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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 faced threats from Iran's increasing strategic capabilities. Bahrain 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 about 7,000 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.

Bahrain closely aligns with 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, and in 2017, it backed the Saudi and UAE decision to isolate Qatar. Bahrain, like several other GCC states, has been building ties to Israel and, in September 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. In mid-February 2022, two weeks after Bahrain and Israel signed a security cooperation agreement, Israel's Prime Minister Naftali Bennett became the first Israeli leader to visit Bahrain.

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 since 2014, the unrest has been relatively low-level. Yet, several senior opposition leaders remain imprisoned. 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 echoed the Bahrain leadership's assertions that Iran is providing material support to violent opposition factions and dropped the conditioning of 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 United States has consistently downplayed human rights concerns in the interests of countering Iran, and Biden Administration officials have stated that the human rights situation in Bahrain is part of the bilateral agenda. To date, Biden Administration policy toward Bahrain has largely resembled that of its predecessors, emphasizing security cooperation and regional issues.

Bahrain has fewer financial resources than do most of the other GCC states. Bahrain's oil revenues emanate primarily from a Saudi oil field whose proceeds go partly to Bahrain. 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, a branch of the Sunni Muslim Bani Utbah tribe, has ruled Bahrain since 1783, when it 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, 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 (72 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 has sought 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 accused 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 52 years old. After serving several years as first deputy Prime Minister, Salman was elevated to Prime Minister in November 2020, after the death of the King's uncle, the long-serving Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa. In February 2020, another reformist, Abdul Latif Rashid Al Zayani, was named the first non-royal family member to be Foreign Minister.[3] Some in the royal family have argued against concessions to the Shia majority.

[1] Much of the information in this section is from the State Department: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2021. 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.

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,"[4] provisions of which were incorporated into a new constitution issued by the King in 2002. The constitution gives the king broad powers, including appointing all ministers and judges and amending the constitution. Al Khalifa family members historically have held a substantial number of cabinet posts, and typically there have been five or six Shia ministers. Several women have held cabinet positions since 2004.

Many Shias and reformist Sunnis criticized the government for not putting the new constitution to a ratification vote and for establishing a National Assembly in which there is all-appointed *Shura* (consultative) *Council* of equal size (40 seats) as the elected *Council of Representatives* (COR).[5] 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 an agreement with the Shia opposition in 2012, the King amended the constitution to designate the COR as the presiding chamber and give it the power to remove individual ministers by two-thirds majority. Still, the *Shura* Council's concurrence is needed to enact legislation, and the King has tended to appoint only government supporters, including former high-ranking government officials, to the body. The King also has typically appointed to the *Shura* Council several women and members of minority communities (Jewish and Christian) that have difficulty winning seats in the COR (see Figure 2 for the breakdown).[6]

Political Groups and Elections

Every COR election since the electoral process in Bahrain resumed in 2002 has generated substantial tension over opposition and government efforts to achieve an electoral majority in the COR. In several elections held during 2002-2010 - prior to the 2011 major uprising in Bahrain - tensions between the Shia majority and the regime escalated. The elections held in October 2002, the first under the 2002 constitution, as well as those 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.[7] In each of these elections, Shia candidates won 17-18 seats, just short of a majority (see Figure 1).

Political parties are banned, but factions have generally been able to organize as functionally equivalent "political societies." The U.S. State Department, citing Human Rights Watch, noted in 2020 that the "dissolution of the country's principal opposition societies and laws restricting their former members from running for office, the absence of an independent press, and the

[4] 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.

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

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

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

criminalization of online criticism created a political environment that was not conducive to free elections."[8] The main political societies include

- *Wifaq* (Accord National Islamic Society) was, until Bahraini courts approved government requests to dissolve it in June 2016, the most prominent Shia political society. Its officials engaged with the government in and outside of formal "national dialogues" after the 2011 uprising. *Wifaq*'s leaders are Secretary-General and Shia cleric Shaykh Ali al-Salman and his deputy Khalil al-Marzuq. Shaykh Salman is serving a life sentence in prison for charges of allegedly inciting a change of government by force and transferring confidential information to and receiving financial support from Qatar.[9] *Wifaq* and its allies boycotted the 2014 elections. Despite the society's dissolution, Wifaq supporters continue to participate politically as independents or members of groups that are allowed to operate openly.
- *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 released and rearrested. Its current leader is Sami Fuad Sayedi. In May 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.

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

The longstanding tensions between the government and the Shia-dominated opposition erupted into a major uprising 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, 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 on 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

[8] U.S. Department of State, *2020 Country Report on Human Rights: Bahrain,* March 30, 2021.

[9] Various U.S. officials have called on the Bahraini government to release Sheikh Salman. See Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, "Sheikh Ali Salman," United States Congress.

[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/.

expert Dr. Cherif Bassiouni, to investigate the government response to the unrest. The 500+ page BICI report, released on November 23, 2011, found that there was "systematic" and "deliberate" use of excessive force against protesters, including torture and forced confessions, and that the opposition increased its demands as the uprising progressed. The report provided no evidence linking Iran to the unrest.[11] The report contained 26 recommendations to hold accountable those government personnel responsible for abuses during the uprising. Bahrain government officials assert that the government fully implemented the vast majority of the 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]

Some in Congress have sought to withhold some U.S. security cooperation with Bahrain until it fully implements the BICI recommendations. In the 114th Congress, two bills (S. 2009 and H.R. 3445), which were not passed in either of their respective chambers of Congress, 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.

"National Dialogues" Held

The government offered dialogue as part of its response. 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*.[13]

The "National Dialogue" process was inaugurated on July 2, 2011, consisting of about 300 opposition delegates, including five *Wifaq* members.[14]The detention of senior oppositionists caused *Wifaq* to exit the talks after two weeks. A second national dialogue convened during 2013-2014. Although no further national dialogues have been held, the two sets of meetings did produce some consensus recommendations that were adopted in May 2012 as constitutional amendments:

- an elected parliament with expanded powers, including to confirm a cabinet;
- "fairly" demarcated electoral boundaries;
- reworking of laws on naturalization and citizenship;
- combating financial and administrative corruption; and
- efforts to reduce sectarian divisions.

Current Situation, Post-uprising Elections, and Prospects

As of 2022, open Shia unrest continues, although at far lower intensity than in 2011, and the government apparently has sought to keep the opposition weak. In 2017, the King signed a

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

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

National Assembly bill amending allowing military courts the right to try civilians accused of terrorism, and the government restored the power of the Bahrain National Security Agency to make arrests. The government also has stepped up citizenship revocations and expulsions and it continues to incarcerate opposition leaders. Each February 14 anniversary of the uprising has been marked by demonstrations. The accession of Crown Prince Salman to the post of Prime Minister in November 2020 might brighten the prospects for reform, although Salman's ability to bring about reform might be limited by others in the ruling family.[15]

Elections since the Uprising

The two elections held since the 2011 uprising, in the fall of 2014 and 2018, have been marked by Sunni-Shia tensions similar to those that appeared pre-uprising. The government urged the opposition to participate in the 2014 election in an effort to portray the domestic political situation as normalized. However, the government's reduction of the number of electoral districts to four, from five, further reduced the chances that Shias would win a majority of COR seats and *Wifaq* and its allies boycotted. 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.

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.[16] 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.

2022 Election

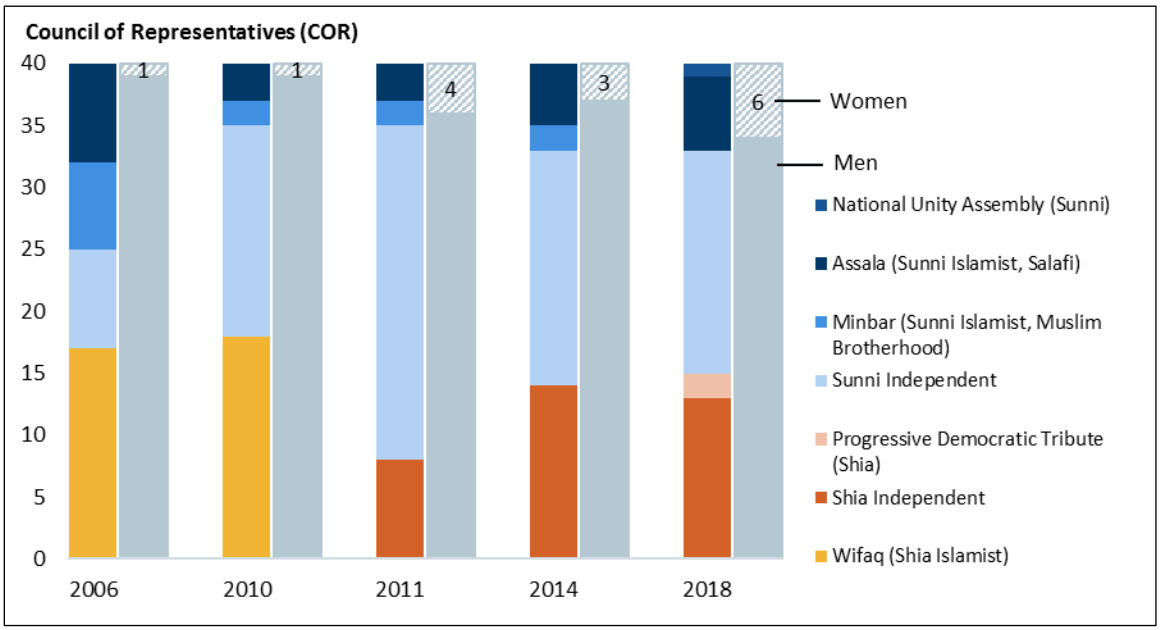
The next elections for the COR, and appointment of a Shura Council, will occur in the fall of 2022. The date will likely be announced in mid-2022. The government has consistently sought to encourage wide participation, including by opposition political societies, but it is not clear to what extent the opposition plans to participate in the 2022 vote.

[15] Kristin Smith Diwan. "Death of Bahrain's Prime Minister Promotes Reformer, But Perhaps Not Reforms." Arab Gulf States Institute of Washington, November 18, 2020.

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

Figure 1. Composition of the Council of Representatives

Lower House, elected 2006-2018

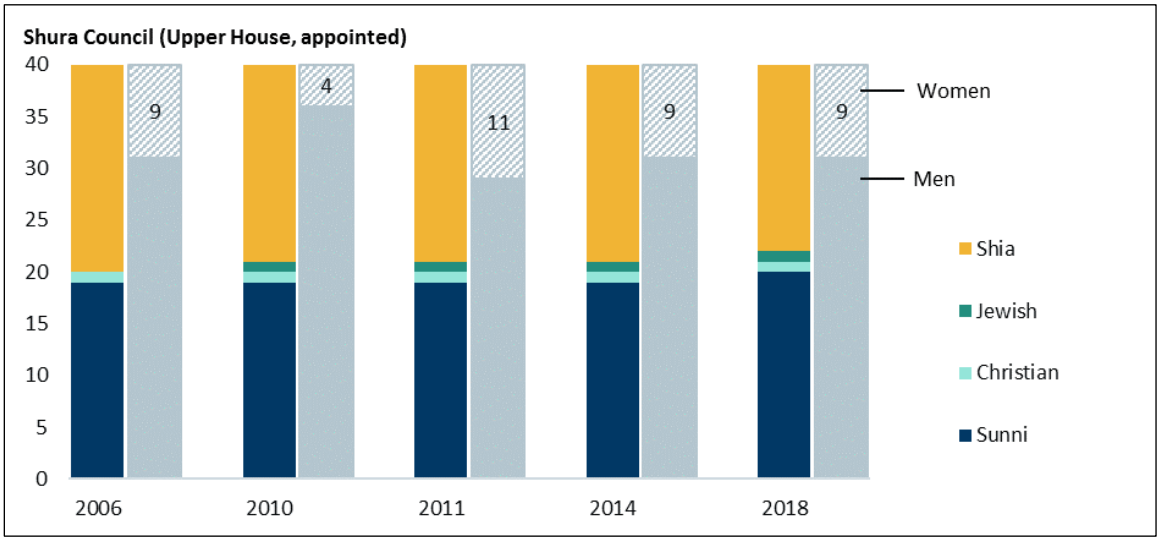


Source: CRS graphics.

Notes: In September 2011, a special election was held after 18 Wifaq lawmakers resigned in protest.

Figure 2. Composition of Shura Council

Upper House, appointed (2006-2018)



Source: CRS graphics.

Violent Underground Groups

Since the 2011 uprising, violent underground Shia opposition groups have formed a relatively small but widely publicized component of the opposition. Their attacks, focused on security forces, have been sporadic, and appear to have waned since 2018. The State Department

international terrorism report for 2020 (latest available) stated that: "There were no successful terrorist attacks in Bahrain in 2020, but domestic security forces conducted numerous operations to preempt and disrupt attack planning."[17] The mainstream opposition has publicly distanced itself from the underground groups and its members have denounced their bombings and other acts of violence. 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, reportedly 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.[18] 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.
- 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.
- *The Mukhtar Brigades* (*Saraya al-Mukhtar*). On December 15, 2020, the State Department designated the group as a terrorist entity under Executive Order 13224. According to the Department: "Saraya al-Mukhtar is an Iran-backed terrorist organization based in Bahrain, reportedly receiving financial and logistic support from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Saraya al-Mukhtar's self-described goal is to depose the Bahraini government with the intention of paving the way for Iran to exert greater influence in Bahrain. The group has plotted attacks against U.S. personnel in Bahrain and has offered cash rewards for the assassination of Bahraini officials."[19]

Broader Human Rights Issues[20]

U.S. and global criticism of Bahrain's human rights practices focuses on the government response to the unrest and more broadly to political opposition, including relative lack of accountability of

[17] U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Bahrain.*

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

[19] Department of State. State Department Terrorist Designation of Saraya al-Mukhtar. December 15, 2020.

[20] See U.S. Department of State, *2020 Country Report on Human Rights: Bahrain,* March 30, 2021.

security forces, suppression of free expression, and treatment of prisoners. 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. Through successive administrations since then, U.S. engagement with Bahraini leaders and defense cooperation have continued without significant alteration, although the Obama Administration withheld or conditioned some arms sales to Bahrain. Since 2011, Congress, in particular the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, has held several hearings and public briefings on Bahrain's human rights practices, particularly its treatment of the Shia opposition.

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, although the Administration later criticized the dissolution of *Waad* as unhelpful to political reconciliation. The Biden Administration has said it would place renewed attention to Bahrain's human rights practices. According to a readout of Secretary of State Antony Blinken's meeting with his Bahraini counterpart State Department spokesperson Ned Price issued the following statement on April 2, 2021:[21]

> Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with the Bahraini Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Abdullatif bin Rashid al-Zayani. Secretary Blinken and the Foreign Minister discussed Bahrain's historic opening with Israel, ways to capitalize on progress made at the first U.S.-Bahrain Strategic Dialogue held in December, and joint regional security initiatives throughout the Gulf. Secretary Blinken outlined key policy objectives, including continued progress on human rights, and commended Bahrain for its successful efforts to combat human trafficking.

However, U.S. high-level meetings with Bahrain leaders, including during the March 2022 visit of the Crown Prince to Washington, D.C., indicates that the U.S.-Bahrain dialogue continues to emphasize security cooperation and regional issues.[22]

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 United States provided about $261,000 for democracy promotion programs in Bahrain. No U.S. funding for democracy promotion in Bahrain was provided for FY2017 or FY2018. In FY2019, nearly $600,000 was provided for a Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Program.[23]

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. 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.[24]

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[21] Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson. "Secretary Blinken's Call with Bahraini Foreign Minister Dr. Abdullatif bin Rashid al-Zayani." April 2, 2021.

[22] U.S., Bahrain Defense Leaders Discuss Global, Regional Concerns. DoD News, March 2, 2022.

[23] USAID Foreign Aid Explorer database, accessed April 2021.

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

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 established 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[25]

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 woman 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. If married to a non-national, a Bahraini woman cannot transmit nationality to her spouse or children. The "Supreme Council for Women," 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[26]

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 2016, the King signed an amendment to a 2005 law that banned persons who are active in religious positions from engaging in political activities.[27] In January 2020, authorities charged Shia cleric Abdul Zahra al-Samaheeji with defamation of religious figures, and in August 2020, the Court of Cassation upheld a one-year prison sentence against Shia religious preacher Abdul Mohsin Atiyya al-Jamri for a sermon "defaming a figure that is revered by a religious group." 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 is integrated into Bahraini society, including serving in appointed seats in the National Assembly and in diplomatic posts.[28]

Human Trafficking and Labor Rights[29]

The State Department's "Trafficking in Persons Report" for 2021, 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." With respect to

[25] See U.S. Department of State, *2020 Country Report on Human Rights: Bahrain,* March 30, 2021; CRS Report R46423, *Women in the Middle East and North Africa: Issues for Congress*, by Zoe Danon and Sarah R. Collins.

[26] This section is based on the U.S. State Department, *Report on International Religious Freedom, 2020: Bahrain.* Released in May 2021

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

[28] "Jews have lived in Bahrain for 140 years; the Israel deal changes their lives." *Times of Israel*, September 18, 2020.

[29] Much of this section was taken from the U.S. Department of State, *2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Bahrain.*

the treatment of expatriate workers, the government has begun to dismantle the "sponsorship system" (*kafala*) that essentially prohibits expatriate workers from changing jobs, and it has instituted requirements that expatriate workers be provided with health insurance. Still, expatriate workers have, on occasion, conducted public protests over the slow payment of wages.

Bahraini law grants many 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 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.

Prominent Human Rights Activists Imprisoned

In addition to figures linked to key political societies, some prominent human rights activists have been incarcerated. 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.

U.S.-Bahrain 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 in 1971.

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 early 2020, there were over 7,000 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). A royal family member, Abdullah bin Rashid Al Khalifa, has been Ambassador to the United States since 2017. The U.S. Ambassador to Bahrain, as of December 2021, is the Hon. Steven C. Bondy.

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." Unrest in Bahrain has raised questions whether the United States should

[30] Much of the information in this section is obtained from: U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation with Bahrain," January 20, 2021.

[31] "Where U.S. troops and military assets are deployed in the Middle East." *Axios*, January 8, 2020.

examine alternatives to NSA-Bahrain, and Defense Department reportedly has done contingency planning to move NSA-Bahrain in the event of a decision to do so.[32] Potential alternatives could include Qatar's New Doha Port, Kuwait's Shuaiba port, and the UAE's Jebel Ali.[33]

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 sometimes commanded these task forces. U.S.-Bahrain naval cooperation undoubtedly facilitated Bahrain's August 2019 decision to join and headquarter 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.[34]

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 supported the deployment of additional U.S. coastal patrol ships and the docking of larger U.S. ships.[35] The Khalifa bin Salman Port, is one of the few facilities in the Gulf that accommodates U.S. aircraft carriers and amphibious ships.[36] U.S. forces also use Shaykh Isa Air Base, which hosts a variety of U.S. aircraft. In December 2014, Bahrain began hosting U.K. naval forces at a base in Bahrain.[37]

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

Bahrain has deployed forces in support of major U.S.-led operations in the region. As part of the U.S.-led coalition that ousted Iraq from Kuwait in 1991, Bahrain hosted 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, hitting three facilities. 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.

[32] Testimony of Cole Bockenfeld, Deputy Director for Policy, Project on Middle East Democracy, "Human Rights in Bahrain: Next Steps," Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, September 9, 2016.

[33] Ibid.

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

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

[36] Ibid.

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

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

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

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

The Bahrain Defense Force (BDF)—Bahrain's regular military force—has 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 national 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 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] The Biden Administration has not announced any policy changes on cooperation with Bahrain's internal security agencies.

According to the State Department's 2021 security cooperation factsheet (latest available, cited above), the United States has provided Bahrain with $22.5 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) since 2014. According to the factsheet: "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." For FY2022, the Administration has requested $4 million in FMF for Bahrain.

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). Since 2014, Bahrain has also received as EDA Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles (MRAPs), and the Mk V Special Operations Craft. Since 2019, $150 million has been spent to refurbish another Perry-class frigate (*Robert G. Bradley*) to facilitate its transfer to Bahrain as grant EDA.

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

[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.

neighbors (see below). About 85% of Bahrain's military equipment is of U.S.-origin. As of January 2021, the United States has $5.8 billion in active government-to-government sales cases with Bahrain under the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) system, and U.S. agencies perform end-use monitoring of how Bahrain uses its U.S.-supplied weaponry.[43] There have been no reported new major sales of U.S. arms to Bahrain since 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 conditioned the sale of an additional 19 F-16s on an improvement in Bahrain's 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]
- *Air-to-Air Missiles.* In 1999 and 2009, the United States sold Bahrain Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAMs) for its 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 opposed 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. In September 2018, the State Department approved a potential sale 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 Saudi-led 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

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

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

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

practices.[46] 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" in its human rights practices."[47] In 2017, the Trump Administration agreed to sell Bahrain 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.[48] In 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 provided 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.[49]
- *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.

Purchases from Russia

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.[50] 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. Bahrain voted in favor of the March 2, 2022 U.N. General Assembly resolution demanding that Russia end its military operations in Ukraine.

International Military Education and Training Funds (IMET)

Since 2014, the U.S. Department of State has provided Bahrain with $2.432 million for International Military Education and Training (IMET) to train about 900 members of the Bahrain Armed Forces in the United States. According to the State Department factsheet referenced above, "IMET provides professional military education and training to military students and is key to establishing lasting relationships with future leaders. IMET courses increase military

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

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

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

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

[50] Bahrain in Talks for Purchase of Russian S-400 Missile Systems. *Defense World.net*. October 17, 2017.

professionalization, enhance interoperability 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." For FY2022, the Administration has requested $950,000 in IMET funding for Bahrain.

Counterterrorism Cooperation/Ministry of Interior[51]

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; Bahrain also stated that it prevented an Iran-backed plot to attack foreign diplomats and Bahrain security officers in early 2020.[52] Nine were arrested in the alleged 2020 plot and nine others involved are said to be in Iran. Critics and Bahrain oppositionists assert that the government uses antiterrorism laws and operations to suppress Shia dissidents who do not use violence.[53]

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 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 the 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. The Trump Administration retained restrictions on selling Bahrain similar weaponry, according to September 12, 2017, testimony by then-Ambassador Justin Siberell, and no sales of these weapons to Bahrain were announced by the Trump Administration or, to date, by the Biden 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.

[51] Much of the information in this section is from the State Department report on international terrorism for 2020. Released December 2021.

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

[53] "The Terrorism Law in Bahrain: A Tool to Silence Dissidents." Bahrain Center for Human Rights, March 13, 2014.

[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 terrorists' use of explosives. No NADR funds for Bahrain were provided in FY2019, and none was requested for FY2020, FY2021, or FY2022.

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 joined 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.

Regional and Foreign Policy Issues

Bahrain's regional and broader foreign policy generally adheres to that of its closest ally in the GCC, 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 lasted more than three years, and longer than an earlier dispute in 2014, began to be resolved on January 5, 2021, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt agreed to lift the blockade, and Qatar agreed to drop its pursuit of legal cases against those countries in international organizations.[57] Many Saudis visit Bahrain using a causeway, constructed in 1986, that links Bahrain to the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia.

Bahrain joined the effort to isolate Qatar in part because the two have been at odds 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

[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.

Bahrainis prisoner, Bahrain and Qatar agreed to abandon Saudi mediation and refer the issue to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). In 2001, the ICJ ruled 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.

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. In 2018, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and UAE announced a $10 billion aid package to stabilize Bahrain's budget and finances.

Iran[58]

Bahraini leaders have consistently advocated that U.S. policy emphasize containment and deterrence of Iran. In 1981 and again in 1996, Bahrain publicly accused Iran of trying to organize a coup by pro-Iranian Bahraini Shias, and Bahrain officials accuse Iranian of backing violent Shia groups in Bahrain, including those discussed above. In 2016, Bahrain supported Saudi Arabia in a dispute with Iran over the Saudi execution of a dissident Shia cleric and attacks by Iranian protestors on two Saudi diplomatic facilities. Bahrain broke diplomatic relations with Iran at that time and diplomatic ties have not been restored.

Bahrain joined the other GCC leaders in expressing public support for the 2015 multilateral Iran nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) that limited Iran's nuclear program, although Bahrain's and other Gulf state leaders reportedly were critical that the agreement was limited to Iran's nuclear program alone, and did not address the threat from Iran's support for regional armed factions.[59] Bahrain's leaders publicly supported the May 2018 Trump Administration withdrawal from the JCPOA in favor of a strategy of "maximum pressure" on Iran, and its Undersecretary for International Relations criticized the Iran nuclear deal during an August 2021 visit to Israel, saying that it "fueled crises" across the Middle East.[60] The statement seemed to represent opposition to the Biden Administration's efforts to restore full U.S. and Iranian compliance with the agreement. 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 hosted the IMSC (see above) that was established in 2019.

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.

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

[59] "Gulf Arab states that opposed the Iran nuclear deal are now courting Tehran." *Washington Post*, December 21, 2021.

[60] "Visiting Israel, Bahraini minister slams Iran nuclear deal: 'It fueled violence.'" *Times of Israel*, September 8, 2021.

On the other hand, Bahrain, as do the other GCC states, maintains relatively normal civilian trade with Iran 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 fueled support for the Islamic State. In 2011, Bahrain and 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 was prevailing in the civil war, Bahrain reopened its embassy in Damascus in December 2018, arguing that doing so might help limit Iranian influence there.[61]

In 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 deployed in Yemen to support the Saudi-led coalition there.[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, and it presumably was responsible for some of the Arab coalition's many strikes that killed or injured Yemeni civilians. The Houthis have not launched missile attacks against Bahrain as they have against Saudi Arabia and the UAE as recently as early 2022, suggesting that Bahrain's current involvement in the Yemen war is limited.

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, including hosting a session on the environment (October

[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.

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 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, after meeting Israeli Foreign Minister Yisrael Katz at a State Department-hosted meeting in Washington, D.C., Bahrain's Foreign Minister stated that Israel is "there to stay."[65] 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]

On September 11, 2020, Bahrain followed an initiative announced one month earlier by the UAE 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.[67] In subsequent comments, Bahrain's leaders, including King Hamad, continued to express support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Since the Accords were signed, embassies have opened in the two capitals, Israel's Defense Minister visited Bahrain in early February 2022 to sign a bilateral security agreement, and, on February 14, 2022, Israel's Prime Minister Naftali Bennett became the first Israeli leader to visit Bahrain. Direct flights between Manama and Tel Aviv began in June 2021. In connection with the expanding ties, which in large part stem from common concerns about Iran, an Israeli military official has taken up a post in Bahrain to support Israel's participation in U.S.-led Gulf security missions.[68]

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 during 2014-2021, and compounded by the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic. To cope with the pandemic and global recession—which caused a 5% contraction of Bahrain's economy in 2020—Bahrain's leaders cut government spending, issued sovereign debt, and delayed new investments in the energy sector.[69] 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.[70] The increase in oil prices in 2021-22 is likely to help Bahrain's economy and help service its relatively high sovereign debt that is more than 100% of its GDP. U.S. aid to Bahrain is focused on security issues, as depicted in the table below.

[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] 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.

[68] "Bahrain hosts Bennett as Israel wades into Gulf security." *Reuters*, February 15, 2022.

[69] The Economist Intelligence Unit. Various articles on aspects of the Bahrain economy. Accessed April 2021.

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

Even though Bahrain's economy has always been generally more diverse than other GCC states, it 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.[71] 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.[72]

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. The United States buys very small volumes of oil and petroleum products from Bahrain - 3,000 barrels per day in December 2021, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. The major U.S. import from the country is aluminum. More than 200 American companies operate in Bahrain.[73] In 2019, the United States and Bahrain signed a memorandum of understanding, for a "U.S. Trade Zone," located on land near the Khalifa bin Salman port, to facilitate U.S. direct investment in Bahrain and U.S.-Bahrain trade. The first phase of a buildout of the zone was inaugurated in February 2022.

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

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

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

Figure 3. 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 at purchasing power parity (PPP) / $42 billion at official exchange rate *GDP per capita:* $52,000 on PPP basis *GDP Real Growth Rate*: -5% in 2020, +2.1% estimated for 2021. *Budget:* $19 billion revenues, $23 billion expenditures (2021) *Inflation Rate: about 1.4%* Unemployment Rate: 3.6%

Sources: Map created by CRS. Fact information from CIA, *The World Factbook;* Bahrain Ministry of Finance statements; Economist Intelligence Unit report 2022.

Table 1. U.S. Assistance to Bahrain Since FY2012

($ in millions)

	FY12	FY13	FY14	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20	FY21 request	FY22 request
FMF	10	13.0	10	7.5	5.0	0	0	0	0	0	4.0
IMET	.554	.487	.522	.577	.416	.641	.290	.400	.800	.650	,950
NADR	.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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