



# INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR SHIA RIGHTS

## FIRST REPORT - 2015



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## Introduction

### SHIA RIGHTS WATCH

Shia Rights Watch (SRW) is the world's first independent organization dedicated to define and protect the rights of Shia Muslims around the world. SRW is a non-governmental, not-for-profit research entity and advocacy group headquartered in Washington D.C., U.S.A. Shia Rights Watch holds a 501(c) status, as well as holding a Special Consultation status (ECOSOC) with the United Nations. Shia Rights Watch aims to draw the international attention where Shia rights are violated; the aim is to give a voice to the oppressed and hold oppressors accountable for their crimes. Shia Rights Watch achieves these objectives through strategic investigations supported by targeting advocacy in order to bring about informed action.

### VISION – FREEDOM OF RELIGION FOR ALL

Shia Rights Watch envisions a peaceful world for all, regardless of religion, gender, race, or origin. Shia Rights Watch believes that Shia Muslims should be recognized as a religious group by the countries in which they reside. Discrimination should not be allowed and it should be brought to light whenever and wherever it takes place. God has given us all the freedom of religion and the rights to live in peace.

### MISSION – NO SHIA ABOVE THE LAW AND NO SHIA BELOW THE LAW

Shia Rights Watch is dedicated to protecting the rights of Shia Muslims worldwide. Shia Rights Watch stands up for victims of prejudice, and supports activism in order to prevent discrimination, support political freedom, and help ensure people's human rights and religious freedom. The organization enlists the local public and international communities to support the cause of human rights for all.

Shia Rights Watch achieves these ends by investigating violations against Shia communities in order to raise awareness and fight injustice. We promote needed change through research and publication, and we submit reports and articles to governments and international organizations. Also, Shia Rights Watch continuously monitors media outlets to ensure accurate coverage of Shia rights violations.

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## Overview & History

### SHIA MINORITIES

There are approximately 1.57 billion Muslims in the world today. Current estimates predict that approximately 1 in 3 Muslims belong to the Shia Muslim denomination. However, this may be an underrepresentation of actual numbers due to the fact that data collection and polling in these countries is unreliable and, due to threats of oppression, many will not voluntarily admit to their faith. Some experts estimate that up to half of the world's Muslim population belongs to the Shia tradition or one of its subdivisions.

A majority of Shia reside in Iran, Pakistan, India, Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon, and Azerbaijan. (PewResearchCenter, "Mapping the Global Muslim Population"). Two distinct experiences emerge in countries with Shia populations. In states such as Bahrain, where there is a Shia majority population governed by a non-Shia government, there is an increase in the prevalence of governmental religious suppression, violent reactions to peaceful gatherings, and government sponsored or government endorsed violence towards Shia communities. Conversely, in states such as Iran and Iraq where Shia have either partial or complete control over the government, Shia civilians become the target of non-Shia sentiments, both violent and non-violent. This is especially true in the divisive culture of Iraq where Shia mosques and communities are continuously targeted by extremists groups.

There has been countless documented cases of extreme anti-Shiism throughout history. Today, cases manifest themselves in a range of ways from small scale verbal attacks and threats, to large massacres, such as the Camp Speicher Massacre in 2014.

### CAMP SPEICHER 2014

Shia Rights Watch chose June 12<sup>th</sup> as the International Day for Shia Rights in commemoration of the massacre that occurred at Camp Speicher in 2014. ISIS militants escorted upwards of 3000 plain clothed Iraqi soldiers from Camp Speicher, an Iraqi military base previously operated by the U.S.A., to Tikrit, an ISIS controlled town 140km north-west of Baghdad. Once they arrived in Tikrit the soldiers were divided by religious affiliation; the non-Shia allowed to live, the Shia condemned to death by firing squad. It is estimated that ISIS killed upwards of 1700 Shia soldiers, making this the most prolific sectarian mass killing against Shias since the time of Saddam Hussein's rule. (Arango, "Escaping Death in Northern Iraq").

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In an expose published by the New York Times, author Tim Arango interviewed Ali Hussein Kadhim, the only known survivor of the attack. Kadhim told of his decision to act dead during the shootings, waiting until night fall to make his escape; thus beginning his long journey back to southern Iraq relying on the kindness and protection of non-Shia tribal members along the way (Arango, "Escaping Death in Northern Iraq"). Focusing on the sheer brutality of the deaths, the number of Shia lost, and Kadhim's chilling testimony, it became clear that this attack was devastating to the Shia community, yet largely ignored by the international community and mass media outlets. It is in memory of these 1700 fallen soldiers that Shia Rights Watch chose June 12<sup>th</sup> to be the International Day of Shia Rights.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF AN INTERNATIONAL DAY

Declaring an International Day was a decision Shia Rights Watch made after realizing the amount of misinformation and lack of awareness that the international community has in regards to Shia communities. The practical significance of the day revolved around raising public and governmental awareness of the human rights violations that occur against Shia Muslims, which go relatively unrecognized by international groups and organizations. Like other International Days, such as International Women's Day, International Day for Shia Rights allows for an inclusive conversation to occur about the issues affecting that specific group. Moreover, the International Day for Shia Rights allowed for the continued promotion for governmental support in favor of the adoption of H.Res.105 and S.Res.69.

The symbolic significance of the day is just as important as the practical. As we go about our daily lives, especially in the Western world, it is easy to focus only on the matters that directly affect us. Having an International Day encourages people to take a moment out of their day to reflect on their lives and experiences, and relate those experiences to the experiences of Shia around the world. More importantly, by recognizing and participating in the International Day for Shia Rights, the international community is showing support and solidarity for those around the world who are used to having their cries for help silenced or ignored.

Shia Rights Watch would like to thank the Al Baqee Organization, the Freemuslim Center for Deradicalization and Extremist Prevention, the Sentinel Human Rights Defenders, the Universal Muslim Association of America, and the Justice Human Rights Organization for partnering with us to make International Day for Shia Rights such a big success.



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## Participation

### COMMEMORATIVE EVENTS

Further sections of this report will go into greater detail about the specifics behind each campaign. Having said this, Shia Rights Watch launched three distinct campaigns in order to commemorate International Day for Shia Rights.

1. Social Media Campaign: Using the hashtag #612ShiaDay participants were encouraged to reach out and engage in a discussion regarding minority rights and human rights violations around the world.
2. 'Rose for a Rose Campaign': Over the course of two days volunteers handed out 1100 roses, 550 each day, as a metaphorical representation of the 550 imprisoned youth in Bahrain.
3. Legislative Campaign: Participants residing with the United States were encouraged to contact their congressional representatives to show their support for H. Res. 105 and S. Res. 60, both of which call for the protection of religious minority rights and freedoms worldwide.



Volunteer handing out roses in Farragut Park and spreading awareness for **International Day for Shia Rights**.

### SCOPE OF THE CAMPAIGNS

Each campaign had a different scope and goal. The 'Rose for a Rose' campaign was isolated to the Washington, D.C. area and was limited by the number of roses handed out. However, it was soon seen that, while only 1100 roses were handed out in the two day span, the people who received roses opened discussion with others, thus drawing more people into the conversation about human rights violations in Bahrain. Similarly, the legislative campaign was limited to American citizens residing in the United States. Unfortunately, we are unable to track at this time how affective this portion of the campaign was as it remains ongoing. Finally, the social media campaign, through the hashtag #612ShiaDay, had a significantly farther reach with people participating in countries as far away as Ireland, Iraq, and Pakistan. It is hard to quantify the exact number of people the message of campaign reached, however, we are proud to say that the first annual International Day for Shia Rights generated an impressive amount of discussion and participation.

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## 2015 Shia Day Dedication: Bahrain

### WHY BAHRAIN

International Day for Shia Rights 2015 is dedicated to the 550 minors currently imprisoned by the Bahraini government for their alleged participation in peaceful, anti-government protests. Many of these minors have sacrificed their futures, and at times their lives, in their fight to bring democracy, freedom, and equality to their country.

### BAHRAIN

Bahrain is a country of approximately 1,314,089 people and is an archipelago in the Persian Gulf, east of Saudi Arabia. The country gained official independence from the United Kingdom in 1971 and has been ruled by a Sunni constitutional monarch for most of its history. Bahrain is 70.3% Muslim, a majority of which ascribe to the Shia Muslim denomination. However, in recent years the Sunni government lost the confidence and support of the Shia majority. As a result, there have been numerous peaceful anti-government, pro-democracy protests that the government reacted to with violent police and military actions (CIA World Fact Book, "Middle East: Bahrain").

### 550 IMPRISONED CHILDREN

Following the illegal incarceration of Shia leader Sheikh Ali Salman by the Bahraini government, Bahrain transformed into a hotbed of protests against the oppressive regime. These largely peaceful protests have sparked a series of arbitrary arrests against the Shia majority in the country. The most notable of these arrests being the 550 children who were imprisoned either due to their involvement in expressing their views at peaceful protests, or because they were presumed guilty for related crimes that they claim to be innocent of.

The Bahraini Citizenship Act of 1963 outlines a minor to be anyone under eighteen years of age, thus making all 550 of the youth arrested children in the eyes of the law. In one particular case a twelve year old was sentenced to three years behind bars. Despite the threat of arrest that Shia citizens face, the people of Bahrain have continued to courageously stand up to the oppressive regime in search of change in their country. As these children sacrifice their futures in hopes of a democratic and just country in the future, Shia Right Watch plans to publicize the facts as much as possible around the world in order to gather international support for the oppressed. International Day for Shia Rights 2015 is dedicated to raising awareness of these 550 children in hopes that their sacrifices will not be in vain.



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## NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LAW

The current actions of the Bahraini government are in contradiction of their own Constitution, signed into law by Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifa. The constitution outlines that all Bahraini citizens are equal in dignity, equal in rights, and protected from discrimination. The document highlights freedom of conscious, freedom of religion, and protection from arbitrary arrests as important values of the Bahraini government and society. Despite this however, the government's recent crack-down on Shia protestors has been in violation of these clauses, as well as many more outlined in the constitution of Bahrain.

Internationally, Bahrain is a signatory of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the United Nations in 1948, and the International Convention for the Rights of a Child (ICRC), which Bahrain signed in 1992. The actions of the Bahraini government against the minors protesting for freedom infringe on a number of the rights guaranteed in these documents including but not limited to:

### International Convention on the Rights of a child:

- \*Article 2 (freedom of discrimination);
- \*Article 6 (the child's right to life);
- \*Article 15 (freedom of association);
- \*Article 37 (protection from arbitrary arrest and torture);
- \*Article 28 (the right to education).

### Universal Declaration of Human Rights

- \*Article 3 (right to life);
- \*Article 9 (protection from arbitrary arrest or torture);
- \*Article 18 (freedom of religion);
- \*Article 19 (freedom of expression);
- \*Article 20 (freedom of peaceful assembly).

Despite being aware of national and international obligations, there are still cases of children being incarcerated, tortured, or even killed in Bahrain because of their fight for freedom and democracy. Most people outside of Bahrain are not aware of the issues going on. They do not know that 11 year old Ali Hasan Alqudaihi was arrested for allegedly participating in protests or that 17 year old Ali Hussain Neamah was intentionally shot in the back at close range by security forces during a protest in Saddad (Shia Rights Watch, "Bahrain: Victim of National Interest"). The western news did not cover the story of the six week old baby named Yahya Yousif Ahmed who died before he even had a chance at life because his mother had been subjected by police to high levels of tear gas during her pregnancy (Shia Rights Watch, "Bahrain: Victim of National Interests").

This is why International Day for Shia Rights 2015 is dedicated to the children of Bahrain – so that more people can become aware and stand up against this type of injustice.

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## 2015 Shia Day: Campaign



Local law enforcement officers participate in International Day for Shia Rights at DuPont Circle in Washington, D.C.

### INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR SHIA RIGHTS 2015

As mentioned above, International Day for Shia Rights 2015 is dedicated to the 550 illegally detained youth in Bahrain. The focus on this year's three campaigns have been to spread awareness of the fact that 550 minors are currently imprisoned rather than getting and education and spending time with their families.

### SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN: #612SHIADAY

International Day for Shia Rights 2015 was planned on June 12<sup>th</sup> in honor of the one year anniversary of the massacre at Camp Speicher. To capture the significance of June 12th, Shia Rights Watch created the inclusive hashtag #612ShiaDay to monitor social awareness for the campaign. The hashtag was shared across multiple social media platforms including Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Use of the hashtag even became a talking to point when spreading the message to people on the street. The social media campaign provided people around the world a low effort and simple way to participate in the event, as well as a way to get more information on Shia rights violations.



### ROSE FOR A ROSE CAMPAIGN

The theme of this year's International Day for Shia Rights focused on Remembrance Roses in honor of the Bahraini minors. Shia Rights Watch collected and dispersed 1100 roses over two days in assorted colors to people walking in D.C. On Wednesday, June 10th volunteers handed out 550 roses at Farragut Square and another 550 on Thursday, June 11th at DuPont Circle.

Each rose was a symbolic representation of one child sitting in a cell as opposed to a classroom. Attached to these roses were two versions of tiny cards depicting issues facing

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the Shia majority in Bahrain. (see Appendix 1) One of the images was a person getting beaten by authorities while the other was someone sitting behind bars. Along with the images on the front side of the card were the hashtag #612ShiaDay, the date, and the Shia Rights Watch logo. On the back of the cards a short message about the minors and a quote were printed. The quotes were from prominent historical figures such as Nelson Mandela, Abraham Lincoln, and Mahatma Gandhi that most Americans would recognize and relate to. The most important aspect of the card was the personalized number system. Each card had a number between 1 and 550, and people who received roses were told that their rose was a physical representation of that number child imprisoned in Bahrain. This allowed for a more personal and emotional connection to be established between the receiver of the rose and the imprisoned youth.



Volunteers and staff at the Shia Rights Watch headquarters prepare the first batch of 550 rose on June 10, 2015.

## LEGISLATIVE CAMPAIGN

The final way that Shia Rights Watch commemorated International Day for Shia Rights was by encouraging American citizens to get involved further by contacting their congressional representatives and urging them to co-sponsor H. Res. 105 and S. Res. 69. These resolutions call for the protection of religious minority rights and freedoms worldwide. Shia Rights Watch has advocated for the passage of these pieces of legislation for three reasons:

1. To make the protection of the religious liberties of Shia Muslims a foreign policy objective;
2. To draw attention to various instances of Anti-Shiism around the world, and;
3. To recognize the importance of the promotion of religious freedom as a tool for combating religious extremism.

Both pieces of proposed legislation, as well as a sample letter and instructions on how to contact legislators, was made available to the public on the Shia Rights Watch website in the “Get Involved” section. For more information on these proposed resolutions please visit [http://shiarightswatch.org/?page\\_id=3807](http://shiarightswatch.org/?page_id=3807).

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## 2015 Shia Day: Results

### SOCIAL MEDIA RESPONSE

The social media response was impressive and widespread. Within a week of the social media campaign launching there were over 125 Instagram posts, 70 Facebook posts, and 160 tweets with the #612ShiaDay. There was



David Saperstein @AmbSaperstein · Jun 12

We stand with all Shia around the world in commemorating International Shia Rights Day #IntShiaDay #612ShiaDay [ow.ly/OdTWi](http://ow.ly/OdTWi)



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[View summary](#)

overwhelming support for both the rose campaign and for supporting Shia Rights at large. People took to social media with messages such as “raise your voice against injustice” and “we’re all human. Give Shias their rights too” to commemorate this day. Even the United States Ambassador for International Religious Freedom David Saperstein took to twitter in support of this day by saying “We stand with all Shia around the world in commemorating International Shia Rights Day”. The social media campaign proved effective in spreading this campaign around the world as people were using the hashtag as far away as Ireland, Iraq and Pakistan. Although the rose campaign was restricted to Washington, DC, the social media campaign allowed for international participation.

### ROSE FOR A ROSE RESPONSE



The Rose Campaign proved to be an immediate success as the 550 roses that were given out, on both days, were gone within two hours. Those who received roses were grateful for the gesture but curious about the campaign. When Shia Rights Watch volunteers explained the reasoning behind the campaign to those who received roses, they were more enthusiastic about the campaign. Many of the people who

received roses in DuPont Circle and Farragut Square Park took pictures of their roses and posted them on social media with #612ShiaDay. This unique campaign was able to engage a large group of professionals in the DC Metropolitan area in the discussion about human rights violations without interrupting their busy schedules.

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## Future Goals & Recommendations

### WHAT WORKED WELL

The hashtag used during this campaign was very successful and is an element of the campaign that should carry over into next year for consistency. #612ShiaDay has the potential to be a trending topic on social media as more people get involved in the campaign in the coming years.

While the flower campaign was successful, it may not be used in the future as these campaigns will emphasize a different aspect of Shia Rights. Should the flower campaign be used again, the approach that was taken to hand out the flowers in crowded professional areas was effective.

### RECOMMENDED CHANGES FOR FUTURE CAMPAIGNS

The best way to improve this campaign would be to begin the social media aspect of the campaign earlier in the year. With only a week and a half of the social media campaign, there was a considerable response so by starting earlier there is a chance to get even more people involved in the campaign. In addition to starting earlier, working to partner with other organizations in other metropolitan areas around the world would help to create more notoriety for the International Day for Shia Rights around the world.

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## Implications for the Shia Community

This campaign has wide ranging implications for both Shia Muslims and for the international community at large. As for Shia Muslims, this campaign allowed for greater acknowledgement of the persecution and violence that Shia Muslims face. Many of the people who received flowers in Farragut and DuPont Circle parks were not aware of the number of minors detained in Bahraini prisons before speaking with Shia Rights Watch volunteers. Bringing this issue to the attention of professionals in the political capital of the United States of America can have far-reaching implications for how anti-Shiism is approached by the international community. By drawing attention to these issues, Shia Rights Watch has an opportunity to shift public opinion away from indifference and unfamiliarity and engage people in the desperately needed conversation about Shia rights violations.

The involvement of a high-ranking United States official in the social media campaign has the potential to make a large impact on the international community. The United States government has been reluctant to address anti-Shiism publically in its foreign policy decisions. However, as more people get involved in campaigns such as this, and so long as high ranking officials begin advocating for greater awareness, as Ambassador David Saperstein did on twitter in his comments supporting the International Day for Shia Rights, there is the possibility for a shift in American foreign policy towards support for Shia Muslims around the world. This would be a welcome change for the millions of Shia Muslims who receive silence from the international community when they are attacked by both their governments and extremist groups.

## Final Remarks & Thank-You

### FROM SHIA RIGHTS WATCH

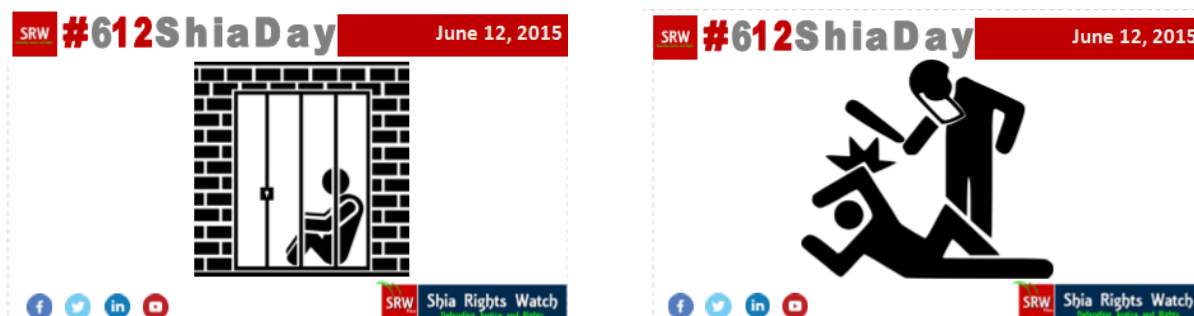
Shia Rights Watch would like to thank everyone who participated in any of the campaigns, as well as the organizations that partnered with us to launch the campaigns. We look forward to commemorating the second annual International Day for Shia Rights on June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016 and hope that you all will remain involved in the fight against faith-based human rights violations around the world.



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## Appendix 1: Campaign Materials

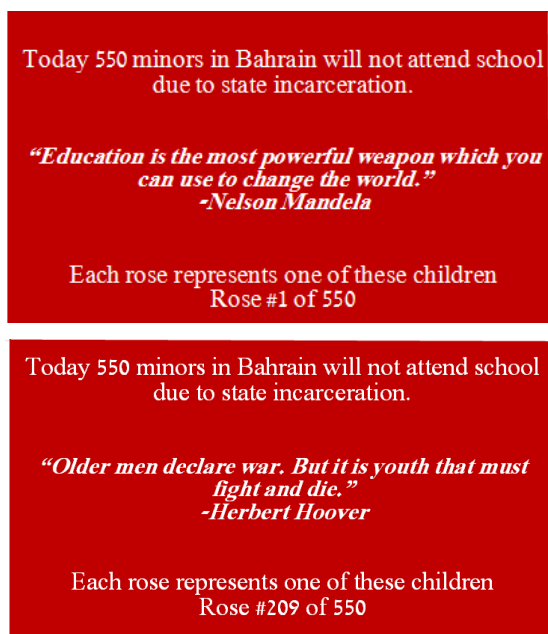
### ROSE FOR A ROSE CAMPAIGN CARDS FRONT DESIGN:



There were two different front side options printed. Each had a graphic cartooned depiction of the violence that is occurring in Bahrain, as well as the date, the social media hashtag, the company logo, and images of participating social media platforms.

### ROSE FOR A ROSE CAMPAIGN CARDS BACK DESIGN:

Each day 550 roses were handed out, each set of roses had cards that counted from 1 to 550. Every hundred cards the quotes on the card changed. The quotes used were:



“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”  
–Nelson Mandela

“Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves.” -Abraham Lincoln

“Older men declare war. But it is youth that must fight and die.” –Herbert Hoover

“In a gentle way you can shake the world.”  
–Mahatma Gandhi

“There is nothing permanent except change.”  
–Heraclitus

“In order to carry a positive action we must develop here a positive vision.”  
–Dalai Lama



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## ROSES:

Coming in an assortment of colors, Shia Rights Watch ordered 1250 roses just to be safe.



Each had its thorns removed by volunteers and staff members, and then one of the above tags was tied to the stem with ribbon. Once completed they were kept in water until it was time to hand them out in Farragut Square and DuPont Circle.

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Shia Rights Watch envisions the world with peace for all humans, regardless of their religion, gender, race and origin. There should be regulations in every country to support every religion. We believe Shia Muslim as religion should be recognized in every country and any discrimination should be brought to light. God has given us all the freedom of religion and the rights to live in peace.