No. (60) for the year 2014 on information technology crimes, [in Arabic] accessed July 31, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1QMpBFD>.

165 "People & Power – Bahrain: Fighting for change," YouTube video, 24:30, posted by Al Jazeera English, March 9, 2011, <http://bit.ly/1Flun6y>.

Rights documents torture and other rights abuses committee by authorities, has recently encountered severe reprisals for her work. Following sustained legal and other harassment in connection with material she tweeted, in May, al-Saegh received a summons from Bahrain's National Security Agency (NSA). Upon presenting herself at its office she was blindfolded, beaten, and sexually assaulted; her attackers also interrogated her about other rights activists and her association with the UN Human Rights Council, and attempted to coerce her to use her Twitter account to announce her retirement as a rights activist.<sup>166</sup> Instead, in July, she used her Twitter account to denounce abuse of women by NSA agents and to criticize Bahrain's king.<sup>167</sup> Hours later, plainclothes office acting without a warrant raided her home, confiscate al-Saegh's phone and national ID card, and took her into custody. She was released in October, but now faces terrorism charges in connection with her July tweets.<sup>168</sup>

In a separate case on April 2, Mahmood Abdulhameed said security forces had beaten him, left him in a cold room, and threatened to assault his wife and sister, while they were holding him in detention over a WhatsApp message.<sup>169</sup> Other government critics reported being subject to abuse in similar cases, including Taiba Isameel, who said she was arrested at 3:15am on June 26, 2016 and subject to psychological pressure.<sup>170</sup> Habeeb Ahmed was arrested in April 2016 and held incommunicado for three days. He said security forces threatened to arrest his parents and brothers if he refused to confess.<sup>171</sup> Said Yousif al-Muhafda, who lives in exile after being detained in relation to online speech in the past, said that a member of Bahrain's NSA contacted him on Instagram with a threat to hurt his brothers if he did not stop tweeting.<sup>172</sup>

Others have been subject to harassment and social sanctions. Progovernment internet users post photos of protestors on social media in order to identify and punish them in "electronic witch hunts." Government services and housing can be withheld from those accused of participating in protests, and some have been fire .<sup>173</sup>

## Technical Attacks

Cyberattacks against both opposition and government supporters are common in Bahrain. Opposition news sites *Bahrain Mirror* and *Bahrain al-Youm* came under attack in August 2016<sup>174</sup>

166 Peter Beaumont, "Activist who accused Bahraini security services of sexual assault is rearrested," *Guardian*, July 6, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/06/activist-rearrested-bahrain-risk-torture-amnesty-international-ebtisam-al-saegh>; "Ebtisam al-Saegh tortured and sexually assaulted," *Frontline Defenders*, June 1, 2017, <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/ebtisam-al-saegh-tortured-and-sexually-assaulted>, and please see PDF download here: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde11/6392/2017/en/>.

167 "Bahrain: Woman human rights defender at high risk of torture, including sexual assault," *Amnesty International*, July 4, 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/07/bahrain-woman-human-rights-defender-at-high-risk-of-torture-including-sexual-assault/>.

168 "Bahrain temporarily frees female activist," *Middle East Online*, October 23, 2017, <http://middle-east-online.com/english/?id=85545>.

169 Bahrain Press Association, Facebook post [in Arabic], April 21, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/BahrainPA/posts/1431092103622587>.

170 "On Eve of UN Resolution for Internet Freedom: Websites blocked, Internet Disrupted, and Social Media Posts Continue to Lead to Arrests in Bahrain," *BCHR*, July 3, 2016, <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/7969>.

171 "More arrests and jail sentences in Bahrain over social media posts," *BCHR*, June 20, 2016, <http://bahrainrights.org/en/node/7919>.

172 "Bahrain targets families of human rights defenders to intimidate them," *BCHR*, March 10, 2017, <http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/8583>.

173 *BCHR*, "Return of Electronic Witch Hunt in Bahrain Leads to Arrest of Ali Abdulaheem," July 14, 2016, <http://bahrainrights.org/en/node/8008>.

174 Bahrain Mirror, Twitter post, August 12, 2016, <https://twitter.com/BahrainMirrorEN/status/764125566329126916>.

and January 2017, respectively, in reprisal for their coverage of political events.<sup>175</sup> In April 2017, the website of the only remaining political opposition party, the National Democratic Action (WADD), came under repeated attack.<sup>176</sup>

Institutions are also targeted. Authorities observed around 167,000 hacking attempts and 107 million malicious emails on government systems in 2016.<sup>177</sup> In April 2017, the website of the Bahraini Football Association was compromised by a Palestinian hacker who criticized Bahrain for hosting a representative from Israel during the FIFA congress in May 2017.<sup>178</sup>

---

175 "Website of (Bahrain Today) is subject to a failed hacking attempt originated from the UAE," [in Arabic] Bahrain Alyoum, January 24, 2017, <https://www.bahrainalyoum.co.uk/?p=79059>.

176 "The electronic attacks on WAAD's website are being renewed for the second time in a week," [in Arabic] LualuaTV, April 9, 2017, <http://lualuatv.com/?p=52867> and "WAAD: Our website was hacked and unknown are now in control," [in Arabic] Alwasat, April 2, 2017, <http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/1226155.html>.

177 "E-Government: more than 107 million harmful emails were handled in 2016," [in Arabic] Alwasat, May 12, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2rrqcK5>.

178 "Video: Palestinian hacker penetrates the site of the FIFA to protest Bahrain hosting of the Israeli delegation in the FIFA Congress," [in Arabic] Alwasat, May 12, 2017, <http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/1227500.html>.