FREEDOM ON THE NET 2020

Bahrain

NOT FREE

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LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

29/100 Not Free

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free)
Overview

Internet freedom in Bahrain remains restricted. While no internet shutdowns were reported during the coverage period, numerous websites continued to be blocked, social media users were continuously interrogated at the security department and were pressured to remove content, and citizens were arrested and jailed for content posted online. The Ministry of Interior continued to warn about the discussion of new critical topics as they emerged such as local and regional political situations. Authorities threatened legal action for following social media accounts critical of the government, and the levels of self-censorship and state surveillance were high. Journalists and activists who work online, including those abroad, continued to face extralegal intimidation, and reports continued of severe abuse of those taken into custody. The government works to manipulate and control online information.

Bahrain was once viewed as a promising model for political reform and democratic transition, but it has become one of the Middle East’s most repressive states. Since violently crushing a popular prodemocracy protest movement in 2011, the Sunni-led monarchy has systematically eliminated a broad range of political rights and civil liberties, dismantled the political opposition, and cracked down harshly on persistent dissent in the Shiite population.

Key Developments, June 1, 2019 - May 31, 2020

- Connectivity is technically advanced and investment in fifth-generation (5G) mobile infrastructure and fiber-optic internet allows for greater internet penetration and competitive prices (see A1).
- Authorities in Bahrain moved to further centralize the internet backbone by launching the Bahrain National Broadband Network (BNET) in October 2019, providing the government with the option to throttle or shutdown the internet through one network (see A3).
A new draft press and media law under revision by the government restricts and controls publishing of online content by journalists and includes harsh punishments for violations (see B1 and B3).

During the coverage period, at least 25 people were arrested, detained, or prosecuted for their online activities, and at least 31 months’ worth of prison sentences were handed out to four users (see C3).

The COVID-19 pandemic created new avenues for authorities to request content removals (see B2) and led to several arrests for posting false information (see C3).

A. Obstacles to Access

Bahrain is one of the most connected countries in the world. More providers started to offer 5G and fiber-optic internet during the coverage period. Competitive prices for broadband data services have led to high levels of mobile internet penetration. Internet shutdowns were not reported during the coverage period. In 2019, the government directed the launch of the Bahrain National Broadband Network (BNET), which has sole control over the national fiber-optic broadband network.

A1  0-6 pts

| Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet connections? | 6/6 |

There are no infrastructural limitations to the internet in Bahrain, where internet penetration stood at 98.6 percent at the end of 2018, according to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). ¹ There were 2.04 million mobile subscriptions at the end of 2019, for a mobile penetration rate of 136 percent. Broadband penetration was at 155 percent, with 2.33 million subscriptions, of which 91.3 percent were mobile broadband subscriptions. ²

Internet speeds have increased in recent years. In May 2020, Speedtest ranked Bahrain 40th globally for mobile internet speed, with an average 38.62 Mbps download speed. Bahrain was ranked 96th globally for fixed broadband speed, with an
average 26.57 Mbps download speed. A 2019 audit by the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) found that 100 percent of the population was within reach of third-generation (3G) and fourth-generation (4G) mobile networks. Batelco, a state-controlled internet service provider (ISP), began offering “superfast” 500-Mbps speeds to residential subscribers in 2016, and fiber-optic broadband internet became available from another two providers (STC and Zain) after the centralization of wholesale services under BNET in October 2019 (see A3 and A4). Meanwhile, 4G long term evolution (LTE) mobile subscriptions have been available since 2013. By June 2019, 5G network services were available from two providers (Batelco and STC) in various areas of the country, with average speeds of 600 Mbps.

Internet access is widely available in schools, universities, and shopping malls, as well as coffee shops, which provide a space for people to conduct personal work and study while connecting to complimentary Wi-Fi. Starting March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led many work and study activities, including parliamentary sessions, to be conducted remotely, and internet use in the country was at 74 percent of total capacity.

Access to the internet is affordable for the majority of the population. Prices for mobile broadband are among the lowest in the region, with one provider, for example, offering 10 GB of data per month for 7.35 dinars ($19). With the increase in companies providing services like fiber-optic broadband (see A1), more competitive packages have become available. Fixed-line broadband subscriptions with a 20 Mbps connection cost 15.75 dinars ($42) per month, less than 1 percent of the average Bahraini’s monthly income, with similar prices for mobile internet. Packages with fewer calls and data—for example, one costing 7 dinars ($18) for 8 GB per month—are affordable to Bahrain’s many low-wage migrant workers.
Although these packages have no content limitations, the more expensive ones offer higher speeds.

The government provides free computer training programs, which had served nearly 17,000 citizens by September 2017, according to the most recently available data.  

## A3  0-6 pts

| Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of restricting connectivity? | 3/6 |

**Score Change:** The score decreased from 4 to 3 due to further centralization of the internet backbone through the establishment of the Bahrain National Broadband Network (BNET).

Until 2019, Bahrain had no centralized internet backbone, though all ISPs are indirectly controlled by the government through orders from the TRA (see A5). Service providers connect to numerous international cables and gateways provided by Tata, Flag, Saudi Telecom, and Etisalat, among others, making the country less prone to unintentional internet outages.  

In October 2019, Batelco, a state-controlled ISP, launched the BNET, which manages the single fiber-optic broadband network in Bahrain. The BNET provides these services to other operators in the country in line with instructions from the TRA to implement the Fourth National Telecommunications Plan, which includes plans for a single infrastructure network (see A4). This new development means the whole fiber-optic broadband network in Bahrain can be restricted or shut down from one switch. Bahrain has a national Internet Exchange (BIX) board appointed by the Prime Minister with the objective of improving connectivity in Bahrain. However, only very few organizations are using the BIX service, while major ISPs are connecting directly to international internet infrastructure or working with other internet exchange providers. In May 2019, the TRA began a study to determine the best model for an internet exchange.
No cases of connectivity restrictions were observed during the coverage period of this report. The most recent restriction lasted for over a year, from June 23, 2016, to July 30, 2017, when authorities implemented an “internet curfew” in Diraz after security forces besieged the town following a sit-in around the house of Shiite cleric Issa Qassem. The sit-in continued until May 23, 2017, when a violent crackdown left five dead and dozens injured.  

**A4**  0-6 pts

| Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers? |
|-------------------------------------------------|---|
|                                                 | 4/6 |

There are some obstacles to service providers seeking to enter the market, related primarily to acquiring the approval of various government bodies, as well as installation of the required systems that facilitate government content controls and monitoring.

Batelco, Zain, and STC are the three mobile phone operators, and also serve as the main ISPs.  

As of February 2020, the TRA was not accepting applications for mobile licenses, but was for ISP licenses.  

In total, around 11 ISPs operated in mid-2019.  

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 financiers.

The requirements for establishing a new ISP are published by the TRA and the Ministry of Commerce on their websites, and include the submission of a “lawful access implementation plan” that would allow security personnel to access subscribers’ data (see C6). The initial registration fee is relatively inexpensive, though operators also need to purchase the filtering system mandated by the TRA (see B1). Approval by the General Directorate of Criminal Investigation is also required.  

Both the infrastructure and personnel behind the ISP must be situated in Bahrain.  

In October 2019, state-controlled ISP Batelco was split into two entities, and a new company, Bahrain National Broadband Network Company (BNET B.S.C), was launched. BNET owns the infrastructure of the fiber-optic broadband network and
provides wholesale services to the licensed telecom operators. BNET is still
owned by Batelco, of which the government is the largest shareholder. The
splitting followed a TRA national communications plan to establish a single
infrastructure network.

Bahrain’s national regulatory bodies are in effect controlled by the monarchy. They
have revoked licenses of operators that failed to install monitoring and filtering
systems required by government authorities, and are indifferent to user complaints
about internet controls.

Mobile phone services and ISPs are regulated by the 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.” The Information Affairs
Authority, which regulates the press, merged with the Ministry of Information
Affairs (MIA) in December 2016.

Although the TRA is theoretically an independent organization, in practice its
members are appointed by the king, based on cabinet approval, through a royal
decree published in the official gazette. As of May 2020, one of three board
members and three members of the agency’s executive management were part of
the royal family.

There have been no reported instances of ISPs being denied registration permits.
However, in February 2016, the TRA revoked the license of the small mobile and fixed-
line provider 2Connect. Among other issues, the company had failed to “provide a
lawful access capability plan” that would allow security forces to access metadata
about communications sent over its network (see C6). In December 2017, the TRA
revoked the license of another small ISP, Bahrain Broadband, following a notice
period, for failure to comply with several TRA regulations; the violations included
failure to implement a unified technical solution for filtering and blocking and failure to remain continuously connected to the central management system 44 (see B3).

During the 2016–17 “internet curfew” in Diraz (see A3), no action was taken by the TRA to address consumer complaints about the shutdowns, despite widespread criticism from the media 45 and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). 46

**B. Limits on Content**

The government summoned users, pressured them to delete social media posts, and forced removal of unwanted content. Numerous websites continued to be blocked, and organized online trolls of Saudi origin became more visible in Bahrain’s online space. Self-censorship remained high. A new draft law for the regulation of online news that had worrying implications for freedom of expression online was under review by the government during the reporting period.

**B1 0-6 pts**

| Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter internet content? | 1/6 |

Authorities ramped up censorship after the 2011 prodemocracy protests, in which online media played an important role, and heavy-handed censorship has persisted since. Political content is widely blocked. While YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and international blog-hosting services are freely available, authorities have blocked a number of messaging and live-streaming apps.

In December 2018, the website of the independent Bahrain news outlet *Awal Online* was blocked, one month after its launch. 47 The news site, operated by anonymous editors, said the block occurred in the wake of critical reporting on a long-term government minister.

Since May 2017, authorities have blocked several websites, including the Qatari outlets Al-Jazeera, Al-Sharq, and Al-Raya; those blocks occurred after Bahrain, Egypt,
Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) cut diplomatic ties with Qatar. In June 2016, authorities blocked the communications app Telegram, which was popular among independent media, members of the political opposition, and protest groups in Bahrain. The Telegram app became accessible in May 2020, while its website remained blocked at the end of the coverage period. Other blocked websites include those for the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR) and Al-Quds al-Araby, a London-based newspaper. Bahrain Mirror, a popular news site, also remains blocked.

Websites rarely get unblocked. Some mobile live-streaming services that were popular in 2011, including Ustream and Bambuser, remained blocked during the coverage period.

In August 2016, the TRA ordered all telecommunications companies to employ a centralized, TRA-managed system for blocking websites. The order was related to a US$1.2-million contract awarded in 2016 to Canadian company Netsweeper to provide a “national website filtering solution.” Netsweeper has since been identified on nine ISPs in the country, and filters political content on at least one. A November 2015 report indicated that more than 85 percent of Bahraini websites are hosted outside of the country, despite excellent infrastructure. Even if they are blocked, websites hosted overseas are less vulnerable to being removed at the behest of the government and remain accessible to Bahrainis with access to censorship-circumvention tools.

**B2 0-4 pts**

| Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete content? | 0/4 |

Content seen as critical of the government is regularly removed from websites, and authorities employ pressure on users through arrests and interrogations to force the removal of content.

In May 2020, an online symposium organized by the Bahrain Democratic Youth Society, with speakers from several Gulf countries who opposed normalization of
diplomatic ties between the Gulf states and Israel, was cut short soon after it started, in response to an order from officials. 56

In March 2020, journalist Fadel Mansi said that he received an official request to delete a tweet he had posted in which he indicated that government agencies might announce that they were suspending activities due to COVID-19. 57 No government shutdown took place.

In January 2020, blogger and historical researcher Jassim Al-Abbas’s post about a historical mosque was deleted from his Instagram account, on which he has more than 254,000 followers, 58 and from his blog, Sanawt Al Jareesh (Years of the Groats). 59 The post mentioned a previous ruler of Bahrain before the ascension of the ruling al-Khalifa family. 60 Al-Abbas was arrested and charged with publishing wrongful information (see C3). 61 His blog was temporarily suspended, 62 but was activated again after he was released on February 4, 2020. 63

In January 2020, several Twitter users were summoned to the Department of Cybercrimes for tweets regarding the assassination of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani, some of which had sympathized with Soleimani or been critical of the assassination. The Twitter users were released only after deleting their tweets. 64 The Ministry of Interior (MOI) claimed that the deleted tweets could “harm the general order,” 65 and issued a statement warning of legal action against those who use social media to violate “public order.” (see B5).

Content is removed from government social media accounts when it is deemed controversial or triggers unwanted criticism. In a practice observed during this and the previous reporting period, parts of recordings of sessions of the Shura Council, the upper house of parliament, were removed by the council channel’s admin before the sessions were uploaded to the council’s official YouTube channel. 66 For example, in April 2020, comments from Shura member Fatima Al Kooheji about punitively revoking a citizen’s nationality if they pose a threat to the country were removed. 67

In April 2019, the Ministry of Information Affairs (MIA) published a guide titled, “How to use social media for government entities,” which includes guidelines on posting
and account management. It also directs account managers to delete “all abusive comments, or incitement of hatred, or those violating the law.” 68 In May 2020, the Ministry of Youth and Sport Affairs (MYSA) deleted a photo and a story from its Instagram account where the minister and some officials appear to be violating government orders to wear masks and social distance in public places. The minister and his colleagues appeared in the photo not wearing masks and moving in close proximity while visiting a filming location. 69 The minister was criticized by social media users for not following government instructions, after which the MYSA deleted the photo without any further comments. 70 Additionally, in August 2019, the Ministry of Education was observed to have disabled comments specifically on its post about the annual distribution of scholarships, 71 a controversial topic that perennially brings criticism about lack of transparency to the ministry. 72

Other publishers have also disabled comments in cases when critical comments were expected or had already begun to appear. In December 2019, users posted over 800 comments calling for the release of Bahraini prisoners on an Instagram post about Bahrain National Day by a local newspaper, Al-Ayam. In response, the newspaper disabled comments on that post and effectively removed all existing comments. 73 In November 2019, Bapco, the national oil company, disabled comments on an Instagram post about sponsoring visits to Bahrain by hundreds of foreign relatives of ex-workers of the company, 74 after the post generated criticism from users for describing a waste of public money. 75 Bapco has since deleted the post altogether.

Users exploit platforms’ reporting mechanisms to remove comments critical of authorities and achieve the suspension of accounts operated by activists and independent journalists. 76 In May 2019, following MOI calls to avoid interacting with “malicious” accounts (see B5), the president of the Social Media Club in Bahrain called blocking and reporting malicious accounts a “national duty.” 77 In March 2019, Bahrain news outlet Awal Online’s Twitter account was temporarily suspended due to organized user reporting, 78 and the same thing happened again in December 2019, causing the account to be suspended for a week. 79 In February 2019, Instagram closed the account of Yousef al-Jamri, an online activist; 80 earlier, in October 2018, likely as a result of user reporting, a video of Hezbollah’s leader commenting on the political situation in Bahrain was removed from al-Jamri’s account, with violations of
community guidelines cited as the cause. 81 Additionally, the Instagram account of journalist Hani al-Fardan was suspended in December 2018 due to organized user reporting. 82

According to transparency reports, neither Google nor Twitter received any requests to remove content from the Bahraini authorities in 2019. 83 Twitter did receive two removal requests in the first half of 2018, but did not withhold any content. 84

In previous years, authorities have employed a variety of other, more heavy-handed tactics to force the removal of online content. Through arrests, prosecutions, and torture, security forces have coerced many online forum moderators to permanently shut down their websites. 85

B3 0.4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to the stated aims, or an independent appeals process? 1/4

The decision-making process and government policies behind the blocking of websites are not transparent. Multiple state organizations, including the MIA and the MOI, can order the blocking of a website without a court order. The MIA blocks websites that violate articles 19 and 20 of the Press Rules and Regulations, which prohibit 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.” 86 The publication of false news is deemed a crime according to Article 70 of the same law.

According to Article 70 of the new draft press and media law, the court can order the blocking of a news website for six months if the chief editor or the managing editor is convicted of a crime committed through the website, and the blocking can last up to twelve months if the crime is repeated. Under Article 78, the court can also order the website to be blocked during the investigation and trial period if it has published something that is considered a crime, or if the website continuation is threatening the public order (see C2).
Authorities regularly send updated lists of blocked websites to ISPs, which are instructed to “prohibit any means that allow access to sites blocked.” Licenses of ISPs may be revoked by the TRA for failing to cooperate with the MIA’s blocking orders (see A5). The government’s frequently updated list of blocked websites is not available to the public, and site administrators do not receive notifications 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.” There is an apparent link within the blockage message to a government website on which unblocking requests can be made, but clicking the link leads to an error message.

There are no official regulations outlining an appeals process for content restriction, and, in the absence of official publications of blocking orders, it is difficult to appeal through the court system. A 2009 MIA blocking order stated that no site could be unblocked without an order from the information minister.

Additionally, the government frequently reminds users not to follow or interact with controversial accounts on social media (see B5). Some human rights activists and journalists have been named as owners of these “malicious” accounts, but a decision was not supported by any court orders, and the individuals didn’t have any chance to appeal the decision (see C7).

Website administrators can be held legally responsible for content posted on their platforms, including alleged libel. The dissemination of false news that damages national security or public order is a criminal offense punishable by up to two years in prison, and in February 2016, the MOI stated that WhatsApp group administrators may be held liable for spreading false news if they fail to report incidents that occur within their groups. In April 2020, the ministry stated that reposting, forwarding, and retweeting false news also subjects individuals to the same legal actions.

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<th>B4</th>
<th>0-4 pts</th>
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<td>Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship?</td>
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Internet users exercise a high degree of self-censorship. Most people use pseudonyms on Twitter, online forums, and comment sections, for fear of being targeted by the authorities, 96 or use social media to share content privately rather than publicly. Even opposition news sites based outside Bahrain rarely publish the names of their editors. 97 Investigations of users’ online activities have been launched at workplaces and universities. 98

Activists often stop tweeting following detentions and interrogations, and those who return to Twitter after being detained frequently avoid controversial subjects, 99 including direct criticism of the king and other topics that the MOI warns against (see B5). 100 In May 2019, exiled journalist Adel Marzooq said he lost 180 followers on Twitter days after the MOI described his account as malicious and warned users not to follow or promote his messages (see C7). 101 Other opposition users, although not directly named by the MOI, have reported losing followers immediately after the MOI issues general threats against following accounts that incite “sedition.” 102 In April 2019, tweets about some royal family members taking over public land in Arad stopped after several users who had criticized the events received summonses (see C3). 103

Self-censorship on Twitter has become acute, with users expressing increasing fear of facing prosecution for discussion of anything beyond sports, lifestyle topics, and political views in line with those of the regime. 104 Mohsen Alsaaff, a Bahraini satirical writer, caustically asserted in April 2019 that “before posting any tweet, one must present it to a lawyer to ascertain its legal status, and to a cleric to ascertain its religious status, and to a diplomat to ensure that it is in accordance with international norms, and to a security expert to make sure it doesn’t support terrorism, and to an economist to make sure it does not destabilize the country’s economy.” 105

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<th>B5</th>
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<td>Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful actors to advance a particular political interest?</td>
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Government authorities and progovernment trolls work effectively to manipulate the online information landscape in Bahrain.

Authorities issue official statements warning against the discussion of certain subjects and the “misuse” of social media. In response to online discussion of the US operation that killed Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani, the MOI issued a statement in January 2020 warning of legal action against those who use social media “in violation of public order” or who “work against civil peace.” In May 2019, the cybercrime directorate of the MOI declared the accounts of several Bahraini activists and journalists to be malicious, and a few days later sent SMS messages and tweeted to users to warn them that following malicious social media accounts could result in prosecution (see C7). In January 2020, the MOI warned again against interacting with accounts that “stir strife, threaten civil peace and social fabric, and undermine security and stability in Bahrain,” adding that such accounts are managed from outside the country. Similarly, the Ministry of Education issued public statements warning its employees against publishing information or articles from unknown sources or those that were offensive to the government, contained defamation, violated public morals, or were offensive to people and religions. The Ministry of Education also added that legal and disciplinary actions would be taken against employees who misuse social media.

Research from 2013 revealed connections between the Bahraini government and “extremist” accounts on Twitter and Facebook that advocated violence against both the government and protesters. It also emerged that the government impersonates opposition figures 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.

Online trolls have become increasingly present on Bahraini social media platforms. Organized progovernment trolls have been active on Twitter since 2011, when hundreds of accounts suddenly emerged to collectively harass and intimidate online activists. In July 2019, progovernment Twitter accounts vocally celebrated the execution of two political prisoners, which they characterized as the implementation of justice.
Twitter accounts from Saudi Arabia and the UAE have played a role in manipulating content about Bahrain on social media in recent years. 116 In August 2019, Facebook announced the removal of 217 Facebook accounts, 144 Facebook Pages, and 31 Instagram accounts originating in Saudi Arabia that were coordinating together to post manipulated content focused on the Middle East, including Bahrain, and that were using fake identities. 117 Similarly, in the first quarter of 2020, Google terminated two advertising accounts, one AdSense account, and 99 YouTube channels, and banned one Play developer account, that they said were part of coordinate efforts to influence the online space by posting Arabic political content that is supportive of Bahrain among other countries and is critical of Iran and Qatar. 118

In July 2019, progovernment and Saudi trolls used Twitter to spam a trending hashtag related to a discussion of a political documentary about Bahrain called “Players with Fire” that had been released by the Qatari satellite channel Al-Jazeera. 119 An ex-officer of the Bahrain army appeared in the documentary to defy the official narrative that protesters at the Pearl Roundabout in 2011 were armed. 120 The Saudi twitter users defamed some of the people who appeared in the documentary, calling them traitors. 121

In April 2020, progovernment trolling activity emerged on an Arabic hashtag that translates to “Breaking the Silence,” which was launched by activists to raise attention to abuses against women in interrogation rooms. 122 The trolls used the hashtag to discredit the women involved and accuse the campaign participants of trying to defame Bahrain. 123

**B6** 0-3 pts

| Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users’ ability to publish content online? | 1/3 |

Regulatory restrictions limit the ability of users to publish online content, while government censorship creates indirect economic constraints that leave many outlets dependent on personal funding.
Newspapers must obtain licenses from Bahrain’s mass media directorate in order to disseminate content on websites or social media, according to Decree 68/2016.\footnote{124} The law does not detail what criteria are used to grant or renew the one-year licenses. 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 of imprisonment and/or a fine of 5,000 dinars ($13,000) for publishing without a license.

In August 2019, the Information Affairs Authority suspended the license of the website Manama Voice, a news site operated by Bahraini journalist Hani Alfardan, without a clear reason (see B1).\footnote{125} Alfardan continues to report using his Instagram platform, as social media does not currently require a license from the IAA.\footnote{126}

Under Decree 68/2016, 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, limiting multimedia content.

As of May 2020, a new press and media law was under final revision by the ministerial committee in preparation for submission to parliament.\footnote{127} The new law would govern the use of electronic media and would impact activities related to online journalism, news reporting, and broadcasting, although it would not cover personal social media accounts (see C2). Article 44 of the draft law mandates that electronic media sites apply to register with the MOI and must obtain approval to operate. Article 20 holds that a person who owns a website “must not be deprived of exercising political rights.”\footnote{128} Article 13 bans newspapers and electronic media sites from publishing content that conflicts with national interest or “contradicts the provisions of the Constitution.” Article 51 states that a site owner can lose their license as a consequence of violating any article of the law, failing to update the site for two months, or losing their legal person status. According to Article 57, operating a news site without license can be punishable by a fine of between $8,000 and $26,000 (3,000 and 10,000 dinars), the blocking of the site, and the confiscation of all equipment used for operating the site.\footnote{129}
There are some government restrictions on online advertising, but several opposition websites continue to operate nonetheless. While it is difficult for blocked websites to secure advertising, some popular blocked sites such as Bahrain Mirror are able to operate with limited resources, and are often self-funded.

**B7** 0-4 pts

| Does the online information landscape lack diversity? | 1/4 |

The internet remains the main source of information and news for many Bahrainis, with many people getting much of their news through Twitter and Facebook. However, only outlets that operate from outside Bahrain can report on local politics freely, and many independent foreign-based sites are subject to blocking within Bahrain (see B1).

The restrictions on online content appear to be disproportional and inconsistent, leading to lack of balance in the views online. For example, while the government in May 2020 banned discussions of views opposing the normalization of relations with Israel (see B2), there were no restrictions on content promoting relations with Israel. In March and April 2020, activists noted that while the government goes after those critical of its policies, it fails to act against hate speech directed at the opposition or Shia people, including posts calling Shia citizens “garbage” and “dogs” and posts suggesting that political prisoners should be allowed to contract COVID-19. According to the Bahrain Mirror, “The only opinion that exists is that of the government loyalists and its mercenaries,” and “the majority of the Bahraini people are… smothered and silenced by the political police who swallowed the public space and turned the country into an imprisonment camp where people are punished for whispering” (see B4).

Despite the government’s stringent information controls, blocked opposition websites and Bahraini news outlets based outside the country continue to receive traffic from users within Bahrain through the use of proxy services, dynamic IP addresses, and virtual private network (VPN) applications. The government used to
block access to Google Translate and Google cached pages, which could be used as
circumvention tools, but they were both found to be accessible in May 2020.  

**B8**  o-6 pts

| Do conditions impede users’ ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on political and social issues? | 4/6 |

Activists rely heavily on digital tools, particularly social media, to draw attention to protests and human rights violations. However, due to the threat of arrest, prosecution, and other consequences for online activity, many users are extremely wary of participating in political discussions over social media, and normally use pseudonyms when participating. In the past, authorities have also blocked some tools used to mobilize or campaign, such as Telegram (see B1).

Even as its users increasingly self-censor, Twitter remains a key platform for mobilization. Users often use it to report on the status and conditions of various detainees’ arrests and detentions and to call for their release. Additionally, the Coalition of February 14 Youth protest movement continues to use social networks to organize protests and bring international attention to local causes.

In April 2020, a large Twitter campaign called for the release of prisoners using an Arabic hashtag that translated to #ReleaseBahrainPrisoners to protect them against the possible spread of COVID-19 in prisons. The campaign generated over 22,000 tweets on the first day, and continued to trend for several days, reaching 280,000 tweets in one day on April 19. Bahrain released a few prisoners in March 2020, but thousands of political prisoners and activists remain in prison. There was no official response to the campaign. Some prisoners have also leaked recorded voice messages on social media to bring attention to their prison situation or to call for their release. In April 2020, the MOI issued a statement to warn against reposting or interacting with a specific voice message of a prisoner asking the king for a pardon. The MOI said that the prisoner was convicted in a drug case and is sentenced to death.
In March 2020, a Twitter campaign using an Arabic hashtag meaning #RepatriateStrandedBahrainis called on the government to repatriate over 1,600 Bahraini citizens who were stranded in Iran for over two weeks after flights were cancelled due to the spread of COVID-19.\textsuperscript{147} However, the government responded slowly. By the end of March, more videos were posted on twitter by stranded citizens calling on the government to facilitate their return home and the campaign hashtag had trended.\textsuperscript{148} With mounting pressure largely due to the online outcry,\textsuperscript{149} and after the Qatari government offered to either host or send back Bahrainis stranded in the Doha airport,\textsuperscript{150} the government announced a plan to repatriate its stranded citizens around the world,\textsuperscript{151} which was nearly complete by May 2020.\textsuperscript{152}

In January 2020, Bahrainis started a Twitter campaign to call for increased medical attention to prisoners.\textsuperscript{153} Some ill prisoners were released following the campaign, although the releases cannot be conclusively tied to the online campaign.\textsuperscript{154} In October 2019, online users started a campaign to support a prisoners’ hunger strike, calling on the National Institution for Human Rights to take action to improve conditions in prison.\textsuperscript{155}

**C. Violations of User Rights**

*Violations of user rights in Bahrain were rampant, with at least 25 users arrested, detained, or prosecuted over the coverage period for their online activities. Those targeted included nonpartisan figures commenting on government services, and some users were summoned and arrested after posting about the COVID-19 pandemic. Some online users remain in prison from previous years, including the country’s most prominent human rights defenders. A mobile geolocation tracking app was introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing government surveillance. Regulations requiring all mobile subscribers to verify their identity through fingerprinting were enforced.*

**C1** 0-6 pts

| Do the constitution or other laws fail to protect rights such as freedom of expression, access to information, and press freedom, including on the | 0/6 |

https://freedomhouse.org/country/bahrain/freedom-net/2020
internet, and are they enforced by a judiciary that lacks independence?

A variety of laws place restrictions on free speech, and the compromised judiciary does not uphold protections that do exist.

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.” 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.” 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 rights the provisions claim to uphold.

The judicial system in Bahrain is neither independent nor fair. Serious crimes have been committed against internet users, including torture (see C7), and impunity for these offenses prevails.

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities? 0 / 4

Multiple laws, including the penal code and terrorism laws, criminalize free speech and online activities. Criminal penalties for online speech are currently enforced under the 2002 Press and Publications Law, which does not specifically mention online activities, but has been applied to digital media. The law allows for prison sentences from six months to five years for publishing material that criticizes Islam, its followers, or the king, as well as material that instigates violent crimes or the overthrow of the government. Article 70 of the Press and Publications Law penalizes certain types of content, including “false news” that undermines public
security and criticism of presidents or states with which Bahrain has diplomatic ties.  

163 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. 164

Sentences can be longer than what is mandated by the Press and Publications Law if users are tried under the penal code or terrorism laws—especially for activity on social media, where the Press and Publication Law is not used. 165 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. 166 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 100 dinars ($260) or a prison term of up to one year. In May 2019, the king ratified an amendment to Article 11 of the terrorism law that criminalizes propagating, glorifying, justifying, favoring, or encouraging acts that constitute terrorist activities, with a penalty of up to five years in prison and a fine of between 2,000 and 5,000 dinars ($5,300 to $13,000). 167 Following the approval of this amendment, activists and lawyers have warned social media users that acts of commenting, retweeting, liking, or forwarding could meet the criteria of the newly codified crime. 168

Under the new draft press and media law that is currently under final revision before submission to parliament, 169 online news reporters can be subject to fines for publishing content that is deemed to fall into a list of vaguely worded categories including “false news, insulting the monarchy, subjecting it to criticism, or imposing responsibility on it for the actions of the government, undermining the regime, news that will affect the value of the national currency,” 170 and may also receive prison sentences under the penal code and other laws (see B6).

In October 2019, the cabinet endorsed an updated draft amendment to the penal code that would increase the maximum prison sentence for posting private news, comments, or images deemed defamatory from one year to five years, and would increase the maximum fine for doing so from 500 to 3,000 dinars ($1,300 to $7,900). 171 However, the amendment was still under discussion by the Council of Representatives at the end of the reporting period. 172
In April 2017, the king approved a constitutional amendment to allow civilians to be tried in military courts. When military courts last operated in this manner, during a state of emergency in 2011, judges handed down prison sentences to bloggers that ranged from 15 years to life. In addition, the public prosecutor has begun using a legal provision that calls for the prosecution of parents when their children are arrested for criminal activities, including “misusing social media.”

The 2014 computer crimes law criminalizes the illegal access of information systems and the possession of pornographic electronic materials.

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<td>Are individuals penalized for online activities?</td>
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*Score Change: The score increased from 1 to 2 due to the handing down of fewer long prison sentences during the reporting period; however, users were still arrested and detained for content posted online.*

Individuals are frequently detained and prosecuted for online activities, and those convicted typically receive harsh sentences. Between June 2019 and May 2020, at least 25 people were arrested, detained, or prosecuted for their online activities, and while some were still on trial as of May 2020, 31 months’ worth of prison sentences were collectively passed down to four internet users during this report’s coverage period. Two people—Abdulla Alsehli and Dr. Sharifa Siwar, who received one- and twelve-month sentences, respectively—were allowed to replace their prison time with fully noncustodial sentences.

In March 2020, the Cybercrimes Directorate stated that a unit of 16 employees works around the clock to monitor social media, and that this unit had identified 65 cases of users spreading rumors and false information and had referred them to the public prosecutor for legal action. Additionally, 23 social media users had been referred for spreading malicious content, and there were 18 cases of “sectarian provocation” on social media.
With the spread of the Coronavirus in Bahrain beginning in late February 2020, there were cases of referrals and arrests related to online posts about the pandemic. In March, a citizen was arrested for posting an audio message that was circulated over WhatsApp and other social media platforms claiming that the government was planning to enforce a “state of national safety” and begin a lockdown; the message called on listeners to take precautions and buy necessities in advance. Unlike neighboring countries, Bahrain did not wind up enforcing a lockdown. Another Bahraini man and an Arab expatriate were interrogated and referred to public prosecution for spreading rumors about the pandemic that “affect civil peace and harm public security.”

In April 2020, an expatriate man was sentenced to six months in prison for insulting a religious sect for calling them terrorists and accusing them of spreading the pandemic. In the same month, legal action was taken against a Bahraini woman who posted false information on social media claiming that workers from a food delivery business were infected with the virus. Also in April, an official from the Cybercrimes Directorate said that since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, 88 social media posts and 55 legal cases had been referred to the public prosecutor for legal action. In May 2020, lawyer Rashid al-BinAli was arrested for posting an Instagram video in which he appeared to call the Coronavirus “a lie” that would cost people money. In the second half of the video, there was an image of a rubber hose, a symbol for torture, and al-BinAli called on everyone to obey the government instructions regardless of the cost. The video was perceived as a joke; however, the public prosecution charged al-BinAli with the “spread[ing] of false news” and ordered his detention. He was detained for around 2 weeks.

With growing self-censorship (see B4), there were fewer reported cases of users being penalized for critical comments online. However, during the coverage period there have been increased cases of prosecutions against users specifically commenting on government services. In November 2019, activist Mohamed al-Aradi was interrogated for tweets regarding the lack of transparency in the distribution of scholarships by the Ministry of Education and calling for the dismissal of the education minister. Between November and December 2019, the Electricity and Water Authority filed cases with public prosecutors against a number of online
users for commenting on the high bills and inaccurate calculations of the new power meters installed by the authority. In December 2019, writer and poet Aqeel Swar was interrogated for his tweets on the slowness of the Ministry of Education’s process for verifying higher education certificates. In January 2020, Instagram user Abdulla Alsehli received a one-month prison sentence and was charged with defamation for comments regarding the failure of the Civil Service Bureau to solve the country’s unemployment problem. Alsehli’s sentence was later replaced with a pledge to never comment about the head of the bureau.

Additionally, users were prosecuted over seemingly harmless online posts. In May 2020, an expatriate man was arrested after posting a video on Tiktok of himself throwing money around his car. He was charged for “misuse of social media.” More expatriates who posted similar videos were also arrested and were charged with “misusing and insulting the Bahraini currency.”

In April 2020, legal action was taken against a Bahraini man for reposting a video of a mosque that had been attacked and damaged. The Cybercrimes Directorate said that the video was old and government action had already been taken against the attackers. On January 30, 2020, a well-known history researcher and blogger, Jassim al-Abbas was arrested after publishing an Instagram post about a historical mosque that was built by a previous ruler of Bahrain before the ruling al-Khalifa royal family took over; the post didn’t match the government narrative about Bahraini history. Al-Abbas was arrested, charged with publishing false information and released a few days later after deleting the post (See B2). Additionally, some online users, including writer Aqeel Swar, were summoned for interrogation at the Cybercrimes Directorate in relation to their online comments on the killing of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani (see B2).

In November 2019, Dr. Sharifa Siwar was sentenced to one year in prison and a fine of 200 dinars ($530) for defamation, dissemination of false news, and misuse of telecommunication mediums after posting videos on her Instagram account in March 2019 of herself interviewing a school student about the trade and use of drugs at an intermediate girls’ school. Siwar was released on a bail of 500 dinars ($1,300) and
in January 2020, a court of appeals agreed to replace her prison sentence with community service. 199

In August 2019, an Instagram user was arrested and charged with “misusing communications devices and infringing the divine self” for insulting God in a comment. 200 He was sentenced to 12 months in prison in September 2019. 201

Nabeel Rajab, one of Bahrain’s most prominent human rights defenders, 202 has been in and out of prison since 2012 for his online speech. 203 In December 2018, the Supreme Court upheld his sentence of five years in prison, 204 on charges that included “spreading false news during a time of war,” “insulting a neighboring country,” and “insulting a statutory body.” 205 The charges were based on 2015 Twitter posts, including retweets of posts by human rights organizations, 206 about the Saudi-led coalition airstrikes in Yemen and the alleged torture of detainees at Jaw prison, 207 although the prosecution failed to prove Rajab’s ownership of the Twitter account in question. 208 Rajab was released on June 9, 2020, after a court approved the exchange of his remaining prison sentence with a noncustodial sentence. 209

Separately, in December 2019, the Court of Cassation confirmed a previous six-month sentence against opposition leader Ebrahim Sharif on charges of “publicly insulting a foreign country...or its leader” 210 over a December 2018 tweet in which he called on Sudan’s then-president, Omar al-Bashir, to resign. 211 The sentence was later suspended after he paid a 500-dinar ($1,300) fine. 212

At least four other internet users are still serving prison sentences for earlier online activities, including Abduljalil al-Singace, a human rights defender and blogger who has been serving a life sentence since 2011 on charges of possessing links to a terrorist organization aiming to overthrow the government, 213 disseminating false news, and inciting protests against the government. 214

Separately, many prominent journalists have been barred from entering the country over their work. 215

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The government restricts the use of many VPNs, imposes onerous registration requirements on mobile phone users, and has sought to uncover the identities of anonymous or pseudonymous users in order to prosecute them.

The TRA requires users to provide identification when registering new telecom connections, and the government prohibits the sale or use of unregistered prepaid mobile SIM cards. In July 2017, a TRA regulation that allows individuals to purchase no more than 10 prepaid SIM cards from a single service provider came into force. Under the regulation, people must be physically present when registering SIM cards directly with service providers, and the service providers must verify the identity of all subscribers, including through fingerprinting, a measure justified as a security measure to help solve crimes. Service was cut in June 2018 for unregistered users of postpaid services, and in June 2019 for unregistered users of prepaid services. All prepaid SIM card users are required to renew registration annually to avoid line cuts.

Anonymous government critics have been sent malicious links that allow authorities to ascertain their identity and take legal action against them (see B5).

Tech-savvy activists use VPNs to conceal their identity. Access to websites of popular VPNs and anonymity services like Hotspot Shield, Express VPN, and the Tor Project are blocked, which makes it difficult to download their client applications. However, the connectivity and functioning of these VPN clients and Tor browsers remained unaffected during the coverage period.

A 2014 computer crimes law, 60/2014, criminalizes the encryption of data with criminal intentions. Observers contend that “criminal intentions” could include criticism of the government.

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users’ right to
State surveillance of online activities is widespread. Several reports have documented the government’s use of spyware against dissidents. In October 2018, it was revealed that Bahrain had purchased espionage and intelligence-gathering software from private companies, including a system from the Israeli company Verint used for collecting information from social networks, and that Bahraini intelligence officers were trained in these systems’ use. 222

In September 2018, a Citizen Lab report alleged that Bahrain used the spying software Pegasus, developed by the Israeli company NSO Group. After the user clicks on an exploit link, Pegasus is covertly installed on their phone, granting the operator access to information including passwords, contacts, text messages, and live voice calls from messaging apps, as well as the ability to open the camera and microphone. Citizen Lab identified spying efforts that may have targeted the persecuted Shia majority and members of the Coalition of February 14. 223 Bahraini human rights defenders and journalists were among those who had their devices attacked and WhatsApp data stolen. 224 In March 2018, it was reported that Bahrain purchased $544,000 (204,000 dinars”) worth of British surveillance equipment between 2015 and 2017. 225

In May 2020, writer Aqeel Swar, who is frequently interrogated for his online posts (see C3), said: “My mobile is completely controlled...I cannot tweet from it...viruses do not stop and fake international calls do not stop and sex ads do not stop...in addition to the strict monitoring of any calls I have...our country descends to a perihelion unmatched by any other state.” 226

In April 2020, Bahrain TV broadcast a short video from inside the Cybercrimes Directorate’s social media monitoring room where a police official was explaining the department’s efforts to “identify and prevent...crimes” on social media. Department officials receive training to identify “permitted speech and forbidden speech,” whether it is text, video, or audio. 227 Earlier, in March 2020, another report confirmed that a security unit of 16 employees was working around the clock to monitor the social media and refer “violators” to public prosecution. 228 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.” 229 Officials had earlier created a unit to monitor social media and foreign news websites in order to “respond to false information that some channels broadcast” in 2011. 230

In March 2020, as part of the measures taken to address the COVID-19 pandemic, the government mandated that individuals who were self-isolating under compulsory quarantine use a smartphone app called “Be Aware.” The app, developed by the Information & eGovernment Authority (iGA), uses location-tracking technologies to trace the movements of users not under quarantine and send alerts when they come into possible contact with a self-isolating user. 231 The app comes with an electronic wristband that self-isolating users have to wear all the time, which sends an alert to the monitoring station and a warning to the user when they stray more than 15 meters away from their phone. Additionally, the user has to confirm their presence at home on a regular basis by allowing access to the device’s camera and sending a live photo to the monitoring station. 232 Violating these restrictions can result in a prison sentence of 3 months and a fine. As of May 2020, there were 4,194 users of the wristband, and 343,072 registered users of the app. 233 Human rights groups raised concerns over the possibility of the technology being abused. 234 Indeed, users’ data was shared without consent with a national TV show that called app users; individuals could be eligible for a prize if they could prove that they were at home by opening their camera. 235 In response to privacy concerns, the iGA added a feature on the app in May 2020 that allows the user to opt in or out of this TV show. 236

In January 2017, the government ratified the Arab Treaty on Combating Cybercrime, a set of standards developed to stem the misuse of telecommunications devices, financial fraud, the promotion of terrorism, and access to pornographic content online. While Bahrain 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. 237

Bahrain lacks a privacy law. While a personal data protection law was introduced in July 2018 (see C6), Article 2.4(b) exempts national security-related data processing undertaken by the MOI, the National Security Apparatus (NSA), the Defense Ministry, and other security services. 238

C6 0-6 pts

Are service providers and other technology companies required to aid the government in monitoring the communications of their users? 0/6

Since 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 security forces access to subscriber data upon request from the public prosecution, while the provision of the data content requires a court order. 239

In order to receive an operating license (see A5), the provider must develop a “lawful access capability plan” that would allow security forces to access communications metadata. The provider 2Connect had its license revoked in February 2016 due to its failure to set up such a plan.

Cybercafés are also subject to 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. 240

According to company transparency reports, Bahrain submitted two emergency user data requests to Facebook in the first half of 2019 for three accounts, and all the data was provided. 241 No requests were made to Google 242 or Twitter 243 in the first half of 2019. Information on local providers complying with the state's requests for users’ data is not made public.
In July 2018, Bahrain introduced a personal data protection law similar to the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) that delineates the requirements for entities collecting, processing, and storing personal data, including getting consent from the user and informing them that data is being collected. The law became effective in August 2019. It is unclear what its enforcement might look like, but violators can be taken to court.

C7 0-5 pts

| Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities or any other actor in retribution for their online activities? | 1/5 |

Violence and torture against online activists and journalists at the hands of authorities is common in Bahrain.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, and in response to concerns over prisoners’ health, the authorities claimed they had taken measures to protect prisoners from the virus. However, in April 2020, journalist Mahmoud al-Jaziri, who is serving a 15-year prison sentence in Jaw prison, was moved to solitary confinement after he recorded an audio clip that was published on YouTube in which he refuted official reports and described poor hygiene and an unhealthy situation inside the prison.

In June 2018, Najah Ahmed Yousif was sentenced to three years in prison based on a coerced confession over comments she made in a Facebook post. She said she was tortured and sexually assaulted during her interrogation. Bahrain’s Ombudsman, to whom she raised a complaint, had not held anyone accountable for her torture. During her imprisonment period, which ended in August 2019, she suffered discrimination and was only permitted to see her family once during her last year in prison.

Numerous online activists have fled Bahrain, including blogger and founder of the Bahrain Online forum Ali Abdulelam, who was detained and tortured in 2010 and, in a separate case in 2011, sentenced to 15 years of imprisonment by the military court; blogger Mohamed Hasan, who was tortured during a 2013 detention and fled in 2014; and Twitter activist Hussein Mahdi, who was tortured in detention in 2014.
In August, 2017, online activist Yousif Al-Jamri fled Bahrain after facing increasing intimidation by the NSA following his publication of a video alleging that he was subjected to physical and psychological torture by the NSA, was threatened with rape and reprisals against his family, and forced to insult religious figures he reveres.  

Bahraini activists living abroad are subject to online threats from people affiliated with the security apparatus. In June 2018, an Instagram account appearing to belong to an MOI officer sent messages to activist Sayed Yousif al-Muhafdha, who is living abroad, threatening that his brothers in Bahrain would be arrested unless he stopped working as an activist, closed his social media accounts within a day, and sent a video apologizing to the king of Bahrain. The same account sent a death threat to Bahrain-based human rights activist Ebtisam al-Saegh, and claimed they would release a video of the torture and sexual assault she was subjected to during her 2017 detention. A Twitter account with the handle @godkingcountry threatened to rape al-Saegh if she did not end her online activism.

In May 2019, the MOI accused people based in Iran, Qatar, Iraq, and Europe, as well as the activist Sayed Yousif Almuhaadha, who was living in exile in Germany, and activist Hassan Abdulnabi, in exile in Australia, of running social media accounts that encourage sedition and harmed public order and the image of Bahrain. It also alleged that their network received support from “e-cells” operating from inside Bahrain, whose members had been identified and should expect prosecution. The MOI also discouraged interaction with these networks.

In May 2019, the MOI tweeted that the Twitter account of Adel Marzooq, a Bahraini journalist in exile and chief editor of the Gulf House for Studies and Publishing, was “encouraging sedition between members of society.” It threatened to take legal actions against the organization and against anyone who promoted its messages. The threats came in response to Adel’s tweets about a conflict within the royal family over whether or not to remove the prime minister.

The New Yorker reported in June 2018 that the PR firm Bell Pottinger provided its Bahraini clients with a list of the most effective dissidents and activists on social
media “at a time when Bahraini officials were imprisoning and torturing people who spoke out against the regime.” 261

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack?

1/3

Cyberattacks against both opposition and government supporters are common in Bahrain. Authorities have intercepted over 6 million cyberattacks and over 830,000 malicious emails in the first half of 2019. 262

In March 2020, the independent online news site Awal Online had to shut down due to heavy attacks that the site could not handle. 263 In the same month, the Bahraini news Instagram account @Bhr_sky, which has more than 100,000 followers, was hacked for a short period, though the motivation for the attack was unknown. 264 In October 2019, the webpage of the Bahrain Football Association was attacked by an Iranian hacker who placed an audio file of the Iranian national anthem on the site. The attack was in response to the behaviour of Bahraini crowds who had whistled in disrespect while the Iranian national anthem was playing before a game between the national teams a few days earlier. 265 In July and August of 2019, there were Iranian cyberattacks on Bahrain’s National Security Agency, the MOI, and the first deputy prime minister’s office. Attacks also targeted critical infrastructure services including the Electricity and Water Authority, which had some systems shut down by the attacks. 266

In December 2019, the national oil company, Bapco, was hit by Iranian hackers using data-wiping malware. 267 The company denied the hacking attack and only admitted to having a “technical glitch,” while according to reports, at least 2000 computers had to be replaced, and work was suspended for two weeks. 268
Footnotes


5 “Batelco First and Only Telecom to Provide Superfast Fibre Internet 500Mbps,” BizBahrain, August 2, 2016, https://www.bizbahrain.com/batelco-first-and-only-telecom-to-provide-su....

More footnotes

On Bahrain
See all data, scores & information on this country or territory.
See More ➤

Country Facts

Global Freedom Score
11/100 Not Free

Internet Freedom Score
29/100 Not Free

Freedom in the World Status
Not Free
Networks Restricted
No

Social Media Blocked
Yes

Websites Blocked
Yes

Pro-government Commentators
Yes

Users Arrested
Yes

In Other Reports
Freedom in the World 2020

Other Years

2019

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