Congressional Research Service
Informing the legislative debate since 1914

Bahrain: Unrest, Security, and U.S. Policy

Updated February 24, 2020

Congressional Research Service
https://crsreports.congress.gov
95-1013

CRS REPORT
Prepared for Members and
Committees of Congress

Summary

A 2011 uprising by a mostly Shia opposition to the Sunni-minority-led regime of Bahrain's Al Khalifa ruling family has subsided, but punishments of oppositionists and periodic demonstrations continue. The uprising did not achieve its goal of establishing a constitutional monarchy, but the unrest compelled the ruling family to undertake some modest reforms. Elections for the lower house of a legislative body, last held in 2018, were marred by the banning of opposition political societies and allegations of gerrymandering. The mainstream opposition uses peaceful forms of dissent, but small factions, reportedly backed by Iran, have conducted some attacks on security officials.

The government's repression presents a policy dilemma for the United States because Bahrain is a longtime ally that is pivotal to maintaining Persian Gulf security. The country has hosted a U.S. naval command headquarters for the Gulf region since 1948; the United States and Bahrain have had a formal Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) since 1991; and Bahrain is designated by the United States as a "major non-NATO ally." There are nearly 5,000 U.S. forces, mostly Navy, in Bahrain, which relies on U.S.-made arms. Because of the government's use of force against protesters, both the Obama and Trump Administrations curtailed U.S. assistance to Bahrain's internal security organizations.

The Trump Administration has prioritized countering Iran and addressing other regional security issues, and to that end has lifted the previous Administration's conditionality on major arms sales to Bahrain's military and has corroborated Bahrain leadership assertions that Iran is providing material support to violent opposition factions in Bahrain. In 2019, Bahrain joined and agreed to headquarter a U.S.-led maritime mission (International Maritime Security Construct, IMSC) to protect shipping in the Gulf from further Iranian attacks. Bahrain also supports a U.S.-backed concept for an Arab coalition to counter Iran, the "Middle East Strategic Alliance." Critics of U.S. policy assert that the Administration is downplaying human rights concerns in the interests of countering Iran.

Within the Gulf Cooperation Council alliance (GCC: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman), Bahrain generally supports Saudi policies. In March 2015, it joined Saudi Arabia-led military action to try to restore the government of Yemen that was ousted by Iran-backed Houthi rebels. In June 2017, it joined a Saudi and UAE move to isolate Qatar for its purported support for Muslim Brotherhood-linked Islamist movements, accusing Qatar of hosting Bahraini dissidents and of allying with Iran. In 2014, Bahrain joined the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State and flew strikes against the group's fighters in Syria that year. Bahrain has expressed support for the Trump Administration's Israeli-Palestinian peace plan that was unveiled in January 2020.

Bahrain has fewer financial resources than do most of the other GCC states and has not succeeded in significantly improving the living standards of the Shia majority. In October 2018, three GCC states assembled an aid package of $10 billion to reduce the strain on Bahrain's budget. Bahrain's small oil exports emanate primarily from an oil field in Saudi Arabia that the Saudi government has set aside for Bahrain's use, although a major new oil and gas discovery off Bahrain's coast was reported in 2018. In 2004, the United States and Bahrain signed a free trade agreement (FTA); legislation implementing it was signed January 11, 2006 (P.L. 109-169). Some U.S. labor organizations assert that Bahrain's arrests of dissenting workers should void the FTA.

Contents

The Political Structure, Reform, and Human Rights 1
Leadership Dynamics 1
Executive and Legislative Powers 2
Political Groups and Elections 3
Pre-uprising Elections 4
2011 Uprising: Origin, Developments, and Prognosis 4
Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) 5
The "National Dialogue" Process 7
Current Situation, Post-Uprising Elections, and Prospects 8
U.S. Posture on the Unrest 11
Other Human Rights Issues 13
Women's Rights 14
Religious Freedom 14
Human Trafficking and Labor Rights 14
Torture 15
U.S.-Bahrain Relations 15
U.S. Naval Headquarters and Other Facilities 16
Other Facilities Used by U.S. and Allied Forces 17
Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) and Major Non-NATO Ally Designation 18
Major Non-NATO Ally Designation 18
U.S. Security Assistance and Arms Transfers 18
Assistance to the Bahrain Defense Forces/Ministry of Defense 19
Russia Purchases 21
Counterterrorism Cooperation/Ministry of Interior 22
Foreign Policy Issues 24
Relations with other GCC States 24
Iran 25
Iraq/Syria/Islamic State Organization 26
Yemen 26
Israeli-Palestinian Dispute 27
Economic Issues 28
U.S.-Bahrain Economic Relations 28

Figures

Figure 1. Bahrain 30

Tables

Table 1. Comparative Composition of the National Assembly 8
Table 2. Status of Prominent Dissidents/Other Metrics 11
Table 3. U.S. Assistance to Bahrain Since 2011 Uprising 29

Contacts

Author Information..... 31

The Political Structure, Reform, and Human Rights[1]

The site of the ancient Bronze Age civilization of Dilmun, Bahrain was a trade hub linking Mesopotamia and the Indus valley until a drop in trade from India caused the Dilmun civilization to decline around 2,000 B.C. The inhabitants of Bahrain converted to Islam in the 7th century. Bahrain subsequently fell under the control of Islamic caliphates based in Damascus, then Baghdad, and later Persian, Omani, and Portuguese forces.

The Al Khalifa family, which is Sunni Muslim and generally not as religiously conservative as the leaders of neighboring Saudi Arabia, has ruled Bahrain since 1783. That year, the family, a branch of the Bani Utbah tribe, left the Saudi peninsula and captured a Persian garrison controlling the island. In 1830, the ruling family signed a treaty establishing Bahrain as a protectorate of Britain, which was then the dominant power in the Persian Gulf. In the 1930s, Reza Shah Pahlavi of Iran unsuccessfully sought to deny Bahrain the right to grant oil concessions to the United States and Britain. As Britain reduced its military presence in the Gulf in 1968, Bahrain and the other smaller Persian Gulf emirates (principalities) sought a permanent status. A 1970 U.N. survey ("referendum") determined that Bahrain's inhabitants did not want to join with Iran, a finding that was endorsed by U.N. Security Council Resolution 278 and recognized formally by Iran's parliament. Bahrain negotiated with eight other Persian Gulf emirates during 1970-1971 on federating with them, but Bahrain and Qatar each decided to become independent. Bahrain became independent on August 15, 1971. The seven other emirates formed the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Leadership Dynamics

Bahrain is led by King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa (70 years old, born January 1950), who succeeded his father, Shaykh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa, upon his death in 1999. Educated at Sandhurst Military Academy in Britain, King Hamad was previously commander of the Bahraini Defense Forces (BDF). The king appears to be trying to balance proponents and opponents of accommodation with Bahrain's Shias, who constitute a majority of the citizenry[2] but have long asserted they are treated as "second class citizens" or suspected of loyalty to Iran.

Within the upper echelons of the ruling family, the most active proponent of accommodation with the Shia opposition is the king's son and designated successor, the U.S.- and U.K.-educated Crown Prince Shaykh Salman bin Hamad, who is about 51. The Crown Prince was strengthened by his appointment in 2013 to a newly created position of First Deputy Prime Minister, with an office staffed with young, well-educated reformists. The Crown Prince and his allies, including Deputy Prime Minister Muhammad bin Mubarak Al Khalifa,[3]assert that further reform is needed to address the unrest. Another perceived supporter of the Crown Prince is incoming Foreign Minister Abdul Latif Rashid Al Zayani, who was named to the post in February 2020 after nearly nine years serving as Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC, comprised of

[1] Some of the information in this section is from recent State Department human rights reports, including for 2018, which can be found at https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/bahrain/. CRS has no means of independently investigating the human rights situation in Bahrain.

[2] Government officials dispute that the Shia community is as large a majority as the 70% figure used in most factbooks and academic work on Bahrain. The Shia community in Bahrain consists of the more numerous "Baharna," who are of Arab ethnicity and descended from Arab tribes who inhabited the area from pre-Islamic times. Shias of Persian ethnicity, referred to as Ajam, arrived in Bahrain over the past 400 years and are less numerous than the Baharna. The Ajam speak Persian and generally do not integrate with the Baharna or with Sunni Arabs.

[3] The foreign minister's name is similar to, but slightly different from, that of the hardline Royal Court Minister.

Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, UAE, Qatar, and Oman), based in Saudi Arabia. A younger son of the king, Shaykh Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa, who is about 35, could become leader if Salman were to step aside.[4] The Crown Prince's wife, Shaykha Hala, passed away in June 2018.

The "antireform" faction—who assert that concessions to the Shia majority cause it to increase its political demands—is led by the King's uncle (the brother of the late Amir Isa), Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, who has been in position since Bahrain's independence in 1971. He is about 85 and reportedly in frail health, but the King risks unrest within the ruling family by removing him. The Prime Minister has been supported by officials who are even more hardline than he is, including Minister of the Royal Court Khalid bin Ahmad bin Salman Al Khalifa[5] and his brother, BDF Commander Khalifa bin Ahmad Al Khalifa. These brothers are known as "Khawalids," hailing from a branch of the ruling family traced to a Khalid bin Ali Al Khalifa,[6] and have like-minded allies throughout the security and intelligence services and the judiciary. In September 2013, Bahrain appointed a BDF senior officer, Abdullah bin Muhammad bin Rashid Al Khalifa, as Ambassador to the United States.

Executive and Legislative Powers

The king has broad powers, including appointing all ministers and judges and amending the constitution. Al Khalifa family members hold nearly half of the 26 cabinet posts, and include the ministries of defense, interior (internal security), and foreign affairs. A typical cabinet includes five or six Shia ministers.

Upon taking office in 1999, Hamad assumed the title of king—a title that implies more accountability than the former title "Amir." A public referendum on February 14, 2001 adopted a "National Action Charter," provisions of which were incorporated into a new constitution issued by the King in 2002. However, many Shias and reform-minded Sunnis criticized the government for not putting the new constitution to a public ratification vote and for deviating from the 1973 constitution by establishing an all-appointed *Shura* (consultative) *Council* of equal size (40 seats each) as the elected *Council of Representatives* (COR).[7] Together, these bodies constitute the National Assembly. The government has tended to appoint generally more educated, pro-Western, and pro-government members to the *Shura* Council. There is no quota for women in the body.

As a result of national dialogues held in 2011-2012, the National Assembly's powers were increased by constitutional amendments enacted and signed by the king on May 3, 2012. The amendments also imposed limitations on the power of the king to appoint the members of the Shura Council, and a requirement that he consult the heads of the two chambers of the National Assembly before dissolving the COR.

- Either chamber of the National Assembly can originate legislation, but enactment into law requires concurrence by the king.[8] Prior to the May 2012 constitutional amendments, only the COR could originate legislation. The king's "veto" can be overridden by a two-thirds majority vote of both chambers. A 2012 decree gives the National Assembly the ability to recommend constitutional amendments.

[4] Simon Henderson, "Gulf Succession: Qatar's Model Could be a Way Forward," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 25, 2016.

[5] The name of this official is similar to that of the Foreign Minister, Khalid bin Ahmad bin Mohammad Al Khalifa.

[6] Differences between the *khawalids* and others in the family are discussed in, Charles Levinson. "A Palace Rift in Persian Gulf Bedevils Key U.S. Navy Base." Wall Street Journal, February 20, 2013.

[7] This body is also referred to as the Council of Deputies (Majles al-Nawwab).

[8] Before the May 2012 constitutional amendments, only the COR could draft legislation.

- The Assembly only partially checks government power, but the May 2012 constitutional amendments declared the elected COR as the presiding chamber of the Assembly, enhancing its authority. The COR can, by a two-thirds majority, declare "noncooperation" with the Prime Minister, but the king rules on whether to dismiss the Prime Minister or disband the COR.
- As of 2012, the COR has the power to reject the cabinet, but it does not vote on individual cabinet appointments. The COR has always had the power to remove individual ministers through a vote of no-confidence by two-thirds majority.

The adoption of the National Charter and other early reforms instituted by King Hamad, although still short of the Shia majority's expectations, were more extensive than those made by his father, Amir Isa. Amir Isa's most significant reform was his establishment in late 1992 of a 30-member all-appointed Consultative Council, but its mandate was limited to commenting on government-proposed laws. In June 1996, he expanded it to 40 members. That body did not satisfy broad demands for the restoration of the elected national assembly that was established under the 1973 constitution but abolished in August 1975 because of Sunni-Shia tensions. Amir Isa's refusal to restore an elected Assembly was at least partly responsible for sparking daily Shia-led antigovernment violence during 1994-1998.

Political Groups and Elections

COR elections have been held every four years since 2002, each time generating substantial tension over perceived government efforts to deny Shias a majority in the COR. The Shia opposition has sought, unsuccessfully to date, to establish election processes and district boundaries that would allow them to translate their numbers into political strength. If no candidate in a district wins more than 50% in the first round, a runoff is held one week later.

Political parties are banned, but factions organize as functionally equivalent "political societies":

- *Wifaq* (Accord National Islamic Society) is the most prominent Shia political society. Its officials have, at times, engaged with the government in and outside of formal "national dialogues" since the 2011 uprising began. *Wifaq'*s leaders are Secretary-General and Shia cleric Shaykh Ali al-Salman and his deputy Khalil al-Marzuq. Shaykh Salman remains jailed. In 2016, Bahraini courts approved government requests to dissolve *Wifaq* entirely. Then-Secretary of State Kerry stated upon the July 17, 2016, dissolution that "these actions are inconsistent with U.S. interests and strain our partnership with Bahrain.... We call on the Government of Bahrain to reverse these and other recent measures, return urgently to the path of reconciliation, and work collectively to address the aspirations of all Bahrainis." *Wifaq* allies include the National Democratic Action Society, the National Democratic Assembly, the Democratic Progressive Tribune, and Al Ekhaa.
- *Al Haq* (Movement of Freedom and Democracy), a small Shia faction, is outlawed because of its calls for outright change of regime; its key leaders, Dr. Abduljalil Alsingace and Hassan Mushaima, have been imprisoned since the uprising. It has boycotted all COR elections.
- The *Bahrain Islamic Action Society and Amal.* Two other small Shia factions linked to the the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB)—a party linked to alleged Iran-backed plots to overthrow Bahrain's government in the 1980s and 1990s—are outlawed. Amal's leader, Shaykh Muhammad Ali al-Mafoodh, has been in prison since 2011.

- *Waad* ("promise") is a secular opposition group that includes both Sunnis and Shias. Its former leader, Ibrahim Sharif, has been repeatedly arrested, released, and rearrested. Its current leader is Sami Fuad Sayedi. On May 31, 2017, the High Civil Court approved a government request to dissolve it.
- *Sunni Islamists*. Among the prominent Sunni factions are *Minbar* (Arabic for "platform"), an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, and *Al Asala*, which is a harder-line "Salafist" political society. Smaller Sunni Islamist factions include *Al Saff*, the *Islamic Shura Society*, and the *Al Wasat Al Arabi Islamic Society*. In June 2011, a non-Islamist, generally pro-government Sunni political coalition—the *National Unity Assembly (NUA)*—was formed as a response to the uprising.

Pre-uprising Elections

In several elections held during 2002-2010, which are generally held in the fall of the year they are held, tensions between the Shia majority and the regime escalated.

- *October 2002*. In the first elections under the 2002 constitution, *Wifaq* and other Shia political groups boycotted on the grounds that establishing an elected COR and an appointed *Shura* Council of the same size diluted popular will. There were 170 candidates, including 8 women. Sunnis won two-thirds of the 40 COR seats, and none of the women was elected.
- *November 2006.* Sunni-Shia tensions escalated in advance of the COR and municipal elections amid a government adviser's revelations that the government had adjusted election districts to favor Sunni candidates and had issued passports to Sunnis to increase the Sunni vote. *Wifaq* participated, helping lift turnout to 72%, and the faction won 17 seats (virtually all it contested) to become the largest COR bloc. Of the 23 Sunni winners, 8 were secular and 15 were Islamists. One woman ran unopposed and was elected (out of 18 women candidates). The King appointed a *Shura* Council with 20 Shias, 19 Sunnis, one Christian, and nine women. A *Wifaq* supporter was subsequently appointed minister of state for foreign affairs.
- *October 2010*. Even though oppositionists again accused the government of gerrymandering to favor Sunnis, and despite the arrest of 23 Shia leaders a month before the election, *Wifaq* participated. Of the 200 candidates, six were women. Turnout was about 67%. The election increased *Wifaq's* representation to 18 seats, reduced Sunni Islamists to five seats from 15; and greatly increased the number of Sunni independents to 17 seats (from nine). The one female incumbent was reelected. The king reappointed 30 of the 40 *Shura* Council incumbents. Of the total membership, 19 were Shias, including the speaker. Four were women, of which one was Jewish and one was Christian.

2011 Uprising: Origin, Developments, and Prognosis

The aspirations of Bahraini Shias were demonstrated as unsatisfied when a major uprising began on February 14, 2011, following the toppling of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak.[9] After a few days of confrontations with security forces, mostly Shia demonstrators converged on the interior

[9] The events of the uprising, and the government's political and security reaction, are examined in substantial detail in the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report released November 23, 2011. Text of the report is at http://files.bici.org.bh/BICIreportEN.pdf.

of a major traffic circle ("Pearl Roundabout"). The unrest escalated on February 17-18, 2011, when security forces using rubber bullets and tear gas killed four demonstrators. All 18 *Wifaq* deputies in the COR resigned. The Crown Prince invited protester representatives to formal dialogue, many demonstrators were released, and two Al Khalifa family members were dropped from the cabinet. In March 2011, the Crown Prince advanced a "seven principles" proposal for a national dialogue that would agree on a "parliament with full authority"; a "government that meets the will of the people"; fair voting districts; and several other measures.[10] Protest leaders asserted that the seven principles fell short of their demands for a constitutional monarchy in which the Prime Minister and cabinet are selected by the fully elected parliament, and they demanded ending gerrymandering of election districts to favor Sunnis, and more jobs and economic opportunities. Their demands were encapsulated in the October 2011 "Manama Document" unveiled by *Wifaq* and *Waad*.

On March 13, 2011, protesters blockaded the financial district of Manama, triggering the GCC to send forces into Bahrain on March 14, 2011. The GCC's joint Peninsula Shield force, including 1,200 Saudi armored forces and 600 UAE police, took up positions at key locations and Kuwait sent naval forces to help secure Bahrain's maritime borders. On March 15, the King declared a three-month state of emergency. GCC-backed security forces cleared demonstrators from Pearl Roundabout and demolished the Pearl Monument on March 18.[11] The king ended the state of emergency as of June 1, and the vast bulk of the GCC force departed in June 2011.

Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI)

On June 29, 2011, as a gesture toward the opposition and international critics, the king named a five-person "Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry" (BICI), headed by international legal expert Dr. Cherif Bassiouni, to investigate the government response to the unrest—and not the broader sources of the unrest. The 500+ page BICI report, released on November 23, 2011, provided support for the narratives of both sides as well as recommendations. It stated that[12]

- there was "systematic" and "deliberate" use of excessive force, including torture and forced confessions, against protesters;
- the opposition increased its demands as the uprising progressed; and
- the government did not provide evidence to link Iran to the unrest.

The report contained 26 recommendations to hold accountable those government personnel responsible for abuses during the uprising. King Hamad promised full implementation of all recommendations and, in November 2011, established a 19-member National Commission to oversee implementation of the recommendations, chaired by the *Shura* Council chairman (a Shia). A "Follow-Up Unit" was established by the Ministry of Justice.[13]

[10] BICI report, op. cit., p. 165.

[11] Some accounts differ on the involvement of the Peninsula Shield force, with some observers arguing that members of the force participated directly in suppressing protests, and others accepting the Bahrain/GCC view that the GCC force guarded key locations and infrastructure.

[12] BICI, *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, at http://files.bici.org.bh/BICIreportEN.pdf.

[13] The Follow-Up Unit's June report can be found at http://www.iaa.bh/downloads/bici_followup_report_en.pdf.

Assessments of Compliance with the BICI Recommendations

Bahraini officials assert that the government has fully implemented the vast majority of the 26 BICI recommendations, but most outside observers assess that Bahrain only partially implemented most of the recommendations. There appears to be consensus that the government has rebuilt almost all of the 53 Shia religious sites demolished in 2011.

State Department. The FY2013 defense authorization act (P.L. 112-239) directed the Secretary of State to report to Congress on Bahrain's implementation of the BICI recommendations, as did the FY2016 Consolidated Appropriation (P.L. 114-113). The latest report, dated June 21, 2016,[14] indicated that Bahrain's government had

- made the office of the inspector general of the Ministry of Interior independent of the ministry's hierarchy;
- stripped the Bahrain National Security Agency (BNSA) of arrest powers;
- provided compensation and other remedies for families of the deceased victims of the government's response to the unrest;
- facilitated, or at least not obstructed, the rehiring of almost all of the 2,700+ workers who had been fired for participating in the unrest;
- developed programs to promote religious, political, and other forms of tolerance and promotion of human rights and the rule of law.

The report recommended that the government needs to allow oversight agencies greater independence, and implement recommendations on freedom of expression.

Outside Assessments. Reports and testimony by the staff of the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) have asserted that the government has fully implemented only three BICI recommendations, partially implemented about half of them, and not implemented at all at least six.[15] The group characterized the June 2016 State Department report referenced above as "a real effort to pull punches and avoid clear evaluations of progress, in order to avoid antagonizing the Bahraini government."[16] A November 2015 report by Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain asserted that the government had only fully implemented two of the BICI recommendations, and that that the issues that caused the uprising had not been addressed.[17]

BICI-Related U.S. Legislation. In the 114th Congress, S. 2009 and H.R. 3445 would have prohibited specific U.S. weapons and crowd control equipment sales to Bahrain (tear gas, small arms, Humvees, and "other" crowd control items) until the State Department certified that Bahrain had fully implemented all BICI recommendations. A Senate-passed State Department authorization bill, S. 1635, would have required another State Department assessment of implementation of the BICI recommendations and the effect of such findings on the U.S. defense posture in the Gulf. The provision was not included in P.L. 114-323.

---

[14] An earlier State Department report, released in August 2013, can be found at http://adhrb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/State-Report-on-Implementation-of-BICI-3-2.pdf. The June 2016 report on BICI implementation can be found at http://pomed.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/State-BICI-Report.pdf.

[15] POMED. "One Year Later: Assessing Bahrain's Implementation of the BICI Report." November 2012.

[16] Statement of Cole Bockenfeld, Deputy Director for Policy, POMED, before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. September 9, 2016.

[17] The report can be found at http://www.adhrb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Shattering_the_Facade_Web.pdf.

The "National Dialogue" Process

The BICI process created conditions for a government-opposition "National Dialogue" process, which was inaugurated on July 2, 2011. Chaired by the COR speaker, about 300 delegates participated, of which 40-50 were members of the Shia opposition (including five *Wifaq* members).[18] The weeks-long dialogue addressed political, economic, social, and human rights issues, but the detention of senior oppositionists caused *Wifaq* to exit the talks on July 18, 2011. The dialogue concluded with the following consensus recommendations, which were endorsed by the government on July 29, 2011. As noted above, some recommendations were incorporated into a constitutional amendment that enhanced the powers of the National Assembly:

- an elected parliament (lower house) with expanded powers, including to confirm a nominated cabinet. In addition, the overall chairmanship of the National Assembly should be exercised by the elected COR, not the Shura Council;
- a government "reflecting the will of the people";
- "fairly" demarcated electoral boundaries;
- reworking of laws on naturalization and citizenship;
- combating financial and administrative corruption; and
- efforts to reduce sectarian divisions.

Second National Dialogue. In January 2013, *Wifaq* and five allied parties accepted the King's call to restart political dialogue. The second dialogue began on February 10, 2013, consisting of twice per week meetings attended by the Minister of Justice (an Al Khalifa family member), two other ministers, eight opposition representatives (*Wifaq* and allied parties), and other prominent Bahrainis. The talks broke down over opposition insistence that consensus recommendations be put to a public referendum, while the government insisted that agreements be enacted by the National Assembly. The dialogue was suspended on January 8, 2014, but the Crown Prince sought to revive negotiations by meeting with *Wifaq* leaders later that month. The Crown Prince's September 2014 "framework" for a new dialogue did not satisfying the core opposition demand for the selection of a prime minister by an elected COR, and no further national dialogue has convened to date.

[18] Mohamed Hasni. "Bahrain Opens Dialogue Buoyed by Shia Attendance." Agence France Presse, July 2, 2011.

Table 1. Comparative Composition of the National Assembly

	2006	2010	2011	2014	2018
Council of Representatives (COR)					
Wifaq (Shia Islamist)	17	18	0	0	0
Shia Independent	0	0	8	14	13
Progressive Democratic Tribute (Shia)					2
Sunni Independent (mostly secular)	8	17	27	19	18
Minbar (Sunni Islamist, Muslim Brotherhood)	7	2	2	2	0
Asala (Sunni Islamist, Salafi)	8	3	3	5	6
National Unity Assembly (NUA), Sunni				0	1
COR Sect Composition	23 Sunni, 17 Shia	22 Sunni, 18 Shia	32 Sunni, 8 Shia	26 Sunni, 14 Shia	25 Sunni, 15 Shia
Women in COR	1	1	4	3	6 (including COR speaker)
Shura Council (Upper House, appointed)					
Sectarian, Religious Composition Upper House (Shura Council)	20 Shia, 19 Sunni, 1 Christian	19 Shia, 19 Sunni, 1 Christian, 1 Jew	No change	Roughly equal numbers of Sunnis and Shias, 1 Christian, 1 Jew	20 Sunni, 18 Shia, one Jew, one Christian
Number of Women	9	4	11	9	9

Current Situation, Post-Uprising Elections, and Prospects

Unrest continues, although at far lower intensity than in 2011, and observers have accused the government of backsliding in its implementation of the BICI recommendations and other human rights reforms. In 2017, the King signed a National Assembly bill amending the constitution to allow military courts the right to try civilians accused of terrorism, and the government returned arrest powers to the BNSA (see above). The government also has stepped up citizenship revocations and expulsions and continues to incarcerate opposition leaders. Each February 14 anniversary of the uprising has been marked by demonstrations.

The government and the opposition have, at times, discussed confidence-building measures such as appointments of oppositionists to the cabinet. The King appears to have ruled out replacing the Prime Minister even though some oppositionists have suggested they would accept a more moderate ruling family member or a Sunni non-royal in that role. Hardline Sunnis within and

outside the government, reportedly with the support of Saudi officials, continue to urge the ruling family to refuse compromise.

Elections Since the Uprising

2014

In an effort to present an image of "normalization" of the domestic political situation, the government urged the opposition to participate in the November 22, 2014, COR election. However, the government reduced the number of electoral districts to four, from five, further reducing the chances that Shias would win a majority of COR seats. *Wifaq* and its allies boycotted, reducing the turnout to about 50% (Bahrain official figures). There was little violence.

The seats were mostly won by independent candidates, suggesting that voters sought to reduce polarization. Only 3 candidates of the Sunni Islamist political societies won, and none of the 10 pro-government *Al Fatih* coalition candidates was elected. The 14 Shias elected were independents, and Shias became deputy COR speaker and chairman of the *Shura* Council.

2018

Observers sought to gauge the state of Bahrain's politics from the 2018 COR elections, held on November 24, 2018 (runoff on December 1, 2018). Municipal council elections were held concurrently. The vote was widely derided by Bahraini oppositionists and regional and international observers as neither free nor fair, citing particularly the government decree that no members of banned parties (*Wifaq* and *Waad,* see above*)* could run. *Wifaq* members boycotted entirely by choosing not to run as independents, but the Democratic Progressive Tribute, a *Wifaq* ally, participated. Several Sunni groupings, including the National Unity Assembly (see above), *Minbar*, and *Asala*, competed in order not to cede Sunni representation to independents. One liberal political society composed of both Shias and Sunnis, the National Action Charter Society (*Mithaq)*, competed.

The final list of candidates included 293 persons, of whom 41 were women—the highest number of women candidates in any Bahrain election. There were 137 candidates for the 30 seats on Bahrain's 3 municipal councils, of which 8 candidates were women. Only nine COR seats were decided on November 24, including victories by two women. Also undecided were 23 municipal council seats. Final results awaited a runoff for the 31 undecided seats (no candidate received a majority) on December 1. The government claimed turnout was very high at 67%, but oppositionists claimed turnout was only about 30%.[19]

The government noted that 85% of the seats were won by independents, only five incumbents retained their seats, and that the victories by six women were the most ever. The new COR voted its first female speaker, Fawzia Zainal. Bahrain observers report that the Shia deputy speaker, Abdulnabi Salman, is serving as an unofficial envoy to the Shia community, aggregating its grievances and attempting to redress them.[20] A *Shura* Council was appointed in December 2018, with roughly the same sect and gender composition as recent *Shuras*, but the king excluded members of political societies from membership.

[19] https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/bahrain-s-farce-of-an-election-heads-to-run-off-as-israel-signals-warming-ties-1.6691045.

[20] Author meeting with Bahrain former parliamentarian. March 2019.

Violent Underground Groups Cloud Outlook

Attacks by apparently small but violent underground groups, using bombs and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), have aggravated tensions between the government and the mainstream opposition, as well as with Iran. These groups have not targeted civilians, although on at least one occasion civilians have been killed or injured. In April 2015, the government arrested 29 persons for a December 2014 bombing that wounded several police officers. On December 25, 2017, six Bahraini Shias were sentenced to death for allegedly forming a terrorist cell and plotting to assassinate a senior Bahrain military official. On January 1, 2017, 10 detainees who had been convicted of militant activities such as those discussed above broke out of Bahrain's Jaw prison with the help of attackers outside the jail.

However, perhaps reflecting a perception that terrorist attacks have not accomplished any political goals, the attacks appear to have diminished in frequency. The State Department international terrorism report for 2017 noted that "terrorist activity in Bahrain increased in 2017," citing Shia militant attacks that the report says killed four police officers in 2017.[21] However, the report for 2018 stated that "Bahraini Shia militants remained a threat to security forces, though there were no successful major terrorist attacks in 2018."[22] Mainstream opposition groups deny any connection to underground violent groups and accuse the government of exaggerating Iran's support for these violent groups. The most active include the following:[23]

- *Al Ashtar Brigades (AAB)*. This group, the most well-known of the underground groups, revealed itself publicly in April 2013. It has claimed responsibility for about 20 bombings against security personnel, including a March 2014 attack that killed three police officers, including a UAE officer. In January 2017, the government executed three Shias for that attack—the first executions since the 2011 uprising began. On March 17, 2017, the Trump Administration designated two Ashtar Brigades members, one of which is Iran-based, as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs) under Executive Order 13224, which blocks U.S.-based property of entities that conduct terrorism. On July 10, 2018, the State Department named the Al Ashtar Brigades as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act. The group was also named as an SDGT under E.O. 13224. On August 13, 2018, the Trump Administration designated Qassim Abdullah Ali Ahmad, a purported Al Ashtar leader, as an SDGT.
- The *"14 February Coalition"* (named for the anniversary of the Bahrain uprising) claims inspiration from antiregime protesters in Egypt in the uprising there in 2011. The group claimed responsibility for an April 14, 2013, explosion in the Financial Harbour district. In September 2013, 50 Shias were sentenced to up to 15 years in prison for alleged involvement in the group. On November 10, 2017, militants allegedly from the group attacked a key pipeline that supplies Saudi oil to the Bahrain Petroleum Company refinery in Sitra, Bahrain.
- *Others:* Other groups, using the names Bahrain Liberation Movement, *al-Wafaa*, the Resistance Brigades, the Mukhtar Brigades, the Basta organization, and the

[21] State Department "Country Reports on Terrorism: 2017."

[22] State Department "Country Reports on Terrorism: 2018." October 2019.

[23] Matthew Levitt. "Iran and Bahrain: Crying Wolf, or Wolf at the Door?," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 16, 2014.

Imam Army, are offshoots of the Al Ashtar Brigades, or separate small cells. In March 2018, authorities arrested 116 persons allegedly part of an armed network supported by the IRGC-QF.[24] In late September 2018, the government charged 169 persons with forming a "Bahrain Hezbollah"—a Bahrain version of Lebanese Hezbollah—with Iranian backing. On May 6, 2019, Bahrain's Court of Cassation sentenced 19 *al-Wafaa* activists to varying jail terms for links to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Lebanese Hezbollah.

U.S. officials assert that the violent Bahraini groups are armed and supported by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF). In late 2016, Bahraini authorities uncovered a large warehouse containing equipment, apparently supplied by Iran, suitable to constructing "explosively-forced projectiles" (EFPs) such as those Iran-backed Shia militias used against U.S. armor in Iraq during 2004-2011. No EFPs have actually been used in Bahrain, to date.[25]

Table 2. Status of Prominent Dissidents/Other Metrics

Wifaq Leaders	Secretary-General Ali al-Salman was arrested in 2013 for "insulting authorities" and "incitement to religious hatred." He was rearrested and, in June 2015, convicted and sentenced to four years in prison. In May 2016, a court increased his sentence to nine years. In November 2017, the government charged him additionally with spying for Qatar. He was acquitted of this charge on June 21, 2018, but the acquittal was overturned on November 4 and he was sentenced to life in prison. Deputy leader Khalil al-Marzuq was arrested in September 2013, for "inciting terrorism," but was acquitted in June 2014. Isa Qasim's home was raided by the regime in 2013 and again in 2014. In June 2016, his citizenship was revoked. He left Bahrain for medical treatment in late 2018 and is in Iran, where he appears on Iranian state media periodically, opening him to government assertions that he is under Iranian sway.
Waad Leaders	*Waad* leader Ibrahim Sharif was imprisoned in 2011, released in June 2015, and rearrested in July 2015 for "incitement" against the government. In February 2016, he was sentenced to one year in jail, but was released in July 2016. He was detained again for several days in November 2016. In March 2019, he was convicted and sentenced to six months in prison for criticizing Sudan's then leader Omar Hassan Al Bashir on social media.
Other Major Dissidents	Nabeel Rajab, a prominent human rights activist and head of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, was sentenced to five years in prison in February 2018; Bahraini courts upheld the sentence in December 2018. Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja, another prominent human rights activist, is serving a life sentence for his role in the 2011 uprising.
Salmaniya Medical Complex Personnel	Twenty-one medical personnel were arrested in April 2011 and tried for, among other charges, forcibly occupying a public building. All were eventually acquitted, most recently in March 2013, but have not regained their jobs.
Protesters Killed	About 100 since the uprising began
Citizenship Revocations and Expulsions	About 990 persons have had their citizenships revoked since 2012, but on April 22, 2019, King Hamad reinstated the nationality of 551 of these persons. There have also been several expulsions, mostly Bahraini Shias of Persian origin.
Number Arrested	Approximately 3,000 total detentions since 2011.

Sources: Various press and interest group reports.

U.S. Posture on the Unrest

The United States has repeatedly urged Bahrain's leaders not to use force against protesters and to release jailed opposition leaders. High-level U.S. engagement with Bahraini leaders and U.S.-

[24] *Washington Post*, March 4, 2018.

[25] Souad Mekhennet and Joby Warrick. "In Bahrain's Militant Cells, U.S. Sees Iran." *Washington Post*, April 2, 2017.

Bahrain defense cooperation have continued and no sanctions have been imposed on any Bahraini officials. The Obama Administration withheld or conditioned some arms sales to Bahrain. In a September 21, 2011, speech to the U.N. General Assembly, President Obama said

> In Bahrain, steps have been taken toward reform and accountability. We're pleased with that, but more is required. America is a close friend of Bahrain, and we will continue to call on the government and the main opposition bloc—the *Wifaq*—to pursue a meaningful dialogue that brings peaceful change that is responsive to the people. We believe the patriotism that binds Bahrainis together must be more powerful than the sectarian forces that would tear them apart. It will be hard, but it is possible.

Critics said that the Obama Administration was insufficiently critical of Bahrain's leaders,[26] citing then-Secretary of State Clinton's comments on December 3, 2010 referring to the October 2010 elections, saying "I am impressed by the commitment that the government has to the democratic path that Bahrain is walking on.... "[27] On July 7, 2014, the government ordered then-Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) Tom Malinowski out of Bahrain for meeting with *Wifaq* leader Shaykh Salman—an action that then-Secretary Kerry called "unacceptable." A July 18, 2014, letter to King Hamad, signed by 18 Members of the House of Representatives, called on the king to invite Assistant Secretary Malinowski back.[28] Bahrain reversed its position, and he and Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East Anne Patterson visited Bahrain in December 2014.

Trump Administration Policy

As part of its stated goal of pressuring Iran, the Trump Administration has dropped conditions on the approval of new sales to Bahrain's military[29] and imposed new U.S. sanctions on Bahraini militant groups. In May 2017, during his visit to the region, President Trump assured King Hamad that U.S.-Bahrain relations would be free of the "strain" that characterized U.S.-Bahrain relations on human rights issues during the Obama Administration.[30] Still, in 2017, the Trump Administration criticized the dissolution of *Waad* as unhelpful to political reconciliation.[31] The Administration also has sought to promote broader, but still quiet, ties between the Gulf states and Israel; this is, perhaps in part, to enlist Gulf state support for the Administration's Middle East peace plans and other efforts to help secure Israel.

Yet, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo was criticized by some U.S. human rights organizations for not publicly raising human rights issues during his January 2019 visit to Bahrain and meeting with King Hamad; the trip was part of a visit to the GCC states to promote unity among them and their cooperation with the United States against Iran.[32] Bahrain opposition figures have expressed concerns that the policy could cause the opposition to draw closer to Iran.

---

[26] Stephen McInerny. "Silence on Bahrain." *Washington Post* op-ed. November 5, 2012.

[27] Department of State. "Remarks With Foreign Minister Al Khalifa After Their Meeting." December 3, 2010.

[28] Congress of the United States. Letter to King Hamad. July 18, 2014.

[29] http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/feb/7/trump-ready-to-approve-weapons-packages-to-saudi-a/.

[30] "After Assurances by Trump, Bahrain Stages Deadly Raid against Opposition." *Washington Post*, May 25, 2017.

[31] https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-05-31/court-orders-last-main-opposition-group-in-bahrain-dissolved.

[32] Pompeo's Visit to Bahrain Ignores Rights Issues. Human Rights Watch, January 15, 2019.

U.S. Programs to Promote Political Reform/Civil Society

The United States has funded programs to accelerate political reform in Bahrain and empower its political societies since long before the uprising. The "Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)" funded programs in Bahrain in 2003,[33] including for an American Bar Association (ABA) program to support the Ministry of Justice's Judicial and Legal Studies Institute (JLSI) specialized training for judges, lawyers, law schools, and Bahrain's bar association. The ABA also provided technical assistance to help Bahrain implement the BICI recommendations. MEPI funds have also been used to train Bahraini journalists. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) had received some U.S. funds for its programs to enhance the capabilities of Bahrain's National Assembly. For example, in FY2016, the United States provided about $350,000 for democracy and human rights promotion programs in Bahrain, of which about $250,000 was provided through NDI. No U.S. funding for democracy promotion in Bahrain was provided for FY2017 or FY2018, the latest full fiscal year included in the USAID "Explorer" database.

Other Human Rights Issues[34]

The bulk of worldwide criticism of Bahrain's human rights practices focuses on the government response to the unrest, including relative lack of accountability of security forces, suppression of free expression, and treatment of prisoners. As have several of the other Gulf states, Bahrain increasingly uses laws allowing jail sentences for "insulting the king" to silence opponents. However, State Department human rights reports and outside assessments note additional abuses.

Several organizations are chartered as human rights groups, although the government characterizes most of them as advocates for or members of the opposition. The most prominent are the Bahrain Human Rights Society (the primary licensed human rights organization), the Bahrain Transparency Society, and the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR, a U.S. grantee in FY2016) and the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights (BYSHR), which was officially dissolved but remains active informally. Some leaders of these organizations are in prison.

In 2013, in line with the BICI report, the king issued a decree reestablishing the "National Institution for Human Rights" (NIHR) to investigate human rights violations and report annually.[35] In October 2016, King Hamad gave the NIHR the power to make unannounced visits to detention centers and to request formal responses to NIHR recommendations. There is also a quasi-governmental Commission on Prisoner and Detainee Rights (PDRC).

Each March since the uprising began, the U.N. Human Rights Council has issued statements condemning the government's human rights abuses. The United States, Britain, and eight other EU countries have sometimes opposed these statements on the grounds that the government has sought to address international concerns on this issue. The United Nations has not acted on suggestions to appoint a U.N. Special Rapporteur on human rights in Bahrain or establish a formal U.N. office in Bahrain on that issue. Bahrain has often denied entry to international human rights researchers and activists, including from U.S. organizations such as Human Rights Watch.

[33] Statement from the U.S. Embassy in Bahrain Concerning MEPI. June 17, 2014.

[34] Much of this section is from the State Department's country report on human rights practices for 2018 and from reports by Human Rights Watch and other outside groups. The State Department report on Bahrain can be found at https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/bahrain/.

[35] The full text of the National Commission's March 20, 2012, report is at http://www.biciactions.bh/wps/portal/BICI/.

Women's Rights

Bahrain's officials assert they seek to advance women's rights. The cabinet regularly has several female ministers, and, as noted, the COR elected its first female speaker after the 2018 elections. Still, traditional customs and some laws tend to limit women's rights in practice. Women can drive, own and inherit property, and initiate divorce cases, but religious courts may refuse a woman's divorce request. A woman cannot transmit nationality to her spouse or children. Some prominent Bahraini women, backed by the wife of the King and the "Supreme Council for Women," have campaigned for a codified family law. Other women's rights organizations in Bahrain include the Bahrain Women's Union, the Bahrain Women's Association, and the Young Ladies Association.

Religious Freedom[36]

The State Department's reports on international religious freedom in Bahrain tend to focus on government discrimination against the Shia majority and Shia clergy. In 2014, the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs, which regulates Islamic affairs, dissolved the Islamic Ulema Council, the main assembly of Shia clerics in Bahrain, for allegedly engaging in illegal political activity. In June 2016, the king signed an amendment to a 2005 law, which banned persons who are active in religious positions from engaging in political activities—a move apparently directed against *Wifaq*.[37] On the other hand, the government does offer financing for Shia seminaries (*hawzas*).

In July 2017, Bahrain became the first country in the region to enact a unified Shia-Sunni personal status law, which weakened the ability of religious courts to regulate matters such as marriage and divorce. The law was enacted despite opposition from Shias who argued that only senior Shia clerics have the authority to pronounce on such matters.[38]

Bahrain's constitution declares Islam the official religion, but the government allows freedom of worship for Christians, Jews, and Hindus, although non-Muslim groups must register with the Ministry of Social Development to operate and Muslim groups must register with the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs. There are 19 registered non-Muslim religious groups and institutions, including Christian churches of many denominations, and Hindu and Sikh groups. The government donated land for the Roman Catholic Vicariate of Northern Arabia to relocate from Kuwait to Bahrain. A small Jewish community of about 36-40 persons—mostly from families of Iraqi Jews who settled in Bahrain in the 19th century or from southern Iran—remains in Bahrain and apparently does not face any harassment or discrimination.

Members of the Baha'i faith, which is declared blasphemous in Iran and Afghanistan, have been discriminated against in Bahrain. However, members of that community can worship openly.

Human Trafficking and Labor Rights[39]

Bahrain remains a destination country for migrant workers from South and East Asia, as well as some countries in Africa. Domestic workers are highly vulnerable to forced labor and sexual exploitation because they are largely unprotected under the labor law. The State Department's

[36] This section is based on the State Department report on International Religious Freedom for 2018. It can be found at https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bahrain/.

[37] "Bahrain King 'Bans Mixing Religion and Politics." http://www.alaraby.co.uk. June 12, 2016.

[38] http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-s-shura-approves-unified-family-draft-law-1.2061301.

[39] Much of this section was taken from the State Department Trafficking in Persons report for 2019. It can be found at https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-trafficking-in-persons-report-2/bahrain/.

"Trafficking in Persons Report" for 2019 and for 2018 rated Bahrain at "Tier 1"—best ranking—on the grounds that it "fully meets the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking." Bahrain was upgraded in the 2018 report from the "Tier 2" rating it had for the three prior years, based partly on the first ever convictions of a national and a government official for forced labor. In 2014, the Obama Administration waived a mandatory downgrade for Bahrain to Tier 3 after it was assessed for three consecutive years as "Tier 2: Watch List."

Regarding the related issue of labor rights, U.S. government reports credit Bahrain with significant labor reforms, including a 2002 law granting all workers in Bahrain the right to form and join unions, and to strike. However, the right to strike does not apply to workers in the oil and gas, education, and health sectors. There are about 50 trade unions in Bahrain, but all unions must join the General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions (GFBTU). The GFBTU has many Shia members, and during the height of the unrest in 2011, the federation organized a few general strikes. During March-May 2011, employers dismissed almost 5,500 workers from both the private and public sectors, including 25% of union leaders. The State Department asserted that the government later reinstated dismissed or suspended workers. Some U.S. MEPI funds (see above) have been used for AFL-CIO projects with Bahraini labor organizations.

The architect of recent labor reforms is the Labor Market Regulatory Authority (LMRA), which is separate from and considered more forward looking than the Ministry of Labor and Social Development. The LMRA has begun to dismantle the "sponsorship system" (*kafala*) that essentially prohibits workers from changing jobs and has helped institute requirements that expatriate workers be provided with health insurance. The LMRA has also instituted public awareness campaigns against trafficking in persons and has established a publicly funded "labor fund" to upgrade worker skill levels.[40]Still, the slow payment of wages has, on occasion, led hundreds of expatriate workers to protest. Generally, after mediation by the Ministry of Labor, all back wages have been paid, according to the State Department.

Torture

Well before the 2011 uprising, Human Rights Watch and other groups asserted that Bahraini authorities were practicing torture, allegations that continue today, including in the State Department human rights report for 2017. A May 13, 2011, hearing of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission asserted that torture was being used regularly on those (mostly Shias) arrested in the unrest. The State Department human rights report for 2011 said there were numerous reports of torture during the state of emergency (March-June 2011). Since 2013, the government has not facilitated visits by the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.[41]

U.S.-Bahrain Relations[42]

U.S.-Bahrain ties are long-standing and have deepened over the past four decades as the Gulf region has become highly volatile. The American Mission Hospital was established in 1903 as the first hospital in what is now Bahrain. A U.S. Embassy opened in Manama, Bahrain's capital, immediately after Bahrain became independent. Hundreds of Bahraini students come to the

[40] Author conversations with Bahrain LMRA top officials, 2015-2016.

[41] http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/HRF-King-Al-Khalifa-Letter.pdf.

[42] Information in this section obtained from a variety of press reports, and the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA).

United States each year to study. The U.S. Ambassador to Bahrain is Justin Siberell, a career diplomat.

The bilateral security relationship dates to the end of World War II, well before Bahrain's independence, and remains central to the U.S. ability to address regional threats.[43] There are about 5,000 U.S. military personnel deployed in Bahrain, mostly Navy, implementing various missions discussed below.[44] It has not been announced specifically how many of the more than 10,000 additional U.S. forces deployed to the Gulf since May 2019 were deployed to Bahrain.[45] Bahrain signed a formal Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with the United States in 1991 and it remains in force.

Bahrain also engages in substantial defense cooperation with other GCC states. Bahrain has formal relations with NATO under a 2004 NATO-GCC "Istanbul Cooperation Initiative" (ICI); it has opened a diplomatic mission at NATO headquarters in Brussels.

U.S. Naval Headquarters and Other Facilities

The cornerstone of U.S.-Bahrain defense relations is U.S. access to Bahrain's naval facilities. The United States has had a U.S. naval command presence in Bahrain since 1948: MIDEASTFOR (U.S. Middle East Force); its successor, NAVCENT (naval component of U.S. Central Command); and the U.S. Fifth Fleet (reconstituted in June 1995), have been headquartered at a sprawling facility called "Naval Support Activity (NSA)-Bahrain." It is also home to U.S. Marine Forces Central Command, Destroyer Squadron Fifty, and three Combined Maritime Forces.[46] The "on-shore" U.S. command presence in Bahrain was established after the 1991 U.S.-led war against Iraq; prior to that, the U.S. naval headquarters in Bahrain was on a command ship docked and technically "off shore."

NSA-Bahrain coordinates the operations of over 20 U.S. and allied warships in Combined Task Force (CTF) 151 and 152 that seek to interdict the movement of terrorists, pirates, arms, or weapons of mass destruction (WMD)-related technology and narcotics across the Arabian Sea. Bahrain has taken several turns commanding CTF-152, and it has led an antipiracy task force in Gulf/Arabian Sea waters—operations that are offshoots of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) that ousted the Taliban from power in Afghanistan in 2001. The coalition conducts periodic naval exercises, such as mine-sweeping drills. Bahrain's central role in U.S. naval operations in the Gulf likely facilitated a decision by the Bahrain government, announced August 19, 2019, to join a U.S.-led maritime security operation ("International Maritime Security Construct," IMSC, formerly called "Operation Sentinel") to secure the Gulf against Iranian attacks on commercial shipping.[47] During October 21-22, 2019, Bahrain cosponsored a multilateral meeting on Iran under the U.S.-led "Warsaw Process," named for the meeting of 60 countries in that city in

[43] A very small number of Bahrain nationals have joined the Islamic State organization.

[44] U.S. Central Command. Information provided to CRS in January 2020.

[45] DOD Statement on Deployment of Additional U.S. Forces and Equipment to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. October 11, 2019.

[46] For an extended discussion of the U.S. military presence in Bahrain, see Brookings Institution, Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence, Policy Paper "No 'Plan B': U.S. Strategic Access in the Middle East and the Question of Bahrain. June 2013, by Commander Richard McDaniel, U.S.N.

[47] "Bahrain Joins U.S.-led Coalition to Protect Gulf Shipping." Thehill.com, August 19, 2019.

February 2019 that discussed how to counter Iran. On November 7, 2019, IMSC formally launched its operations, headquartered in Bahrain.[48]

To further develop the Naval Support Activity facility, the U.S. military implemented a $580 million military construction program from 2010 until the end of 2017,[49] which doubled the size of the facility (to over 150 acres) by integrating the decommissioned Mina (port) Al Salman Pier, leased by the Navy under a 2008 agreement, and added buildings for administration, maintenance, housing, warehousing, and dining. The expansion supports the deployment of additional U.S. coastal patrol ships and the Navy's new littoral combat ship, and the docking of larger U.S. ships.[50] The expansion has also allowed for infrastructure for families of U.S. military personnel, including schools for young children. The United States has spent over $2 billion to improve the facility. Some smaller U.S. ships, such as minesweepers, are home-ported in Bahrain. In 2012-2013, the U.S. Navy doubled the number of minesweepers homeported there to eight, sending additional mine-hunting helicopters, and adding five coastal patrol ships.

Alternatives? Some urge the United States to examine alternatives to NSA-Bahrain, in the event the unrest in Bahrain poses threats to U.S. personnel deployed there or brings to power a new government that expels U.S. forces. The FY2016 National Defense Authorization Act did not contain a provision of an earlier version (H.R. 1735) to mandate a Defense Department report on alternative locations for the NSA-Bahrain. But, the Defense Department reportedly has done such contingency planning.[51] Still, continued U.S. military construction there, coupled with the decline of open manifestations of serious unrest, suggest that the facility will not be relocated.

Should there be a decision to relocate the NSA, potential alternatives could include Qatar's New Doha Port, Kuwait's Shuaiba port, and the UAE's Jebel Ali.[52]All three are close U.S. allies, but none has stated a position on whether it would be willing to host such a facility. The alternatives do not provide the ease of docking access that Bahrain does, and many of the alternatives share facilities with commercial operations.

Other Facilities Used by U.S. and Allied Forces

A separate deep water port in Bahrain, Khalifa bin Salman Port, is one of the few facilities in the Gulf that can accommodate U.S. aircraft carriers and amphibious ships.[53] An aircraft carrier group and surface combatants generally operating in and around the Persian Gulf.

In December 2014, Bahrain agreed to allow Britain to establish a naval base in part of the Mina Al Salman pier, and facilities there have been improved to allow Britain's Royal Navy to store equipment and house military personnel.[54] Also in December 2014, the GCC announced it would establish a joint naval force based in Bahrain to cooperate with the U.S. Navy and other navies.

[48] Multinational Coalition Begins Patrolling Persian Gulf Oil Routes. Bloomberg News, November 7, 2019.

[49] Among the recent appropriations to fund the expansion are: $54 million for FY2008 (Division 1 of P.L. 110-161); $41.5 million for FY2010 (P.L. 111-117); $258 million for FY2011 (P.L. 112-10). $100 million was requested for FY2012 for two projects, but was not funded in the FY2012 Consolidated Appropriation (P.L. 112-74).

[50] Hendrick Simoes. "Bahrain Expansion Latest Sign of Continued Presence." *Stars and Stripes*, December 16, 2013.

[51] Bockenfeld statement to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, September 9, 2016. op. cit.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid.

[54] "U.K. to Boost Military Presence in the Persian Gulf." Associated Press, December 7, 2014.

Shaykh Isa Air Base, improved with about $45 million in U.S. funds, hosts a variety of U.S. aircraft, including F-16s, F-18s, and P-3 surveillance aircraft. About $19 million was spent to construct a U.S. Special Operations Forces facility there.

Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) and Major Non-NATO Ally Designation

Bahrain was part of the U.S.-led coalition that ousted Iraq from Kuwait in 1991, hosting 17,500 U.S. troops and 250 U.S. combat aircraft that participated in the 1991 "Desert Storm" offensive against Iraqi forces. Bahraini pilots flew strikes during the war, and Iraq fired nine Scud missiles at Bahrain, of which three hit facilities there.

After that war, Bahrain and the United States institutionalized the defense relationship by signing a Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) on October 28, 1991, for an initial period of 10 years. It remains in effect.[55] The pact reportedly gives the United States access to Bahrain's air bases, enables the United States to preposition munitions, requires consultations if Bahrain's security is threatened, and provides for joint exercises and U.S. training of Bahraini forces.[56] It reportedly includes a "Status of Forces Agreement" (SOFA) placing U.S. military personnel serving in Bahrain under U.S. law.

U.S. pilots flew combat missions from Bahrain in both Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan (after the September 11, 2001, attacks) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) to oust Saddam Hussein (March 2003). During both operations, Bahrain also deployed its U.S.-supplied frigate warship (the *Subha*) to help protect U.S. ships, and it sent ground and air assets to Kuwait in support of OIF. Bahrain and UAE have been the only GCC states to deploy forces to Afghanistan; Bahrain deployed 100 police officers to Afghanistan during 2009-2014.

Major Non-NATO Ally Designation

In March 2002, President George W. Bush designated Bahrain a "major non-NATO ally" (MNNA) in Presidential Determination 2002-10. The designation qualifies Bahrain to purchase certain U.S. arms, receive excess defense articles (EDA), and engage in defense research cooperation with the United States for which it would not otherwise be eligible.

U.S. Security Assistance and Arms Transfers

Bahrain's small budget allows for modest amounts of national funds to be used for purchases of major combat systems, offset partly by U.S. security assistance credits. The government's response to the political unrest caused the Obama Administration to put on hold sales to Bahrain of arms that could easily be used against protesters, primarily those used by the Interior Ministry, as well as to hold up or condition the sale of combat systems such as combat aircraft. The Trump Administration has maintained restrictions on sales of equipment that could be used against protesters, while dropping conditions or holds on sales of most major combat systems.

[55] "U.S.-Bahrain Defense Pact Renewed." *Agence France Presse*, August 5, 2011.

[56] Details of the U.S.-Bahrain defense agreement are classified. Some provisions are discussed in Sami Hajjar, *U.S. Military Presence in the Gulf: Challenges and Prospects* (U.S. Army War College: Strategic Studies Institute), March 2002, p. 27. The State and Defense Departments have not provided CRS with requested information on the duration of the pact, or whether its terms had been modified in recent years.

Assistance to the Bahrain Defense Forces/Ministry of Defense

The main recipient of U.S. military assistance is the Bahrain Defense Force (BDF)—Bahrain's regular military force—which totals about 8,000 active duty personnel, of which 2,000 are Bahraini Air Force and Navy personnel. There are another 2,000 personnel in Bahrain's National Guard—a unit that is separate from both the BDF and the Ministry of Interior. The BDF, as well as Bahrain's police forces, are run by Sunni Bahrainis, but supplement their ranks with unknown percentages of recruits from Sunni Muslim neighboring countries, including Pakistan and Jordan.

Most U.S. military assistance to Bahrain is in the form of Foreign Military Financing (FMF), used to help Bahrain buy and maintain U.S.-origin weapons, to enhance interoperability with U.S. forces as well as with other GCC forces, to augment Bahrain's air defenses, and to improve counterterrorism capabilities. In recent years, some FMF funds have been used to build up Bahrain's Special Operations forces and to help the BDF use U.S.-made Blackhawk helicopters.[57]

The United States has reduced FMF to Bahrain since the unrest began, in part as a response to the government's repression of the uprising. The FY2012 aid request, announced near the start of the unrest in 2011, included $25 million in FMF for Bahrain, but only $10 million was provided, and amounts provided have declined further since. Some FY2017 funds were used to assist the Bahrain Coast Guard and upgrading the Coast Surveillance System that reportedly provides Bahrain and the U.S. Navy a 360-degree field of vision.[58]

Some funds are provided under "Section 1206" of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2006, P.L. 109-163. Five Section 1206 programs spanning 2006-2015—totaling almost $65 million—were used to provide coast patrol boats, equip and train Bahrain's special forces and coastal surveillance sites, and fund biometric equipment to help Bahrain detect movement of international terrorists through its territory.

Excess Defense Articles (EDA)

The BDF is eligible to receive grant "excess defense articles" (EDA), and it has received over $400 million worth of EDA since the program began for Bahrain in 1993. In June 1995, the United States provided 50 M-60A3 tanks to Bahrain as a "no cost" five-year lease. Bahrain later received title to the equipment.

In July 1997, the United States transferred the FFG-7 "Perry class" frigate *Subha* as EDA. The Obama Administration supported providing another frigate (an "extended deck frigate") as EDA because the *Subha* is approaching the end of its service life, but Bahrain decided instead to devote U.S. military aid to maintaining the *Subha*. On October 23, 2019, DSCA notified Congress (Transmittal 19-61) that the State Department approved $150 million in funding to refurbish a Perry class frigate (*Robert G. Bradley*) to facilitate its transfer to Bahrain as grant EDA. The transfer of frigate-sized ships as EDA requires legislative enactment, and the DSCA notification cites Section 1020 of P.L. 115-232 (FY2019 NDAA) as authorizing the grant.

During 2015-2016, the United States transferred five MK V Special Operations naval craft to Bahrain as EDA. The five craft were valued at a total of about $2.7 million. In FY2018, $533,000 was obligated by DOD for EDA for Bahrain of another MK V Special Operations craft.

[57] "Revealed: America's Arms Sales to Bahrain amid Bloody Crackdown," op. cit.

[58] "Bahrain Government's Ties with the United States Run Deep," op. cit.

Major Foreign Military Sales (FMS)

About 85% of Bahrain's defense equipment is of U.S.-origin, as discussed below.

- *F-16s and other U.S.-made Aircraft.* In 1998, Bahrain purchased 22 U.S.-made F-16 Block 40 aircraft. In 2016, Bahrain requested to purchase up to 19 new F-16Vs.[59] The Obama Administration notified the sale to Congress with the condition that it would not finalize approval until Bahrain improves its human rights record.[60] The Trump Administration dropped that condition, and in September 2017, notified Congress of the intent to sell Bahrain 19 F-16Vs at an estimated value of $2.785 billion, and to upgrade of Bahrain's existing F-16s, at an estimated cost of $1.082 billion.[61] The sale process was far along enough to avoid then-Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker's July 2017 restriction on providing informal concurrence to arms sales to the GCC states—a restriction dropped by then-Chairman Corker on February 8, 2018.[62]
- *Air-to-Air Missiles.* In 1999 and 2009, the United States sold Bahrain Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAMs) to arm the F-16s. In 2012, the Obama Administration approved a sale of additional AMRAAMs. On May 3, 2019, the State Department approved a possible sale of a large variety of munitions, including AMRAAMs and large bombs (GBUs) at an estimated value of $750 million (Transmittal Number 18-20). A resolution of disapproval for the sale, S.J.Res. 20, was introduced on May 13. The Administration issued a statement on June 12 opposing that resolution, and a motion to discharge was defeated on June 13 by a vote of 43-56. Opponents of the sale noted that Bahrain's Air Force is flying strikes as part of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen.
- *Anti-Armor Missiles/Rockets*. An August 2000 sale of 30 Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMs, a system of short-range ballistic missiles fired from a multiple rocket launcher), valued at about $70 million, included an agreement for joint U.S.-Bahraini control of the weapon. That arrangement sought to allay U.S. congressional concerns about possible U.S. promotion of regional missile proliferation. On September 28, 2018, the State Department approved a potential sales to Bahrain of 110 ATACM missiles and 720 Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System rockets, with an estimated value of $300 million. A joint resolution, S.J.Res. 65, was introduced to block that sale, on the grounds that arms sales contributes to Bahrain's participation in the Arab coalition in Yemen. The Senate voted 77-21 on November 15, 2018, not to advance the measure.
- *Stingers.* Section 581 of the FY1990 foreign operations appropriation act (P.L. 101-167) made Bahrain the only Gulf state eligible to receive the Stinger shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missile, and the United States has sold Bahrain about 70 Stingers since 1990. (This authorization has been repeated subsequently.)
- *Humvees and TOWs.* In September 2011, the Obama Administration announced a sale to the BDF and National Guard of 44 "Humvee" (M115A1B2) armored

[59] Craig Hoyle. "Bahrain Considering F-16V Order, Fleet Upgrade." *Flight Global*, January 26, 2016.

[60] Anthony Capaccio, Bloomberg News, September 30, 2016. http://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2016-09-30/bahrain-s-lockheed-f-16-purchase-said-to-come-with-u-s-strings.

[61] DSCA Transmittal numbers 16-60 and 16-59.

[62] Letter to Secretary of State Rex Tillerson from SFRC Chairman Bob Corker. February 8, 2018.

vehicles and several hundred TOW missiles of various models, including 50 "bunker busters," with an estimated total value of $53 million. State Department officials said the sale would not violate the intent of the "Leahy amendment," a provision of U.S. law that forbids U.S. sales of equipment to security units that have committed human rights abuses.[63] Two joint resolutions introduced in the 112th Congress (S.J.Res. 28 and H.J.Res. 80) would have prohibited the sale unless the Administration certified that Bahrain is rectifying alleged abuses.[64] In January 2012, the Obama Administration put the sale on hold, but in June 2015, the State Department announced that the sale would proceed because the government had "made some meaningful progress on human rights reforms and reconciliation."[65]Separately, on September 8, 2017, the Trump Administration notified Congress of a potential sale of 221 TOW missiles of various types, with an estimated valued of $27 million.

- *Maritime Defense Equipment and Spare Parts*. In May 2012, in conjunction with a visit to Washington, DC by Bahrain's Crown Prince, the Administration announced the release of additional U.S. arms for the BDF, Bahrain's Coast Guard (a Ministry of Interior-controlled force), and the National Guard, stating that the weaponry supported Bahrain's maritime defense. The Administration gave examples of weapons approved for sale to Bahrain: (1) a Perry-class frigate, and (2) harbor security boats for the Bahrain Coast Guard.[66] No legislation to block the sale was enacted. Separately, on September 8, 2017, the Trump Administration notified Congress of a potential sale of two 35-Meter Fast Patrol Boats, at an estimated cost of $60 million. As discussed above, the Trump Administration has agreed to provide a frigate to Bahrain as grant EDA. Bahrain is also upgrading six naval vessels under a $70 million contract with Italy's Leonardo firm.
- *Attack Helicopters*. On April 27, 2018, the Defense Department notified Congress that the State Department had approved a potential sale to Bahrain of up to 12 AH-1Z ("Cobra") attack helicopters and associated munitions to the Royal Bahrain Air Force. The estimated value of the sale is $911 million.[67]
- *Missile Defense*. U.S.-made Patriot missile defense batteries have long been deployed in Bahrain. On May 3, 2019, the State Department approved a potential sale to Bahrain of the Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) missile defense system with an estimated value of $2.5 billion. S.J.Res. 22 was introduced on May 14, 2019, to disapprove that sale, but the resolution did not advance.

Russia Purchases

Bahrain has sought to diversify its arms supplies somewhat, particularly from Russia, probably in recognition of Russia's role in Syria and the broader region. In 2016, Bahrain took delivery of

[63] James Lobe. "Bahrain: U.S. Congress Urged to Reject Arms Sales." IPS News Service, September 29, 2011.

[64] To block a proposed arms sale would require passage of a joint resolution to do so, presumably with a veto-proof majority.

[65] Statement by State Department spokesman John Kirby. "Lifting Holds on Security Assistance to the Government of Bahrain." June 29, 2015.

[66] Nicole Gaouette. "U.S. Resumes Bahrain Arms Sales Citing Security Interests." Bloomberg News, May 11, 2012.

[67] Defense Security and Cooperation Agency. Transmittal Number 16-36. April 27, 2018.

about 250 *Kornet* anti-tank systems. In 2017, Bahrain military officials stated they were in discussions to possibly purchase the Russian S-400 missile defense system.[68] Purchases from Russia, particularly the S-400, could trigger U.S. consideration of sanctioning Bahrain's cooperation with Russia's defense sector under authorities in the Countering America's Adversaries through Terrorism Act (CAATSA, P.L. 115-44). No sanctions on Bahrain under that law have been announced.

International Military Education and Training Funds (IMET)

As noted in **Table 3**, small amounts of International Military Education and Training funds (IMET) are provided to Bahrain to inculcate principles of civilian control of the military, democracy, and interoperability with U.S. forces. Approximately 100 BDF students attend U.S. military schools each year through the IMET program. A roughly equal number train in the United States under the U.S. Foreign Military Sales program, using FMF.

Counterterrorism Cooperation/Ministry of Interior[69]

Bahrain is assessed by U.S. reports and officials as continuing to face a terrorist threat from Iran-backed groups, discussed above, but the State Department report on terrorism for 2018 states that "there were no major terrorist attacks reported in Bahrain in 2018." Bahrain authorities arrested more than 400 suspected Shia militants in early 2018. Critics assert that the security services use antiterrorism laws and operations to suppress Shia dissidents who do not use violence.

Regarding a potential threat from Sunni jihadist groups, no Islamic State or Al Qaeda terrorist attacks have been reported in Bahrain. But, in June 2016, Bahraini courts sentenced 24 supporters of the Islamic State for plots in Bahrain, including attacks on Shias, and the government has stripped the citizenship of some Bahrainis accused of supporting the Islamic State.

The United States provides training, equipment, and other assistance to Bahrain's Interior Ministry on counterterrorism issues, although U.S. cooperation with the ministry has been somewhat reduced since 2011 because of its role in internal security. The ministry has retained a reputation among the Shia population for brutality, despite the departure in the late 1990s of security services chief Ian Henderson, a former British colonial-era commander known for favoring brutal tactics. The February 2014 expulsion of Malinowski led the Obama Administration to suspend most cooperation with the Ministry,[70] but some U.S. cooperation with it resumed later in 2014 after Bahrain joined the anti-Islamic State coalition.

Arms Sales to the MOI/Bahrain Coast Guard

Sales of U.S.-made small arms such as those sold to the Interior Ministry are generally commercial sales, licensed by State Department, with Defense Department concurrence. In May 2012, the State Department put "on hold" license requests for sales to Bahrain of small arms, light weapons, and ammunition[71]—all of which could potentially be used against protesters. Apparently referencing Bahrain, the FY2014 Consolidated Appropriation Act (P.L. 113-76) prohibited use of U.S. funds for "tear gas, small arms, light weapons, ammunition, or other items

[68] https://www.defenseworld.net/news/20994/Bahrain_In_Talks_For_Purchase_Of_Russian_S_400_Missile_Systems#.XOa_XC17mUk.

[69] Much of the information in this section is derived from the State Department report on international terrorism for 2018. Released October 2019.

[70] Michael Gordon. "Expelled U.S. Official to Return to Bahrain." *New York Times*, December 2, 2014.

[71] Email from the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Legislative Affairs, May 20, 2013.

for crowd control purposes for foreign security forces that use excessive force to repress peaceful expression, association, or assembly in countries undergoing democratic transition." The Trump Administration has retained restrictions on selling it arms, according to September 12, 2017, testimony by Ambassador Justin Siberell.

Bahrain's Coast Guard. This force, which is under the Ministry of Interior, polices Bahrain's waterways and contributes to the multilateral mission to monitor and interdict the seaborne movement of terrorists and weapons. U.S. restrictions on support for the Ministry of Interior forces have generally not applied to the Bahrain Coast Guard.

U.S. Training/NADR Funding

The United States provides assistance to the MOI, primarily through programs funded by Non-proliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining and Related Programs (NADR) funds, to help it confront violent extremists and terrorist groups. U.S. officials assert that a general lack of training and antiquated investigative methods had slowed the MOI Police Force's progress on counterterrorism and criminal investigations. The ministry's role in putting down unrest prompted an Obama Administration "review" of the use of NADR-ATA (Antiterrorism Assistance) funding for the ministry to ensure that none of the funding was used against protestors. The State Department report on international terrorism for 2014 stated that the "Leahy Law" requirement to vet Bahrain personnel participating in ATA programs prompted the cancellation of planned ATA courses for Bahrain in 2015. However, that report for 2015 stated that one ATA-related course took place that year; the reports for 2016, 2017, and 2018 did not mention any specific courses in those years, but the report for 2018 acknowledged the counterterrorism training mentioned above.

The United States provided Bahrain $400,000 in NADR funds for FY2017 and FY2018 and requested an equivalent amount for FY2019 to train MOI personnel in investigative techniques, and to help MOI personnel respond to terrorist's use of explosives. No NADR funds for Bahrain were requested for FY2020 or for FY2021. Some NADR-ATA funds have previously been used to augment Bahrain's ability to protect U.S.-manned facilities in Bahrain.

Countering Terrorism Financing and Violent Extremism

Bahrain has been a regional leader in countering terrorism financing since well before the Islamic State organization emerged as a threat. Bahrain has hosted the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force (MENA/FATF) secretariat. Bahrain's financial intelligence unit is a member of the Egmont Group. Bahrain's banks cooperate with U.S. efforts against terrorism financing and money laundering. In 2013, the government amended the Charity Fundraising Law of 1956 to increase terrorism financing monitoring and penalties. In October 2017, King Hamad issued a series of decreases mandating extensive prison sentences and financial penalties on persons found guilty of raising funds for groups engaged in terrorist activities.[72]

In April 2015, Bahrain hosted the 8th European Union-GCC Workshop on Combating Terrorist Financing, and Bahrain is a member of the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition's Counter-ISIS Finance Group. In 2015, Bahrain hosted a workshop focused on preventing the abuse of the charitable sector to fund terrorism, and a U.S.-GCC anti-Hezbollah workshop in 2016. In 2017, Bahrain jointed the U.S.-GCC Terrorist Financial Targeting Center, which coordinates GCC counterterrorism financing efforts. In concert with other members of that center, Bahrain has imposed sanctions on persons and entities linked to the Islamic State and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and on entities linked to the IRGC or the Afghanistan Taliban.

[72] Release by the Embassy of Bahrain in Washington, DC. October 4, 2017.

Countering Violent Extremism. Bahrain's Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs heads the country's efforts to counter radicalization. It has organized regular workshops for clerics and speakers from both the Sunni and Shia sects. The ministry also reviews schools' Islamic studies curricula to evaluate interpretations of religious texts. In 2016, the country drafted a National Countering Violent Extremism strategy.

Foreign Policy Issues

Bahrain's foreign policy is similar to several other GCC states, particularly Saudi Arabia.

Relations with other GCC States

Bahrain is politically closest to Saudi Arabia, as demonstrated by the Saudi-led GCC intervention to help the government suppress the uprising in 2011, and Bahrain's joining of the June 2017 Saudi-led move to isolate Qatar. That dispute remains unresolved, and it has to date hampered the Trump Administration's plan to forge a "Middle East Strategic Alliance" (MESA)—consisting of the GCC and other Sunni Arab monarchies—to counter Iran.[73] The MESA reportedly was to be formally launched at a planned U.S.-GCC summit, but that meeting has not been held to date.

Many Saudis visit Bahrain to enjoy the relatively more liberal social atmosphere there, using a causeway constructed in 1986 that links Bahrain to the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia. King Hamad's fifth son, Khalid bin Hamad, married a daughter of the late Saudi King Abdullah in 2011. In May 2012, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain announced a proposal to form a political and military union among the GCC states ("Riyadh Declaration"), but opposition by the other four GCC states caused it to languish.

Bahrain is also politically close to Kuwait, in part because of historic ties between their two royal families. Both royal families hail from the Anizah tribe that settled in Bahrain and Kuwait. Kuwait has sometimes sought to mediate the Bahrain political crisis, but Shias in Kuwait have expressed resentment at the Kuwait ruling family's alignment with the Al Khalifa regime. Kuwait, as noted, joined the GCC intervention in Bahrain in 2011 and, according to observers, has over the past few years become a major investor in Bahrain, as has the UAE. In October 2018, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and UAE announced a $10 billion aid package to stabilize Bahrain's budget and finances.

Perhaps contributing to Bahrain's joining of the June 2017 Saudi-led move against Qatar, the two had a long-standing territorial dispute over the Hawar Islands and other lands. This dispute had roots in the 18th century, when the ruling families of both countries controlled parts of the Arabian Peninsula. In 1991, five years after clashes in which Qatar landed military personnel on a Bahrain-constructed man-made reef (Fasht al-Dibal) and took some Bahrainis prisoner, Bahrain and Qatar agreed to abandon fruitless Saudi mediation efforts and refer the issue to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The ICJ ruled on March 16, 2001, in favor of Bahrain on the central dispute over the Hawar Islands but awarded to Qatar the Fasht al-Dibal reef and the town of Zubara on the Qatari mainland, where some members of the Al Khalifa family were long buried. Two smaller islands, Janan and Hadd Janan, were ruled not part of the Hawar Islands group and were also awarded to Qatar. Qatar expressed disappointment over the ruling but accepted it as binding.

[73] https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-gulf-alliance/trump-seeks-to-revive-arab-nato-to-confront-iran-idUSKBN1KH2IK.

Not only has Bahrain backed the 2017 Saudi-led isolation of Qatar, but Bahrain joined the earlier Saudi Arabia and UAE withdrawal of their ambassadors from Qatar in 2014. That disagreement centered on Qatar's support for Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated opposition movements in several Middle Eastern countries, which Qatar views as a constructive Islamist movement but which Saudi Arabia and the UAE consider a terrorist organization. The earlier dispute eased in November 2014 with the return of GCC ambassadors to Doha.

Iran

Bahrain has long blamed Iran for encouraging Bahrain's Shia opposition to rebel and for supplying the violent Shia opposition with arms and explosives. In December 1981, and then again in June 1996, Bahrain publicly accused Iran of trying to organize a coup by pro-Iranian Bahraini Shias. Bahrain's leaders cite Iranian statements as evidence that Iran seeks to promote the overthrow of the government. In June 2016, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i called the revocation "blatant foolishness and insanity" that would mean "removing a barrier between fiery Bahrain youths and the state." In September 2018, Bahrain's government charged 169 persons for allegedly forming "Bahrain Hezbollah" with the backing of the IRGC-QF. The Trump Administration has firmly backed the government view that Iran is arming Shia militants in Bahrain. As noted above, Bahrain has joined and hosts the headquarters for the U.S.-led mission to protect shipping in the Gulf.[74]

Bahrain backed Saudi Arabia in its January 2016 dispute with Iran in which Iranian protesters attacked two Saudi diplomatic facilities in Iran in response to the Saudi execution of dissident Shia cleric Nimr al-Baqr Al Nimr. As did Saudi Arabia, Bahrain broke diplomatic relations with Iran, going beyond a 2011-2012 cycle of tensions in which Iran and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors. In March 2016, the GCC states declared Lebanese Hezbollah, a key Iran ally, a terrorist organization and discouraged or banned their citizens from visiting Lebanon.

On Iran nuclear issues, Bahrain has expressed support for Iran's right to civilian nuclear power, but it said that "when it comes to taking that [nuclear] power, to developing it into a cycle for weapon grade, that is something that we can never accept, and we can never live with in this region."[75] It publicly supported the 2010-2016 global economic pressure on Iran to compel it to limit its nuclear program. Bahrain abandoned a 2007 agreement—reached after a visit to Bahrain by then-President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejaded—to buy Iranian gas via a planned undersea pipeline and for Bahrain to invest $4 billion to develop the Iranian fields (South Pars) that would supply the gas. At the same time, Bahrain maintains relatively normal trade with Iran. Bahrain did not take immediate action to close Iran-linked Future Bank (formed and owned by two major Iranian banks, Bank Saderat and Bank Melli) or the Iran Insurance Company until 2016, long after Future Bank was sanctioned by the United States in 2008 under Executive Order 13382 (antiproliferation). By the time Bahrain closed that Bank in February 2016, the United States had already lifted sanctions in accordance with the Iran nuclear agreement.

As did the other GCC states, Bahrain expressed initial concern that the Iran nuclear agreement represented a U.S. acceptance of an enhanced regional role for Iran. King Hamad scuttled plans to attend the U.S.-GCC summit at Camp David during May 13-14, 2015—a meeting intended to soothe GCC concerns about an Iran nuclear deal—and sent the Crown Prince instead. Bahrain joined the GCC in eventually supporting the JCPOA but, as did most of the other GCC states, Bahrain's leaders publicly supported the May 2018 Trump Administration withdrawal from the

[74] Comments by Bahrain Foreign Minister. Atlantic Council meeting in Washington, DC, July 17, 2019.

[75] Department of State. Transcript of Remarks by Secretary Clinton and Foreign Minister Al Khalifa. December 3, 2010.

JCPOA. Bahrain's hosting of the IMSC represents an additional reflection of its backing for the U.S. policy of pressuring Iran economically and deterring Iran militarily.

Bahrain's animosity toward Iran also stems from issues that predate the formation of the Islamic Republic in 1979. In 2009, an advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader, referred to Bahrain as Iran's 14th province, reviving Bahrain's long-standing concerns that Iran would again challenge its sovereignty. Persian officials contested Bahrain's sovereignty repeatedly during the 19th and 20th centuries, including in 1957, when a bill was submitted to the Iranian *Majlis* (legislature) to make Bahrain a province of Iran. Bahrain considers the independence issue closed: when Iran reasserted its claim to Bahrain in 1970, prior to the end of British rule in Bahrain, the U.N. Secretary-General dispatched a representative to determine the views of Bahrainis, who found that the island's residents overwhelmingly favored independence from all outside powers, including Iran. The findings were endorsed by U.N. Security Council Resolution 278 and Iran's *Majlis* ratified them.

Iraq/Syria/Islamic State Organization

Bahrain participated in efforts to contain Iraq during the 1990s by hosting the U.S.-led Multinational Interdiction Force (MIF) that enforced a U.N. embargo on Iraq during 1991-2003. Bahrain also hosted the U.N. Special Commission (UNSCOM) inspection mission that worked to dismantle Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

Bahrain backed the U.S.-led 2003 overthrow of Iraq's Saddam Hussein, but Bahrain's relations with the post-Saddam Iraq deteriorated after 2005 as the Shia-dominated Iraqi government marginalized Sunni leaders. Some Shia Iraqi leaders expressed support for the 2011 Bahrain uprising. Bahrain did not contribute financially to Iraq reconstruction, but it participated in the "Expanded Neighbors of Iraq" regional dialogue on Iraq that ended in 2008, and it posted its first post-Saddam ambassador to Iraq in October 2008. Bahrain sent a low-level delegation to the March 27-29, 2012, Arab League summit in Baghdad.

Similarly, Bahrain and the other GCC states blamed Syrian President Bashar Al Assad for authoritarian policies that alienated Syria's Sunni Arab majority and fueled support for the Islamic State. In 2011, Bahrain and most of the other GCC states (except Oman) closed their embassies in Damascus and voted to suspend Syria's membership in the Arab League. Bahrain's government did not, by any account, provide funding or weaponry to any Syrian rebel groups. Apparently recognizing that Assad is prevailing in the civil war, in late December 2018, Bahrain re-opened its embassy in Damascus, as did the UAE.

Asserting that the Islamic State poses a regional threat, on September 22, 2014, Bahrain and the other GCC states joined the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition. Bahrain conducted air strikes against Islamic State positions in Syria, as did several other GCC states, but the State Department's report on terrorism for 2016 stated that Bahrain "has not contributed substantively to coalition [anti-ISIS] military efforts since 2014." None of the GCC states engaged in anti-Islamic State air operations in Iraq.

Yemen

Bahrain joined the GCC diplomatic efforts to persuade Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh to cede power to a transition process in 2012. In 2015, Zaidi Shia "Houthi" militia rebels, backed to some degree by Iran, took control of the capital, Sanaa, and forced President Abdu Rabbu Mansur Al Hadi into exile. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia assembled a coalition of Arab states, including Bahrain and all the other GCC countries except Oman, to combat the Houthis in an effort to

achieve a restoration of the Hadi government. Bahrain has conducted air strikes and contributed some ground forces to the effort. About 200 BDF are deployed in Yemen, according to the State Department's report on international terrorism for 2018, and at least eight members of the BDF have been killed in the engagement. A Bahrain Royal Air Force F-16 crashed in Yemen-related operations on December 30, 2015, and the pilot survived. Air Vice Marshall Hamad bin Abdullah al Khalifah, head of the Royal Bahrain Air Force (RBAF), stated in February 2019 that RBAF F-16s had conducted over 3,500 sorties since the intervention.

Israeli-Palestinian Dispute

On the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, Bahraini leaders have long tended toward engagement with Israel while also supporting Palestinian aspirations. In a July 2009 op-ed, Crown Prince Salman called on the Arab states to do more to communicate to the Israeli people ideas for peaceful resolution of the dispute.[76] In September 2017, King Hamad called for the Arab states to forge direct ties to Israel and an end to the Arab boycott of Israel. Subsequently, in December 2017 a cross-sectarian Bahraini group visited Israel. Following the October 2018 visit of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Oman, Israel's Minister of Economy, Eli Cohen, received an invitation to visit Bahrain. In July 2019, Bahrain's Foreign Minister met Israeli Foreign Minister Yisrael Katz at a State Department-hosted meeting in Washington, DC; the bilateral meeting was publicized by both countries as discussions on Iran, regional threats, and bilateral relations.[77] Israeli officials attended the Bahrain-hosted session of the Warsaw Process in October 2019. Still, many Bahrainis, including in the National Assembly, oppose engaging Israel and it was this public pressure that caused the cancellation of a large Israeli delegation to a business conference in April 2019.[78]

The commitment of the Bahrain government to engagement with Israel undoubtedly contributed to a Trump Administration to promote the economic component of its Israeli-Palestinian peace plan in Bahrain, at the "Peace to Prosperity Workshop," on June 25-26, 2019.[79] Bahrain Embassy representatives attended the late January 2020 unveiling of the Administration's proposal for an Israeli-Palestinian settlement. Bahrain has given the plan public support.[80] The other GCC states that attended the session were UAE and Oman.

Still, Bahrain supports the efforts of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to obtain U.N. recognition for a State of Palestine. Bahraini leaders publicly criticized the announcement by President Trump on December 6, 2017, recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital as an obstacle to forging an Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Earlier, Bahrain participated in the 1990-1996 multilateral Arab-Israeli talks, and it hosted a session on the environment (October 1994). In September 1994, all GCC states ceased enforcing secondary and tertiary boycotts of Israel, but Bahrain did not join Oman and Qatar in exchanging trade offices with Israel. In conjunction with the U.S.-Bahrain FTA, Bahrain dropped the primary boycott and closed boycott-related offices in Bahrain.

---

[76] "Arabs Need to Talk to the Israelis," *Washington Post*, July 16, 2009.

[77] Times of Israel, July 18, 2019.

[78] Simon Henderson, "Israel and Bahrain's Normalization Setback," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 16, 2019.

[79] Peter Baker and Mark Landler, "Trump to Open Middle East Peace Drive with Economic Incentives," *New York Times*, at https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/19/us/politics/trump-middle-east-peace-plan.html.

[80] Simon Henderson, "Trump peace plan attracts some Gulf states, but not consensus backing," *The Hill*, January 29, 2020.

Economic Issues

Bahrain's economy has been affected by the domestic unrest and by a decline in oil prices from 2014 levels. Hydrocarbon exports still account for about 80% of government revenues, mostly from oil exports (300,000 barrels per day) from a Saudi field (Abu Safa), the revenue from which Saudi Arabia shares equally with Bahrain. Bahrain's own oil and gas reserves are the lowest of the GCC states, estimated respectively at 210 million barrels of oil and 5.3 trillion cubic feet of gas. However, Bahrain's energy export potential might be revived if the 2018 discovery of a shale oil field in Bahraini territory that contains an estimated 80 billion barrels of shale oil proves commercially viable.[81]

The decline in oil prices from 2014 levels has caused Bahrain to cut subsidies of some fuels and some foodstuffs. The financial difficulties have also contributed to a lack of implementation of government promises to provide more low-income housing (presumably for Shias, who tend to be among the poorer Bahrainis). To try to diversify, Bahrain is investing in its banking and financial services sectors (about 25.5% of GDP combined). To help Bahrain cope with its budgetary difficulties, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE announced in early October 2018 a $10 billion aid package. A comprehensive assessment of Bahrain's economy is provided in Economist Intelligence Unit country reports,[82] but it should be noted that Bahrain's Ministry of Finance estimated that the economy will grow by 2.7% in 2020, suggesting that Bahrain's diversification efforts might be showing signs of success.

U.S.-Bahrain Economic Relations

U.S.-Bahrain economic relations have expanded, even though the United States buys virtually no oil from Bahrain. The major U.S. import from the country is aluminum. In concert with Crown Prince Salman's visit to Washington, DC, in November 2017, Bahrain-based companies in several sectors signed trade deals with U.S. based firms, including a memorandum of understanding between Aluminum Bahrain (Alba) and General Electric. More than 200 American companies operate in Bahrain, and Amazon Web Services is slated to open its first regional headquarters in Bahrain.[83]

To encourage reform and signal U.S. appreciation, the United States and Bahrain signed an FTA on September 14, 2004. Implementing legislation was signed January 11, 2006 (P.L. 109-169). However, in light of the unrest, the AFL-CIO has urged the United States to void the FTA on the grounds that Bahrain is preventing free association of workers and abridging their rights. In 2005, bilateral trade was about $780 million, and U.S.-Bahrain trade has increased significantly since.

Some U.S. funds have been used to provide assistance to Bahrain for purposes that are not purely security related. In 2010, MEPI supported the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the Small Business Administration and Bahrain's Ministry of Industry and Commerce to support small and medium enterprises in Bahrain. MEPI funds have also been used to fund U.S. Department of Commerce programs ("Commercial Law Development Program") to provide Bahrain with technical assistance in support of trade liberalization and economic diversification, including modernization of the country's commercial laws and regulations.

[81] Columbia University's Center on Global Energy Policy. May 3, 2018.

[82] EIU, *Country Report Bahrain*, at http://country.eiu.com/FileHandler.ashx?issue_id=1644685748&mode=pdf.

[83] "Bahrain Signs $10 million Worth of Trade Agreements with US Firms," Constructionweekonline.com, December 3, 2017.

Table 3. U.S. Assistance to Bahrain Since 2011 Uprising

($ in millions)

	FY11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19 request	20 request	21 request
FMF	15.46	10	13.0	10	7.5	5.0	0	0	0	0	0
IMET	.435	.554	.487	.522	.577	.416	.641	.290	.400	.400	.650
NADR	1.5	.500	.900	.790	.610	0	.400	.400	.400	0	0
ESF/Dem. and Gov.			.300	.52	.685	.350					
DOD counternarcotics						.588	.294				
DHS/ICE counternarcotics						.248	.028				

Notes: IMET = International Military Education and Training Funds, used mainly to enhance BDF military professionalism and promote U.S. values. NADR = Non-Proliferation, Anti-Terrorism, De-Mining and Related Programs, used to sustain Bahrain's counterterrorism capabilities and interdict terrorists. Section 1206 are DOD funds used to train and equip Bahrain's special forces, its coastal surveillance and patrol capabilities, and to develop its counterterrorism assessment capabilities (named for a section of the FY2006 Defense Authorization Act, P.L. 109-163). FY2018 figures represent the Administration request.

Figure 1. Bahrain

Area	3.5 times the size of Washington, DC
People	*Population:* About 1.4 million, of which about half are citizens. Expatriates are mainly from South Asia and other parts of the Middle East. *Religions:* Nearly all the citizenry is Muslim, while Christians, Hindus, Bahais, and Jews constitute about 1% of the citizenry. Of the total population, 70% is Muslim, 9% is Christian, 10% are of other religions.
Economy	*Gross Domestic Product (GDP):* $70 billion / $34 billion at official exchange rate (2017) *GDP per capita:* $51,800 (2017) on ppp basis *GDP Real Growth Rate*: 1.8% (2018)—slightly lower than 3% in 2016. About 1.8% growth in 2019 and 2.7% expected in 2020 by Ministry of Finance. *Budget:* $5.5 billion revenues, $9.3 billion expenditures (2017) *Inflation Rate:* 0.9% (2017) Unemployment Rate: 3.8% (2017) *U.S. Exports to Bahrain*: $2.04 billion in 2018, more than double the $907 million of 2017. *U.S. Imports from Bahrain***:** $990 million in 2018, almost identical to the $996 million in 2017.

Sources: Map created by CRS. Fact information from CIA, *The World Factbook;* U.S. Census Bureau "Foreign Trade Statistics"; Bahrain Ministry of Finance statements.

Author Information

Kenneth Katzman
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.