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

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Summary

Bahrain is a small island nation, ruled by a hereditary monarchy, that is in a partnership with other Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf called the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman). Bahrain is led by King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, who succeeded his father, Shaykh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa, upon his death in 1999. U.S.-Bahrain ties are long-standing and have deepened over the past four decades as the Gulf region has become highly volatile. The country has hosted a U.S. naval command headquarters for the Gulf region since 1948, and the United States and Bahrain have had a formal Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) since 1991. In 2004, Bahrain was designated by the United States as a "major non-NATO ally." There are nearly 5,000 U.S. forces, mostly Navy, serving at the naval facility and other bases in Bahrain, and the country is a significant buyer of U.S.-made arms. In 2014, Bahrain joined the U.S.-led coalition combatting the Islamic State and flew strikes against the group's fighters in Syria that year.

Bahrain generally supports de facto GCC leader Saudi Arabia, which provides Bahrain with substantial financial support. In 2015, Bahrain joined Saudi Arabia-led military action to try to restore the government of Yemen that was ousted by Iran-backed Houthi rebels. In 2017, it joined a Saudi and UAE move to isolate Qatar. Bahrain, like several other GCC states, has been building ties to Israel over the past three years and it hosted the June 2019 economic workshop that preceded the Trump Administration's Israeli-Palestinian peace plan unveiled in January 2020. On September 15, 2020, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu signed agreements at the White House to fully normalize Israel's relations with Bahrain, as well as with the United Arab Emirates, after both deals were announced in the preceding weeks.

Bahrain is the only GCC state to have a Shia majority population, and Bahrain's politics have been unsettled since a 2011 uprising by a mostly Shia opposition to the Sunni-minority-led government of Bahrain's Al Khalifa ruling family. The stated goals of the opposition for a constitutional monarchy have not been realized, but the government has undertaken some modest political reforms. Since 2014, the unrest has been relatively low-level, but punishments of oppositionists continue. Since 2002, there have been elections for the lower house of a bicameral legislative body, but several of the elections have faced opposition boycotts and allegations of voting district gerrymandering.

The mainstream opposition has used peaceful forms of dissent, but small factions have conducted occasional attacks on security officials. The Trump Administration has echoed the Bahrain leadership's assertions that Iran is providing material support to violent opposition factions. In part to express support for the Bahrain government against Iran, the Trump Administration has not conditioned major arms sales to Bahrain's military on improvements in its human rights practices. In 2019, Bahrain agreed to host a U.S.-led maritime mission (International Maritime Security Construct, IMSC) to protect shipping in the Gulf from further Iranian attacks. Critics of U.S. policy argue that the Trump Administration is downplaying human rights concerns in the interests of countering Iran.

Bahrain has fewer financial resources than do most of the other GCC states. Its economic difficulties have been compounded by the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak, although the 48 deaths from the disease in Bahrain (as of mid-June 2020) is the lowest number among the GCC states. Bahrain's 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).

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Historical Background

The site of the ancient Bronze Age civilization of Dilmun, the island nation of 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 by Iran's parliament. Bahrain negotiated with eight other Persian Gulf emirates during 1970-1971 on federating with them, but Bahrain and Qatar each became independent, and the other seven emirates federated into the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Bahrain became independent on August 15, 1971.

Governance, Unrest, and Human Rights[1]

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 but have long asserted they are discriminated against and suspected of loyalty to Iran.[2]

Within the upper echelons of the ruling family, the most active proponent of accommodation with the Shia opposition has been the king's son and designated successor, the U.S.- and U.K.-educated Crown Prince Shaykh Salman bin Hamad, who is about 52 years old. 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. In February 2020, another reformist, Abdul Latif Rashid Al Zayani, was named the first non-Al Khalifa member to be Foreign Minister,[3] and he took office in May 2020. He previously served as Secretary-General of

[1] Much of the information in this section is from the State Department 2019 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices. Bahrain, as well as published material from Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED).

[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, such as the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook. 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] "Bahrain formally appoints ex-GCC chief Abdullatif al-Zayani as foreign minister." *Al Arabiya*, February 12, 2020.

the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC, comprised of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, UAE, Qatar, and Oman), based in Saudi Arabia.

Some in the royal family have argued against concessions to the Shia majority. Those in this group have been 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 has resisted opposition calls to replace him. The Prime Minister has been supported by some hardline officials including Minister of the Royal Court Khalid bin Ahmad bin Salman Al Khalifa and his brother, Bahrain Defense Forces (BDF) Commander Khalifa bin Ahmad Al Khalifa. The two are known as "Khawalids," hailing from a branch of the ruling family with allies throughout the security and intelligence services and the judiciary.[4] A senior BDF officer, Abdullah bin Muhammad bin Rashid Al Khalifa, has been Ambassador to the United States since 2013.

Executive and Legislative Powers

Upon taking office in 1999, Shaykh Hamad assumed the title of king, forgoing the historic leadership title of "Amir" (ruler) used by Bahrain's leaders. A public referendum on February 14, 2001 adopted a "National Action Charter,"[5] provisions of which were incorporated into a new constitution issued by the King in 2002. Under Bahrain's constitution, the king has broad powers, including appointing all ministers and judges and amending the constitution. Al Khalifa family members hold half of the 24 cabinet posts, and include the ministries of defense and interior (internal security). Bahrain's cabinets typically have had five or six Shia ministers.

Many Shias and reform-minded Sunnis criticized the government for not putting the new constitution to a ratification vote and for deviating from the 1973 constitution (abolished in 1975 because of Sunni-Shia tensions) by establishing an all-appointed *Shura* (consultative) *Council* of equal size (40 seats each) as the elected *Council of Representatives* (COR).[6] Together, these bodies constitute the National Assembly. Enactment of any legislation requires concurrence by the king, but a veto can be overridden by a two-thirds majority vote of both chambers. In implementation of reforms agreed with the Shia opposition, the King enacted constitutional amendments in 2012 that gave the COR the power to remove individual ministers by two-thirds majority and declared the elected COR as the presiding chamber of the Assembly. The *Shura* Council was empowered to originate legislation (previously, only the COR could do so).[7] The *Shura* Council's concurrence is needed to enact legislation, and the king has tended to appoint its supporters to the body—former high-ranking government officials, as well as women and members of minority communities (Jewish and Christian) that are underrepresented or not represented at all in the COR.[8]

[4] "A Palace Rift in Persian Gulf Bedevils Key U.S. Navy Base." *Wall Street Journal*, February 20, 2013.

[5] The National Charter and constitution's provisions did not meet the Shia majority's expectations, but represented reform beyond that enacted under the king's father, Amir Isa. In 1992, Amir Isa established a 30-member all-appointed Consultative Council, (expanded to 40 in 1996), but its mandate was limited to commenting on government-proposed laws – powers far less extensive than that of the elected national assembly established under the 1973 constitution. Amir Isa's refusal to restore an elected Assembly sparked daily Shia-led antigovernment violence during 1994-1998.

[6] Bahrain's October 24 and 31, 2002 Legislative Elections. National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 2002.

[7] Constitution of the Kingdom of Bahrain. NIHR. February 9, 2016.

[8] "Bahrain: 9 Women, Including a Jew, Christian, Appointed to Shura Council." *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, December 10, 2018.

Political Groups and Elections

COR elections have been held every four years since 2002, each time generating substantial tension over opposition and government efforts to achieve an electoral majority in the COR. 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*. Allied factions include the National Democratic Action Society, the National Democratic Assembly, the Democratic Progressive Tribune, and Al Ekhaa.
- *Waad* ("promise")/National Democratic Action Society 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.
- *Al Haq* (Movement of Freedom and Democracy), a small Shia faction, was outlawed for calling for regime change. Its key leaders, Dr. Abduljalil Alsingace and Hassan Mushaima, have been imprisoned since 2011.
- The Bahrain Islamic Action Society *and Amal.* Two small Shia factions linked to the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB)—a party linked to alleged Iran-backed plots against Bahrain in the 1980s and 1990s—are outlawed. Amal's leader, Shaykh Muhammad Ali al-Mafoodh, has been in prison since 2011.
- *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. In 2011, a 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, tensions between the Shia majority and the regime escalated. The elections held in October 2002, the first elections were held under the 2002 constitution, as well as in November 2006 and October 2010, were marred by opposition partial or full boycotts of some or all three of the elections, allegations of government gerrymandering, and government arrests of oppositionists in advance of the elections.[9] In each of these elections, Shia candidates won 17-18 seats, just short of a majority.

2011 Uprising: Origin, Developments, and Outlook[10]

A major uprising began on February 14, 2011, following the toppling of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak. 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,

[9] "Bahrain's elections overshadowed by crackdown on Shia protesters." *The Guardian*, October 22, 2010.

[10] The events of the uprising, 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://www.bici.org.bh/.

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. As protests decreased in size and intensity, the king ended the state of emergency as of June 1, 2011, and the vast bulk of the GCC force departed in June 2011.

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. The 500+ page BICI report, released on November 23, 2011, provided support for the positions of both the government and the opposition by stating[11]

- 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 National Commission to oversee implementation. Bahraini officials asserted that the government fully implemented the vast majority of the 26 BICI recommendations, but most outside assessments, including by the State Department and the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), assess that Bahrain only partially implemented the recommendations.[12] POMED characterized a June 2016 State Department assessment on the implementation of the BICI recommendations as "a real effort to pull punches and avoid clear evaluations of progress, in order to avoid antagonizing the Bahraini government."[13] In the 114th Congress, two bills (S. 2009 and H.R. 3445) would have prohibited U.S. sales to Bahrain of tear gas, small arms, Humvees, and "crowd control items" until the State Department certified that Bahrain had fully implemented all BICI recommendations.

The "National Dialogue" Process

The Bahrain government initially responded to the unrest with offers of dialogue. 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. Protest leaders asserted that the principles fell short of their demands for a constitutional monarchy in which the Prime Minister and cabinet are selected by the fully elected parliament—a demand encapsulated in the October 2011 "Manama Document" unveiled by *Wifaq* and *Waad*.[14]

The first "National Dialogue" process was inaugurated on July 2, 2011, consisting of about 300 opposition delegates, including five *Wifaq* members.[15] The detention of senior oppositionists caused *Wifaq* to exit the talks after two weeks, but the meetings reached consensus on several recommendations that became the May 2012 constitutional amendments discussed above:

[11] The full text *of the Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, op.cit.

[12] Project on Middle East Democracy. "State Department Reports on Bahrain's Implementation of the BICI." June 23, 2016; and POMED. "One Year Later: Assessing Bahrain's Implementation of the BICI Report." November 2012.

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

[14] "Bahrain opposition unites to decry "police state." *Reuters*, October 13, 2011.

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

- an elected parliament with expanded powers, including to confirm a cabinet;
- 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. However, the meetings 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, and despite efforts since then by the Crown Prince to revive talks, no further national dialogue has convened to date.

Current Situation, Post-uprising Elections, and Prospects

Unrest continues, although at far lower intensity than in 2011. The government has apparently rolled back some of the political reforms it had undertaken, and there has been no evidence of any government-opposition dialogue to try to reach accord on additional reform. 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 Bahrain National Security Agency—powers the government had revoked in 2012 as it implemented the BICI recommendations. 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. Particularly in the first few years after the uprising, the government and the opposition discussed confidence-building measures such as appointments of oppositionists to the cabinet or the appointment of a new Prime Minister. However, there has been no evident discussion on any such measures over the past three years.[16]

[16] Author conversations with think-tank experts and visiting Bahrain officials. 2011-2020.

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, 1 Jew, 1 Christian
Number of Women	9	4	11	9	9

Elections since the Uprising

The two elections held since the 2011 uprising have been marked by Sunni-Shia tensions similar to those that appeared in pre-uprising votes.

2014

The government urged the opposition to participate in the November 22, 2014, COR election, perhaps in an effort to portray the domestic political situation as having normalized. 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. There was little violence. The seats were mostly won by independent candidates, suggesting that voters sought to reduce polarization. Shia Bahrainis became deputy COR speaker and the chairman of the *Shura* Council.

2018

The most recent COR elections were held on November 24, 2018, with municipal council elections held concurrently. The vote was widely derided by Bahraini oppositionists as neither free nor fair, citing the outlawing of *Wifaq* and *Waad* (see above). According to the State Department human rights report on Bahrain for 2019, "The government did not permit international election monitors. Domestic monitors generally concluded authorities administered the elections without significant procedural irregularities."

The final list of candidates included 293 persons, of whom 41 were women—the highest number of women candidates in any Bahrain election. The government reported that 85% of the seats were won by independents (candidates not affiliated with any of the political societies discussed above), only five incumbents retained their seats, and that more women won (six) than in any prior election. The new COR selected its first female speaker, Fawzia Zainal. The Shia deputy speaker, Abdulnabi Salman, conducts outreach to the Shia community.[17] A *Shura* Council was appointed in December 2018, with roughly the same ethnic and gender composition as recent *Shuras*, but excluding members of any political society.

Violent Underground Groups

Attacks in Bahrain by apparently small but violent underground groups, targeting mainly security forces, have been sporadic, and appear to have waned since 2018. The State Department international terrorism report for 2019 (latest available) states that there were no Bahraini Shia militant terrorist attacks in 2019.[18] On January 1, 2017, 10 detainees who had been convicted of militant activities broke out of Bahrain's Jaw prison with the help of attackers outside the jail.[19]

The Bahrain government asserts that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) is arming and advising the underground groups as part of deliberate effort to destabilize Bahrain. In 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.[20] In September 2018, the government charged 169 persons with forming a Bahrain version of Lebanese Hezbollah, with Iranian backing.

The most prominent underground groups in Bahrain include the following:

- *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. 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.

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

[18] State Department "Country Reports on Terrorism: 2019." June 2020.

[19] "Inmates escape in 'armed attack' on Bahrain jail." *Financial Times*, January 1, 2017.

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

- The *"14 February Coalition"* (named for the anniversary of the Bahrain uprising) claims inspiration from anti-regime protesters in Egypt in the uprising there in 2011. In September 2013, 50 Shias were sentenced to up to 15 years in prison for 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 underground groups have used the names Bahrain Liberation Movement, *al-Wafaa*, the Resistance Brigades, the Mukhtar Brigades, the Basta organization, and the Imam Army, appear to be offshoots of larger groups. 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.[21]

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 released and rearrested in 2014 and has been in prison since and in November 2018, 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. He was incarcerated for most of 2019.
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. He was released in June 2020. 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
Citizenship Revocations and Expulsions	About 990 citizenships revoked, but in April 2019, King Hamad reinstated the nationality of 551 persons. The several expulsions have mostly been Bahraini Shias of Persian origin.
Number Arrested	Approximately 3,000

Sources: Various press, and reports and press releases from human rights organizations. All figures are cumulative from the time the uprising began in 2011.

U.S. Posture on the Unrest

For several years after the 2011 uprising, the United States 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.-Bahrain defense cooperation continued without significant alteration, although the Obama Administration withheld or conditioned some arms sales to Bahrain.

[21] "Bahrain court jails 19 over Iran, Hezbollah links." Middle East Monitor, May 7, 2019.

As part of its stated goal of pressuring Iran, the Trump Administration dropped conditions on the approval of new sales to Bahrain's military and imposed U.S. sanctions on Bahraini militant groups (see above). 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.[22] In 2017, the Trump Administration criticized the dissolution of *Waad* as unhelpful to political reconciliation.

Over the past 15 years, the United States has funded programs to train Bahraini lawyers, judges, and journalists, as well as to enhance the capabilities of Bahrain's National Assembly. In FY2016—the latest fiscal year in which democracy and civil society programs were funded for Bahrain—the United States provided about $350,000 for democracy and human rights promotion programs in Bahrain. 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.[23]

Broader Human Rights Issues[24]

The bulk of U.S. and global 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. Bahrain, like several other GCC states, has increasingly sought to use laws against "insulting the king" to silence opponents.

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, the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR) and the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights (BYSHR), which was officially dissolved but remains active informally. The BHCR received some U.S. funding in FY2016. In 2013, in line with the BICI report, the king issued a decree reestablishing the "National Institution for Human Rights" (NIHR) and empowering it to investigate human rights violations, make unannounced visits to detention centers, and request formal responses to NIHR recommendations.[25] 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 Nations has not appointed 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.

Women's Rights[26]

Bahraini leaders have sought to promote the role of women in government and society. 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. If married to a non-national, a Bahraini woman cannot transmit nationality to her spouse or children. The "Supreme Council for Women,"

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

[23] USAID Explorer database.

[24] Much of this section is from the State Department's country report on human rights practices for 2019 and from reports by Human Rights Watch and other outside groups.

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

[26] This section is taken from the State Department country reports on human rights practices for 2019.

backed by the wife of the King, oversees efforts to improve the rights of women. 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[27]

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 2016, the king signed an amendment to a 2005 law that banned persons who are active in religious positions from engaging in political activities.[28] In 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.

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. 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 have been discriminated against in Bahrain but can worship openly.

Human Trafficking and Labor Rights[29]

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 "Trafficking in Persons Report" for 2020, 2019, and 2018 rated Bahrain at "Tier 1" (best ranking) for "fully meet[ing] the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking." 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." The government has established a Center of Excellence for trafficking that aims to serve as a regional hub for expertise and training to combat the crime.

Bahraini law grants 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). During March-May 2011, employers dismissed almost 5,500 mostly Shia workers from both the private and public sectors, including 25% of union leaders, for participating in anti-government protests. Most were later reinstated. U.S. 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 has begun to dismantle the "sponsorship system" (*kafala*) that essentially prohibits workers from

[27] This section is based on the State Department report on International Religious Freedom for 2019.

[28] "Bahrain King 'Bans Mixing Religion and Politics." Al Araby, June 12, 2016.

[29] Much of this section was taken from the State Department Trafficking in Persons report for 2020. Released June 2020.

changing jobs. The Authority also has helped institute requirements that expatriate workers be provided with health insurance. Still, expatriate workers have, on occasion, conducted public protests over the slow payment of wages.

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 2019. The State Department reported that there were numerous reports of torture of protesters during the height of the 2011 uprising.

U.S.-Bahrain Security Relations[30]

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. 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. As of the end of 2019, there were about 5,000 U.S. military personnel deployed in Bahrain, mostly Navy, implementing various missions.[31] Bahrain has formal relations with NATO under a 2004 NATO-GCC "Istanbul Cooperation Initiative" (ICI).

U.S. Naval Headquarters and Other Facilities

A major hallmark of the defense relationship 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 1995), have been headquartered at a sprawling facility called "Naval Support Activity (NSA)-Bahrain." Prior to the 1991 U.S.-led war against Iraq, the U.S. naval headquarters in Bahrain was on a command ship docked and technically "off shore."

NSA-Bahrain coordinates the operations of warships from 30 countries participating in Combined Task Force (CTF) 151 and 152 that seek to interdict the movement of terrorists, pirates, arms, weapons-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. U.S.-Bahrain naval cooperation undoubtedly facilitated Bahrain's August 2019 decision 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.[32] On November 7, 2019, IMSC formally launched its operations, headquartered in Bahrain.

[30] Much of the information in this section is obtained from: State Department. U.S. Security Cooperation with Bahrain, March 20, 2020.

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

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

To further develop the Naval Support Activity facility, the U.S. military implemented a military construction program from 2010 until the end of 2017 that doubled the size of the facility (to over 150 acres) and added buildings for administration, maintenance, housing, warehousing, and dining. The expansion supports the deployment of additional U.S. coastal patrol ships and the docking of larger U.S. ships.[33] The separate Khalifa bin Salman Port, is one of the few facilities in the Gulf that can accommodate U.S. aircraft carriers and amphibious ships.[34] U.S. forces also use Shaykh Isa Air Base, which hosts a variety of U.S. aircraft. In December 2014, Bahrain agreed to allow Britain to establish a naval base in Bahrain and to store equipment and house military personnel.[35]

Unrest in Bahrain has raised questions whether the United States should examine alternatives to NSA-Bahrain. No legislation has been enacted to mandate Defense Department planning to move NSA-Bahrain, but the Department reportedly has done such contingency planning.[36] 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.[37]All three are close U.S. allies, but none has stated a position on whether it would be willing to host such a facility.

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

Bahrain has sent its forces to join U.S.-led operations in the region. Bahrain was part of the U.S.-led coalition that ousted Iraq from Kuwait in 1991, hosting U.S. troops and 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. It was renewed in 2017 for 15 years.[38] Under the DCA, Bahrain provides access, basing, and overflight privileges to facilitate U.S. regional military operations.[39] The pact 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 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.

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

[34] Ibid.

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

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

[37] Ibid.

[38] "US, Bahrain Extend Defense Cooperation for 15 Years." *Al Defaiya*, April 12, 2017.

[39] State Department security cooperation factsheet, op.cit.

U.S. Security Assistance and Arms Transfers

The main recipient of U.S. military assistance is the Bahrain Defense Force (BDF)—Bahrain's regular military force—which totals about 10,000 active duty personnel, including 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.

Bahrain's small budget allows for modest amounts of national funds to be used for purchases of U.S. 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 U.S. sales to Bahrain of arms that could easily be used against protesters, such as Humvee armored vehicles, until Bahrain had met U.S. conditions for improving its human rights record.[40] The Trump Administration has maintained restrictions on security cooperation with Bahrain's Interior Ministry, which supervises Bahrain's internal security forces, while dropping conditions or holds on sales of most major combat systems, including F-16 combat aircraft.[41]

According to the State Department's 2020 security cooperation factsheet (cited above), the United States has provided Bahrain with $22.5 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) since 2014. According to the factsheet, the assistance helps Bahrain "provide for its own defense and to operate effectively alongside U.S. air and naval forces. U.S. assistance has also strengthened Bahrain's interoperability for regional security and counterterrorism cooperation, boosted its maritime defenses against smuggling and terrorism, and improved its ability to deny terrorist sponsorship, support, and sanctuary in a manner that respects the human rights of its citizens."

Excess Defense Articles (EDA)[42]

The BDF is eligible to receive grant excess defense articles. Since 2014, the United States has provided Bahrain with $28.423 million in military grant assistance. Among the major military equipment transferred to Bahrain as EDA are: M-60A3 tanks (1995) and the FFG-7 "Perry class" frigate *Subha* (1997). On October 23, 2019, DOD notified Congress (Transmittal 19-61) that the State Department approved $150 million in funding to refurbish another Perry-class frigate (*Robert G. Bradley*) to facilitate its transfer to Bahrain as grant EDA. The notification cited Section 1020 of P.L. 115-232 (FY2019 NDAA) as authorizing the grant. Since 2014, Bahrain has received M198 Howitzers, Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles (MRAPs), and the Mk V Special Operations Craft, via the EDA program.

Major Foreign Military Sales (FMS)

Some U.S. sales to Bahrain have been the subject of debate because of Bahrain's human rights record, its involvement in the Yemen conflict (see below), and its dispute with some of its neighbors (see below). About 85% of Bahrain's defense equipment is of U.S.-origin. As of March 2020, the United States has $5.8 billion in active government-to-government sales cases with Bahrain under the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) system. The United States also performs end-use monitoring of how Bahrain uses its U.S.-supplied weaponry.[43] There are no reported new major

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

[41] "Trump administration drops human rights conditions to sell fighter jets to Bahrain." *The Guardian*. March 30, 2017.

[42] Most of the information in this section is from the State Department security cooperation factsheet, op.cit.

[43] State Department security cooperation factsheet, op.cit.

sales of U.S. arms to Bahrain as a consequence of its September 2020 decision to normalize relations with Israel, which is discussed further below.

- *F-16s and other U.S.-made Aircraft.* In 1998, Bahrain purchased 22 U.S.-made F-16 Block 40 aircraft. In 2016, the Obama Administration notified to Congress a sale to Bahrain of up to 19 additional F-16s, stipulating that would not finalize approval until Bahrain improves its human rights record.[44] The Trump Administration dropped that condition, and in September 2017, notified Congress of the possible sale to Bahrain of 19 F-16Vs and upgrading of its existing F-16s, at an estimated value of nearly $4 billion.[45] The sale was not subject to then-Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker's July 2017 withholding of informal concurrence to arms sales to the GCC states.[46]
- *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. On May 3, 2019, the State Department approved a possible sale of a large variety of munitions, including additional AMRAAMs and large bombs (GBUs) at an estimated value of $750 million (Transmittal Number 18-20). Citing Bahrain's Air Force participation in the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, a resolution of disapproval for the sale, S.J.Res. 20, was introduced on May 13, 2019. The Administration issued a statement on June 12, 2019 opposing that resolution, and a motion to discharge was defeated on June 13, 2019 by a vote of 43-56.
- *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, citing 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 notified Congress of a sale to the BDF and National Guard of 44 "Humvee" (M115A1B2) armored vehicles and several hundred TOW missiles of various models, at an estimated total value of $53 million. Two joint resolutions introduced in the 112th Congress (S.J.Res. 28 and H.J.Res. 80) would have withheld the sale pending Administration certification that Bahrain has improved its human rights practices.[47] In January 2012, the Obama Administration put the sale on hold, but

[44] Anthony Capaccio, Bloomberg News, September 30, 2016.

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

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

[47] Blocking an arms sale would require passage of a joint resolution to do so, presumably with a veto-proof majority.

in June 2015, the State Department announced that the sale would proceed because the government had "made some meaningful progress" in its human rights practices."[48] 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*. In May 2012, in conjunction with a visit to Washington, DC by Bahrain's Crown Prince, the Obama Administration announced the sale and grant to Bahrain of U.S. weaponry to support Bahrain's maritime defense, including a Perry-class frigate, and harbor security boats for the Bahrain Coast Guard.[49] 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.
- *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, with an estimated value of $911 million.[50]
- *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 would have disapproved that sale, but the resolution did not advance.

Russia Purchases

Bahrain has sought to diversify its arms supplies somewhat. In 2016, Bahrain took delivery of about 250 Russian-made *Kornet* anti-tank systems. In 2017, Bahrain military officials stated they were in discussions to possibly purchase the Russian S-400 missile defense system, but no purchase of the system has been announced.[51] Purchases from Russia, particularly the S-400, could trigger U.S. sanctions on Bahrain under the Countering America's Adversaries through Terrorism Act (CAATSA, P.L. 115-44). No sanctions on Bahrain under that law have been announced, to date.

International Military Education and Training Funds (IMET)

According to the State Department factsheet cited above, since 2014, the U.S. Department of State has provided Bahrain with $2.432 million for International Military Education and Training (IMET). Over 866 members of the Bahrain Armed Forces have received training in the United States, including 30 members in FY2018. The factsheet states "IMET provides professional military education and training to military students and is key to establishing lasting relationships with future leaders. IMET courses increase military professionalization, enhance interoperability

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

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

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

[51] Bahrain in Talks For Purchase Of Russian S-400 Missile Systems. *Defense World.net*. October 17, 2017.

with U.S. forces, offer instruction on the law of armed conflict and human rights, provide technical and operational training, and create a deeper understanding of the United States."

Counterterrorism Cooperation/Ministry of Interior[52]

Bahrain is assessed by U.S. reports and officials as continuing to face a terrorist threat from Iran-backed groups, discussed above. There have been no reported attacks in Bahrain by Iran-backed groups since 2017, and authorities thwarted terrorist attacks in 2019 according to the State Department, as well as an Iran-backed plot to attack foreign diplomats and Bahrain security officers in early 2020.[53] Nine were arrested in the alleged 2020 plot and nine others involved are said to be in Iran. 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. 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 organization (ISIS).

The United States provides training, equipment, and other assistance to Bahrain's Interior Ministry on counterterrorism issues, although both the Obama and Trump Administrations have reduced U.S. overall cooperation with the ministry since 2011. For much of 2014, because of Bahraini leadership resistance to U.S. scrutiny of its treatment of dissidents, the Obama Administration suspended virtually all cooperation with the Ministry.[54]

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[55]—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 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 retained restrictions on selling Bahrain similar weaponry, according to September 12, 2017, testimony by Ambassador Justin Siberell, and no sales of these weapons to Bahrain have been announced by the Trump Administration.

Bahrain's Coast Guard, 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.

[52] Much of the information in this section is from the State Department report on international terrorism for 2019. Released June 2020.

[53] "Bahrain Says it Broke Up Militant Attack Plot in Early 2020." *Washington Post*, September 20, 2020.

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

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

U.S. Training/NADR Funding

As noted above, the United States has continued cooperation with the Ministry of Interior on issues of counter-terrorism. The United States runs training programs for Bahraini MOI offers using Non-proliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining and Related Programs (NADR) funds. The United States provided Bahrain $400,000 in NADR funds in each of FY2017 and FY2018 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 provided in FY2019, and none was requested for FY2020 or for FY2021.

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 secretariat of the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force (MENAFATF), a regional body to exchange information and recommendations to promote anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism (AML/CFT). 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 October 2017, King Hamad issued a series of decrees mandating extensive prison sentences and financial penalties on persons raising funds for terrorist groups.[56]

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.

Countering Violent Extremism. Pursuant to the country's 2016 National Countering Violent Extremism strategy, 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.

Foreign Policy Issues

Bahrain's foreign policy generally adheres to that of its closest allies in the GCC, particularly Saudi Arabia. The close Bahrain-Saudi relationship was 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, which has lasted more than three years, and longer than an earlier dispute in 2014, remains unresolved.[57] The intra-GCC rift has 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.[58] 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 using a causeway, constructed in 1986, that links Bahrain to the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia.

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

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

[57] For detail on the rift, see CRS Report R44533, *Qatar: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

[58] "Trump seeks to revive 'Arab NATO' to confront Iran." *Reuters*, July 27, 2018.

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 has become a major investor in Bahrain, as has the UAE. In 2018, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and UAE announced a $10 billion aid package to stabilize Bahrain's budget and finances.

Bahrain and Qatar have been at odds many times prior to the 2014 and 2017 intra-GCC rifts. The two had a long-standing territorial dispute over the Hawar Islands and other lands, with 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 Saudi mediation 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.

Iran[59]

Bahraini leaders conduct virtually no dialogue with Iran's leaders and they have consistently claimed that Iran is fomenting unrest in Bahrain. In 1981 and again in 1996, Bahrain publicly accused Iran of trying to organize a coup by pro-Iranian Bahraini Shias. Bahrain backed Saudi Arabia in its 2016 dispute with Iran in which Iranian protesters attacked two Saudi diplomatic facilities in Iran in response to the Saudi execution of a dissident Shia cleric. Bahrain broke diplomatic relations with Iran, going beyond a 2011-2012 cycle of tensions in which Iran and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors. The diplomatic ties have not been restored. Bahrain's accusations of Iranian backing for violent Shia groups in Bahrain, and the operations of those groups, are discussed in the sections above.

On Iran nuclear issues, Bahrain's leaders have maintained that "when it comes to [Iran's] taking [nuclear] power to developing it into a cycle for weapon[s] grade, that is something that we can never accept, and we can never live with in this region."[60] Bahrain joined the other GCC leaders in expressing support for the 2015 multilateral Iran nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) that limited Iran's nuclear program. However, Bahrain's leaders publicly supported the May 2018 Trump Administration withdrawal from the JCPOA in favor of a strategy of "maximum pressure" on Iran. 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 February 2019 that discussed how to counter Iran. And, Bahrain's hosting of the IMSC (see above) further reflects its backing for Trump Administration policy on Iran.

Bahrain's animosity toward Iran also stems from issues that predate the formation of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Officials in Iran contested Bahrain's sovereignty repeatedly during the 19th and 20th centuries. In 1970, as British rule in Bahrain was ending, Iran asserted its claim to Bahrain again. That year, 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.

[59] See also CRS Report R44017, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*, by Kenneth Katzman.

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

Like the other GCC states, Bahrain maintains relatively normal civilian trade with Iran despite its criticism of that country, and has not always strictly enforced U.S. secondary sanctions on Iran. Bahrain did not close the Manama offices of the Iran-owned Future Bank until 2016, long after the bank was sanctioned by the United States in 2008 under Executive Order 13382 (anti-proliferation). Iran-Bahrain discussions in 2002 on joint energy projects did not bear fruit.

Iraq/Syria/Islamic State Organization (ISIS)

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' did not post an ambassador to Iraq until 2008.

Bahraini and the other GCC leaders publicly blamed Syrian President Bashar Al Assad for authoritarian policies that alienated Syria's Sunni Arab majority and fueling 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 was not reported to have provided funding or weaponry to any Syrian rebel groups. Apparently recognizing that Assad is prevailing in the civil war, Bahrain reopened its embassy in Damascus in December 2018, as did the UAE, arguing that doing so might help limit Iranian influence in post-civil conflict Syria.[61]

Asserting that the Islamic State poses a regional threat, on September 22, 2014, Bahrain and the other GCC states joined the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. Bahrain conducted air strikes against Islamic State positions in Syria, as did several other GCC states. The State Department's report on international terrorism for 2016 stated that Bahrain "has not contributed substantively to coalition [anti-ISIS] military efforts since 2014," and no military operations by Bahrain in this effort have been reported since.

Yemen[62]

Bahrain has also used its small force to intervene in the region, in partnership with Saudi Arabia. In 2015, Saudi Arabia assembled a coalition of Arab states, including Bahrain and all the other GCC countries except Oman, to combat the Iran-backed Houthi movement in an effort to restore the Republic of Yemen Government. About 200 BDF are deployed in Yemen supporting the Saudi-led coalition there, according to the State Department's report on international terrorism for 2018.[63] The head of the Bahrain's Air Force stated in February 2019 that Bahrain's U.S.-made F-16s had conducted over 3,500 sorties since the Saudi-led intervention.

Israeli-Palestinian Issues/Normalization with Israel

On the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, Bahraini leaders have long tended toward engagement with Israel, while supporting Palestinian aspirations for statehood. Bahrain participated in the 1990-1996 multilateral Arab-Israeli talks, and hosted a session on the environment (October 1994). In

[61] "Why did the UAE and Bahrain reopen their embassies in Syria?" Al Jazeera, January 8, 2019.

[62] For information on the conflict in Yemen, see CRS Report R43960, *Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

[63] Department of State. Country Reports on Terrorism 2018. Bahrain.

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 Free Trade Agreement (see below), Bahrain dropped the primary boycott and closed boycott-related offices in Bahrain.

In 2017, King Hamad called for the Arab states to forge direct ties to Israel and end the Arab League boycott of Israel.[64] In July 2019, Bahrain's Foreign Minister met Israeli Foreign Minister Yisrael Katz at a State Department-hosted meeting in Washington, DC and reportedly discussed the threat from Iran,[65] culminating in a statement by the Bahrain Foreign Minister that Israel is "there to stay." Israeli officials subsequently attended the Bahrain-hosted session of the Warsaw Process in October 2019.

Bahrain's engagement with Israel made it a suitable location for the Trump Administration's workshop to promote the economic component of its Israeli-Palestinian peace plan in Bahrain ("Peace to Prosperity Workshop") on June 25-26, 2019.[66] Bahrain Embassy representatives, as well as those of the UAE and Oman, attended the January 2020 unveiling of the Administration's proposal for an Israeli-Palestinian settlement.[67]

On September 11, 2020, Bahrain followed an initiative announced one month earlier by the UAE to agree to normalize relations with Israel (the so-called "Abraham Accords"), including to exchange embassies, permit direct flights between Israel and Bahrain, and forge commercial ties in a broad range of fields. In a joint ceremony at the White House on September 15, 2020, Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Bahrain's Foreign Minister Zayani, signed the normalization agreement, and the UAE and Israel signed their accords as well.[68] In subsequent comments, Bahrain's leaders, including King Hamad, continued to express support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On September 23, 2020, an Israeli delegation visited Bahrain to discuss implementation of the bilateral agreement. Press reports indicated that some Bahraini Sunni hardliners, as well as some Shias who tend to sympathize with the Palestinians and other marginalized communities in the region, demonstrated against the government normalization decision. It is likely that Saudi leaders at least tacitly supported the Bahrain move in light of the close Saudi-Bahrain relationship.

Economic Issues and U.S.-Bahrain Economic Ties

Bahrain's economy has been affected by the domestic unrest and by a decline in oil prices from 2014 levels, and its economic difficulties have been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. As of September 25, 2020, Bahrain has reported 67,700 infections and 230 deaths from the disease.[69] That is the lowest death toll among the GCC states. However, Bahrain's economy has suffered from restrictions on public gathering and on travel, measures that began to be lifted during June, as well as the sharp decline in oil prices (which recovered somewhat since June).

[64] CRS Report RL33961, *Arab League Boycott of Israel*, by Martin A. Weiss.

[65] "Israel, Bahrain foreign ministers talk Iran in groundbreaking public meet." *Times of Israel*, July 18, 2019.

[66] "Trump to Open Middle East Peace Drive with Economic Incentives," *New York Times*, May 19, 2019.

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

[68] White House. "Remarks by President Trump, Prime Minister Netanyahu, Minister bin Zayed, and Minister Al Zayani at the Abraham Accords Signing Ceremony." September 15, 2020.

[69] Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center.

To cope with the COVID-19 pandemic—which is expected to cause an economic contraction of about 5% in 2020—Bahrain's leaders have cut government spending, issued sovereign debt, and delayed new investments in the energy sector.[70] Yet, Bahrain's financial difficulties long predate the COVID-19 pandemic; in October 2018, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE assisted the country with a $10 billion aid package.[71] U.S. aid to Bahrain is depicted in the table below, and it is possible that the United States might increase aid to Bahrain in appreciation of the Bahrain normalization of relations with Israel.

Even though Bahrain has always had an industrial sector and an economy somewhat more diverse than other GCC states, Bahrain has had difficulty reducing its reliance on hydrocarbon exports that account for about 80% of government revenues. Most of Bahrain's daily oil production of about 200,000 barrels per day come 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 at 125 million barrels of oil and 5.3 trillion cubic feet of gas.[72] Bahrain is not a member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). 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.[73]

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). In 2005, bilateral trade was about $780 million, and U.S.-Bahrain trade has increased more than threefold since, 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. More than 200 American companies operate in Bahrain.[74]

[70] The Economist Intelligence Unit. Various articles on aspects of the Bahrain economy. Accessed late June 2020.

[71] "Saudi, Kuwait, UAE to sign $10 billion Bahrain aid deal: Kuwait newspaper." *Reuters*, October 4, 2018.

[72] "Bahrain is betting on 80 billion barrels of oil to help clear its budget deficit." CNBC, May 8, 2018.

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

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

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 *GDP per capita:* $51,800 (2017) on ppp basis *GDP Real Growth Rate*: -5% expected in 2020 *Budget:* $5.5 billion revenues, $9.3 billion expenditures *Inflation Rate: about 1%* Unemployment Rate: 3.8% *U.S. Exports to Bahrain*: $1.4 billion in 2019, about one-third lower than in 2018. *U.S. Imports from Bahrain***:** $1.046 billion in 2018, slightly higher than 990 million in 2018.

Sources: Map created by CRS. Fact information from CIA, *The World Factbook;* U.S. Census Bureau "Foreign Trade Statistics"; Bahrain Ministry of Finance statements; Economist Intelligence Unit report June 2020.

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

($ in millions)

	FY11	FY12	FY13	FY14	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20	FY21 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				

Source: U.S. State Department Congressional Budget Justification.

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.

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