



**Congressional
Research Service**

Informing the legislative debate since 1914

Bahrain: Issues for U.S. Policy

Updated March 12, 2024

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

95-1013

Summary

The Kingdom of Bahrain is an island nation connected by a causeway to Saudi Arabia (15.5 miles away) and once claimed by Iran (124 miles away). Though small geographically and wedged between these two larger regional powers, Bahrain has outsized importance for U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf. U.S.-Bahraini ties have deepened over the past four decades as the Gulf region has faced increasing threats from the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Bahrain has hosted a U.S. naval command headquarters since 1948; the United States and Bahrain have had a formal Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) since 1991; and Bahrain is the only Arab member of the 22-nation Operation Prosperity Guardian to defend against Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping.

Bahrain is ruled by a hereditary monarchy and is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman); its politics have been restive, though the monarchy's control has not been threatened. With a population of 1.5 million people, a little over half of whom are Bahraini citizens, Bahrain has a history of sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims. 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. Since 2014, the unrest has been relatively low-level. Several senior opposition leaders remain imprisoned.

Bahrain closely aligns with de facto GCC leader Saudi Arabia, which provides Bahrain with substantial financial support and which intervened in 2011 to help Bahrain's government repress protests. Bahrain, like some other GCC states, has been building ties to Israel and, in September 2020, Bahrain signed agreements at the White House to fully normalize its relations with Israel as part of the "Abraham Accords." Since the outbreak of war between Israel and Hamas in October 2023, Bahrain and Israel have each withdrawn their ambassadors but have not severed relations; the ongoing conflict and post-conflict developments may further affect relations.

Bahrain has fewer financial resources than 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). In 2005, bilateral trade was about \$780 million, and U.S.-Bahrain trade has since increased fourfold. In 2023, the total volume of bilateral trade stood at \$2.8 billion.

Naval Support Activity (NSA) Bahrain, the U.S. Navy base in Manama, Bahrain, is the headquarters of the U.S. Navy's Fifth fleet, which oversees all Navy operations in the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility (AOR). As of 2023, there were over 8,000 U.S. military personnel and civilian employees assigned to NSA Bahrain. In FY2023, the U.S. Department of Defense estimated that it would spend \$539.5 million on personnel, operations, maintenance, and family housing costs for U.S. personnel stationed in Bahrain.

Members of Congress travel with some frequency to Bahrain to visit U.S. armed services personnel and provide oversight over the U.S. bilateral relationship and defense presence in the kingdom. During the 118th Congress, P.L. 118-31, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024, requires the Secretary of State to submit to Congress a review of the legal protections afforded by bilateral agreements between the United States and Bahrain. Section 2204 extends a \$26.3 million authorization of Navy Military Construction Funds for U.S. facilities in Bahrain through FY2024. Section 7338 of the Act mandates that the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency submit to Congress an assessment of the "current effects on the intelligence community of the agreements between Israel and 4 other foreign countries, including Bahrain, collectively known as the Abraham Accords."

Contents

Overview	1
Historical Background.....	1
Domestic Politics.....	2
The Al Khalifa Dynasty	2
The National Assembly	3
Human Rights.....	4
Women’s Rights	6
Religious Freedom.....	6
The Economy	7
Foreign Policy Issues.....	8
Iran	8
Israel.....	9
Yemen.....	9
U.S. Relations.....	10
U.S. Defense Presence in Bahrain.....	10
2023 U.S.-Bahraini Cooperation Agreement	11
Combined Maritime Forces (CMF)	12
U.S. Arms Sales and Foreign Assistance to Bahrain.....	14
Major Non-NATO Ally Designation and Excess Defense Articles.....	15
U.S. Trade and Investment	16
Recent Legislation.....	17

Figures

Figure 1. King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa.....	2
Figure 2. Prominent Members of the Al Khalifa Family.....	3
Figure 3. Map of Bahrain	7
Figure 4. Combined Maritime Forces	13
Figure 5. Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa visits NAVCENT	14
Figure 6. U.S.-Bahrain Annual Volume of Trade	16

Tables

Table 1. Democracy, Human Rights, and Development Indicators.....	5
---	---

Contacts

Author Information.....	17
-------------------------	----

Overview

As the smallest, least oil-endowed member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the island Kingdom of Bahrain has established close partnerships with its larger Gulf neighbors, most notably Saudi Arabia, as well as Western powers, such as the United States and United Kingdom. U.S.-Bahraini ties are long-standing and have deepened over the past four decades as the Arab Gulf states have faced threats from Iran. Bahrain is the only GCC state to have a Shia Muslim majority population, and Bahrain's Shias have long asserted they are discriminated against by the Sunni Muslim Al Khalifa family-led government and that Shias have been accused by Sunnis of loyalty to predominantly Shia Muslim Iran. Bahrain has hosted a U.S. naval command headquarters for the Gulf region since 1948, and there are several thousand U.S. military forces serving at the naval facility.

Historical Background

The Al Khalifa family, a branch of the Sunni Muslim Bani Utbah tribe, has ruled Bahrain since 1783, when it left the Arabian Peninsula and captured a Persian garrison controlling the main island of Bahrain (the Persian Safavid dynasty had an intermittent presence in Bahrain from 1602-1782). During the 19th century, Bahrain's Al Khalifa rulers signed various treaties with the United Kingdom, which was then the dominant foreign naval power in the Gulf. In the late 19th century, the British Empire entered into additional treaties with Bahrain, making the island kingdom a British protectorate. For over a century, the British exercised control over Bahrain's foreign and defense policies in exchange for recognizing the Al Khalifa dynasty as the rulers of the kingdom.

Prior to the discovery of oil, Bahrain's economy centered on trade and pearl diving. Oil exploration began in the 1920s and production followed a decade later. In the 1930s, Iran unsuccessfully sought to deny Bahrain the right to grant oil concessions to the United States and Britain.

By 1968, as Britain reduced its military presence in the Gulf, Bahrain and the other smaller Persian Gulf emirates (principalities) sought a permanent status. At the time, Iran also claimed sovereignty over Bahrain and refused at first to recognize its independence.¹ A 1970 U.N. survey ("referendum") determined that Bahrain's inhabitants wanted independence, a finding that was endorsed by U.N. Security Council Resolution 278 and recognized by Iran's then-parliament. Bahrain negotiated with eight other Persian Gulf emirates during 1970-1971 on federating with them, but Bahrain and Qatar each became independent (Bahrain on August 15, 1971), and the other seven emirates federated into the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

In fifty years as an independent nation, Bahrain has become a high-income country as defined by the World Bank. The kingdom's rulers have used the nation's limited oil wealth, with aid from its larger GCC neighbors, to construct a financial services and tourism-centered economy in which Bahraini per capita income is equivalent to some Western European nations, such as Spain, Portugal, and the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, structural inequalities and sectarian tensions persist, as many Shia citizens contend that the state suppresses Shia political identity and denies Shia citizens access to high positions of governmental authority. A 2011 uprising by a mostly Shia opposition against the Sunni monarchy is the most recent episode of unrest in the kingdom; since then, the government has suppressed organized opposition political activities.

¹ Ahisha Ghafoor and Paul Mitchell, "Secret deals ending Britain's control in Gulf revealed," *BBC*, August 30, 2022.

Domestic Politics

The Al Khalifa Dynasty

King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa (74 years old) is the 14th ruling Al Khalifa monarch and the second ruler since the island kingdom's independence in 1971 (until 2002 Bahrain's heads of state were first referred to as "Hakims" then "Emirs"). Educated at Sandhurst Military Academy in Britain, King Hamad (see **Figure 1**) was previously commander of the Bahraini Defense Forces (BDF) and has ruled Bahrain since 1999. The constitution gives the king broad powers, including appointing all ministers and judges and amending the constitution. Nevertheless, during his first two decades of rule, King Hamad's late uncle, the longtime Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, exercised widespread executive authority over the government, particularly its internal security services. According to one account, though King Hamad had early in his reign attempted to liberalize Bahrain's political system, "Khalifa frustrated that process."² At the time of his death in November 2020, Khalifa bin Salman had been the longest serving prime minister in the world.

Since his uncle's death, King Hamad has appeared to focus on consolidating power amongst his direct descendants, accelerating Bahrain's economic diversification, and incorporating younger Bahrainis into the political system.³ His eldest son, 54-year-old Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa,⁴ is the prime minister and the de facto face of the country's attempt to modernize its institutions. In 2022, King Hamad reshuffled the cabinet, which the Crown Prince expressed hope would "bring in new ideas and a renewed drive to continue advancing the public sector."⁵ Another of the king's sons, 36-year-old Sheikh Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa, serves as national security advisor (appointed in October 2019) and royal guard commander. Sheikh Nasser also holds the title of major general and routinely meets with U.S. and other foreign defense officials. According to one account, Sheikh Nasser's role is growing increasingly prominent, as he and the crown prince vie for power amongst the next generation of Al Khalifa royals.⁶ *The Economist* notes that Sheikh Nasser is "reportedly the king's favourite son."⁷

Figure 1. King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa



Source: Government of Bahrain.

² "Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa," *The Times*, December 16, 2020.

³ Kristin Smith Diwan, "Death of Bahrain's Prime Minister Promotes Reformer, But Perhaps Not Reforms," The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, November 18, 2020.

⁴ According to Bahrain's constitution, royal succession is determined by agnatic (male only) primogeniture amongst the descendants of King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. The constitution does grant the king the power to appoint any of his other sons as his successor.

⁵ "Bahrain's king orders cabinet reshuffle, names new oil minister -state media," Reuters, June 13, 2022.

⁶ Simon Henderson, "Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 14, 2022.

⁷ "Sunnis and Shias in Bahrain remain as far apart as ever," *The Economist*, January 22, 2022.

Figure 2. Prominent Members of the Al Khalifa Family
As of April 2023



Source: Tesla Government Inc.

The National Assembly

Bahrain’s legislative branch of government consists of a bicameral National Assembly: the directly elected, 40-seat Council of Representatives (COR or *Majlis al Nuwab* in Arabic) and the royal-appointed, 40-seat Consultative Council (*Majlis al Shura* in Arabic). 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, King Hamad 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 King Hamad has tended to appoint only government supporters, including former high-ranking government officials, to that body. King Hamad 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.

In the aftermath of Bahrain’s 2011 uprising, the government has banned political parties and dissolved various political societies that were legally able to operate before 2011. In 2016, Bahraini courts approved government requests to dissolve Al Wifaq (Accord National Islamic Society, alt. sp. *Wefaq*), the most prominent Shia political society. Its officials had engaged with the government in and outside of formal “national dialogues” after the 2011 uprising.

Political Currents in Bahrain

Within the GCC, Bahrain's political life is unique and has been influenced by Sunni-Shia sectarian tensions, labor unrest, and its geography. Though Bahrain's constitution identifies the nation as an "Islamic Arab State," over time, Bahrain has been influenced by the presence of different ethnicities (Arab, Persian, South Asian, Western) and religions (Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism), creating a less religiously conservative culture than exists in neighboring Saudi Arabia and Qatar. For example, alcohol is legal in Bahrain. Saudi tourists frequently visit using the 15.5 mile King Fahd causeway that connects Bahrain to the Arabian Peninsula.

Existing alongside its reputation for openness is a long history of Sunni-Shia sectarian tension.⁸ Though at times, Sunnis and Shias have protested together, particularly during periods of labor unrest in the oil industry in the mid-20th century, the 1979 Iranian revolution ushered in a period of Shia political activism and concomitant Sunni suspicion.⁹ According to one account, "Since the Islamic revolution of 1979 that convulsed Iran and threatened the thrones of Sunni Arab monarchs across the Gulf, Bahrain has been on the fault line of the Sunni-Shia division."¹⁰ Today, though many Bahraini Shia have risen to positions of power in the public and private sectors, Bahraini human rights organizations still report that the community is subjected to state-sponsored discrimination. According to the UN Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, "Despite the constitutional prohibition of discrimination on the basis of religious affiliation, members of the Shia community and stateless persons ... reportedly face discrimination in education, employment and the exercise of their cultural rights."¹¹

Foreign influence, particularly from neighboring Saudi Arabia, is a major factor in maintaining the political status quo in Bahrain. The island kingdom is dependent on the financial largesse of its Saudi neighbor, as Saudi Arabia seeks to keep Bahrain in its orbit, lest the Shia of Bahrain influence Saudi Arabia's own Shia population in its oil-rich Eastern Province. Some critics also assert that the U.S. naval presence in Bahrain legitimizes and bolsters Bahrain's unequal political structure.¹²

During the November 2022 COR elections, which some Shia groups had called on citizens to boycott, 73% of registered voters elected 40 members to the COR, of whom eight were women. One report suggests that since the pool of eligible voters in 2022 was actually smaller than in previous years (despite a population increase) that significant numbers of Bahraini citizens have been deemed ineligible to vote.¹³ With banned opposition parties unable to field candidates, most candidates were independents. According to one analysis, "Official figures claim a record turnout of 73%. However, a broad lack of enthusiasm about the candidates, few of which obtained the requisite 50% vote share in their constituencies in the first round, reflects broad disillusionment with the chamber's limited powers and the repressive political climate."¹⁴ The next elections are slated for November 2026.

Human Rights

U.S. and global criticism of Bahrain's human rights practices focuses on the government response to political opposition, including lack of accountability of security forces, suppression of free expression, and treatment of prisoners. According to the latest U.S. Department of State Country

⁸ According to an older, but still relevant study from 1955, Bahrain's Shia population are "the oldest group among the present inhabitants of the shaykhdom and have been subjected through the centuries to successive conquests, so that although at present they equal or exceed the Sunnis in number - as the 1941 census indicates- they constitute the poorer and lower classes of society and manifest all the markings of a minority group." See, Fahim I. Qubain, "Social Classes and Tensions in Bahrain," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 3, Summer, 1955, pp. 269-280.

⁹ Louay Bahry, "The opposition in Bahrain: a bellwether for the Gulf?" *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 5, Issue 2, May 1997.

¹⁰ "Can Bahrain's division between Sunnis and Shias be healed?" *The Economist*, November 24, 2022.

¹¹ United Nations Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, *Concluding observations on the initial report of Bahrain*, E/C.12/BHR/CO/1, August 4, 2022.

¹² Thérèse Postel, "Here's One Way to Stop the Brutal Repression in Bahrain," *The Atlantic*, March 13, 2013.

¹³ Dominic Dudley, "The Curious Case of Bahrain's Disappearing Voters," *Forbes*, November 19, 2022.

¹⁴ Economist Intelligence Unit, Bahrain Country Report, Updated February 8, 2023.

Report on Human Rights Practices, “Significant human rights issues include, among other things credible reports of: inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment by the government; political prisoners; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media, including censorship and enforcement or threat to enforce criminal libel laws; serious restrictions on internet freedom; [and] interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association.”¹⁵

Table I. Democracy, Human Rights, and Development Indicators

Issue	Index	Ranking
Democracy	Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2023	“Not Free”
Press Freedom	Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index 2023	171/180 Countries
Corruption	Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2023	76/180 Countries
Human Development	United Nations Human Development Programme, Human Development Index 2021/2022	35/191 Countries

Source: Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders, Transparency International, and United Nations Human Development Programme.

In a joint statement accompanying the 2023 U.S.-Bahrain Strategic Dialogue, the U.S. and Bahraini governments recounted how the governments discussed “the importance of universal values, human rights, and fundamental freedoms, building on the ongoing cooperation in the Human Rights Dialogue between the two countries.”¹⁶

Congressional Action in Support of Human Rights in Bahrain

In 2011, the “Arab Spring” spread to Bahrain resulting in mass demonstrations led by mostly Shia opponents of the Sunni-minority-led government. In response, the Bahraini government’s use of force, with assistance from Saudi Arabia and other GCC states to quell the protest movement, led some Members of Congress to question U.S.-Bahraini security ties.¹⁷ In 2011, the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) issued a report that contained 26 recommendations to hold accountable those government personnel responsible for abuses during the 2011 uprising.¹⁸ Since 2011, 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.¹⁹ In the 112th Congress, two joint resolutions (S.J.Res. 28 and H.J.Res. 80) would have withheld the sale of 44 “Humvee” (M115A1B2) armored vehicles and several hundred TOW missiles of various models pending Obama Administration certification that Bahrain had improved its human rights practices. 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.²⁰ In 2017, the Trump Administration agreed to sell Bahrain 221 TOW missiles of various types, with an estimated valued of \$27 million. Also in the 112th and 114th

¹⁵ U.S. Department of State, *2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Bahrain*, March 20, 2023.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Joint Statement on the U.S.-Bahrain Strategic Dialogue*, July 21, 2023.

¹⁷ Josh Rogin, “Congress Gears Up to Fight Arms Sales to Bahrain,” *Foreign Policy*, October 5, 2011.

¹⁸ For more information, see <https://www.bici.org.bh/>.

¹⁹ For example, see <https://humanrightscmission.house.gov/events/hearings/bahrain-2022-elections>.

²⁰ Statement by State Department spokesperson John Kirby, “Lifting Holds on Security Assistance to the Government of Bahrain,” June 29, 2015.

Congresses, some Members introduced legislation titled the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) Accountability Act, which 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 2011 BICI recommendations. Congress did not consider successive versions of the bill.

Women's Rights

Though Bahraini leaders have sought to promote the role of women in government and society, Bahrain scores relatively low on international rankings of overall gender equality globally. The World Economic Forum's 2023 Global Gender Gap report ranks Bahrain 113 out of 146 countries overall, though it is one of the three highest scoring countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Bahrain improved from 131st in 2022, an advancement driven by increased women's political empowerment.²¹ The cabinet regularly has several female ministers (currently four), and, after the 2018 election, the COR elected its first woman speaker. Bahrain also consistently scores among the highest in the Middle East and North Africa countries for women's educational attainment (globally, 57th in 2023).²² International organizations have noted that Bahraini women are becoming better represented in the private sector. According to the World Bank Women, Business and the Law 2023 Index, Bahrain's score improved due to legal reforms that "equalized the ages at which men and women can retire with full pension benefits."²³ There are several women's advocacy organizations in Bahrain, including the Supreme Council for Women, backed by the wife of the king.

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. However, the children of Bahraini men who are married to foreigners automatically are granted citizenship; Bahraini women married to non-nationals must petition the state to confer citizenship to their children.

Religious Freedom

The State Department's 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom notes that Shia activists, nongovernmental organizations, and the political opposition continue to report Bahraini government targeting of Shia religious leaders, anti-Shia commentary on social media, and continued discrimination against Shia citizens.²⁴

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. In 2022, Pope Francis visited Bahrain as part of a conference of religious leaders on "East-West peaceful coexistence;"²⁵ the kingdom is home to an estimated 80,000 Catholics and was the first Gulf country to open a Catholic Church (1939). A small Jewish community—mostly from families of Iraqi Jews who settled in Bahrain in the 19th century or from southern Iran—remains in Bahrain

²¹ World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2023*, June 20, 2023.

²² Ibid.

²³ The World Bank, *Women, Business and the Law 2023*.

²⁴ U.S. Department of State, *2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Bahrain*, May 15, 2023.

²⁵ Ibid.

and is integrated into Bahraini society, including serving in appointed seats in the National Assembly and in diplomatic posts.²⁶

The Economy

Bahrain has fewer financial resources than do most of the other GCC states and runs chronically high budget deficits. As of the end of 2023, public debt is approximately 124% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the highest level of indebtedness in the GCC.²⁷ Bahrain's oil revenues emanate primarily from a Saudi oil field whose proceeds go partly to Bahrain. Other GCC states also provide various forms of financial assistance. In 2018, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE provided Bahrain with a \$10 billion grants and loans aid package.

Recovery in the tourism sector following the COVID-19 pandemic and increases in earnings on oil and non-oil exports (mainly iron and aluminum products) contributed economic growth over the last two years, and government investment projects under the 2021 Economic Recovery Plan are expected to continue boosting non-oil sectors.²⁸ Though Bahrain has implemented measures to reduce public debt, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects public debt of nearly 120% of GDP in 2024.²⁹

Bahrain's overall economy has been diversified away from hydrocarbon production, but the government remains dependent on oil and gas for 70%-80% of revenue. In 2024, Bahrain's energy industry is at a crossroads. Existing natural gas reserves are dwindling, and the country may become a net importer in the years ahead. Though two new off-shore reservoirs were discovered in 2022, development of the reservoirs has not been publicly announced. Four years earlier, significant deposits of off-shore shale oil also were revealed, though the government continues to evaluate the costs of extraction and production.

In February 2024, the board of the Export-Import Bank of the United States voted to notify Congress of plans to provide more than \$100 million in financing to underwrite the drilling of more than 400 oil wells and 30 gas wells in what is known as the Bahrain Field, one of the oldest

Figure 3. Map of Bahrain



Source: Map created by CRS using State Department and Esri data.

²⁶ "Jews have lived in Bahrain for 140 years; the Israel deal changes their lives," *Times of Israel*, September 18, 2020.

²⁷ Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), "Country Forecast: Bahrain," January 2024.

²⁸ EIU Viewpoint, "One-click report: Bahrain," January 1, 2024.

²⁹ International Monetary Fund, "IMF Executive Board Concluded 2023 Article IV Consultation with The Kingdom of Bahrain," July 11, 2023.

oil and gas fields in the Middle East.³⁰ Two climate advisors on Ex-Im's advisory board resigned in protest over the decision, citing President Biden's 2021 pledge to curb federal financing of foreign fossil fuel projects.³¹

Foreign Policy Issues

Bahrain's regional and broader foreign policy generally mirrors that of its closest ally in the GCC, Saudi Arabia. The closeness of Bahraini-Saudi relations 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 and its dispatch of Bahraini military personnel to serve as part of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. Bahrain is also politically close to Kuwait, in part because of historic ties between their two ruling families. Both families hail from the Anizah tribe that settled in Bahrain and Kuwait.

Iran

With the smallest armed forces of any Gulf state, Bahraini leaders have long apparently feared that Iran seeks to destabilize the kingdom, given the centuries-long Iranian contestation of Bahrain's sovereignty.³² Since 1979, as Iran's theocratic rulers have sought to export their model of religious governance to parts of the Arab world, Bahrain has publicly accused Iran of trying to organize coups by pro-Iranian Bahraini Shias.³³ Bahraini officials have also accused Iran of backing violent Shia groups in Bahrain. 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. After Iran and Saudi Arabia restored ties in 2023, there was some speculation that Bahrain would follow suit,³⁴ the regional conflict that has ensued since Hamas' October 7, 2023 attack against Israel may have slowed or tabled some further Iranian-Arab rapprochement.

On March 12, 2024, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), in coordination with the Kingdom of Bahrain, sanctioned Iran-based operatives for the U.S. designated terrorist group Al Ashtar Brigades.³⁵ According to OFAC, these designations "highlight the critical role that the Iranian regime plays in providing support to Al-Ashtar Brigades."³⁶

³⁰ Lisa Friedman and Hiroko Tabuchi, "Two Climate Advisers Quit U.S. Export-Import Bank Over Fossil Fuel Plans," *New York Times*, February 5, 2024.

³¹ Jennifer A. Dlouhy, "US Trade Bank Defies Biden to Expand Oil Drilling in Bahrain," Bloomberg, February 8, 2024.

³² Even before the formation of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Iran contested Bahrain's sovereignty throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. In 1957, the Shah of Iran designated Bahrain as the country's fourteenth province ("Mishmahig Island" in Farsi).

³³ In 1981, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, a Bahraini Shia revolutionary group backed by Iran, attempted to carry out a coup in Bahrain. See John Vinocur, "1981 Plot in Bahrain Linked to Iranians," *New York Times*, July 25, 1982. See also, "Bahrain Coup Suspects Say They Trained in Iran," Reuters, June 6, 1996.

³⁴ "Bahrain, Iran likely to restore diplomatic ties soon -US diplomat," Reuters, June 13, 2023.

³⁵ The United States designated the Al Ashtar Brigades as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in 2018.

³⁶ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "U.S. Targets Al-Ashtar Brigades Operatives," March 12, 2024.

Israel

On September 16, 2020, Israel and Bahrain signed the Declaration of Peace, Cooperation, and Constructive Diplomatic and Friendly Relations, a diplomatic normalization agreement commonly referred to as one of the “Abraham Accords.”³⁷ For the next three years, Israel and Bahrain slowly advanced bilateral relations. In February 2022, Bahrain signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Israel on security cooperation.³⁸ In September 2023, Israel inaugurated a new embassy in the capital Manama, and foreign ministers from both countries agreed to cooperate to increase the number of direct flights, tourism, trade volume, and investments.³⁹

However, the Hamas-led October 7, 2023 attack against Israel and Israel’s ensuing counter-attack in Gaza have largely disrupted momentum toward closer Israeli-Bahrain ties. As conflict continues not only in Gaza, but in the wider Middle East region between Iran-supported groups and the United States, the Bahraini government appears to be in a difficult position; it is attempting to retain relations with Israel while avoiding antagonizing the Bahraini public, which is largely supportive of the Palestinians.⁴⁰ In November 2023, the Crown Prince “unequivocally” condemned Hamas, but also called the situation in Gaza “intolerable.”⁴¹ Also in November 2023, Bahrain’s lower house of parliament (which has no authority over foreign policy) announced that the ambassadors of Bahrain and Israel had each left the other’s country.⁴² Israel immediately claimed that relations were stable and that it had received no official demarche from Bahrain recalling its ambassador.⁴³ Since October 2023, there have been periodic protests in Bahrain in support of the plight of the Palestinian in Gaza; at times, the government has granted licenses for public marches, perhaps in order to provide a safety valve for the expression of discontent over the war.⁴⁴

Yemen

Since Saudi Arabia led an international coalition to intervene in Yemen’s civil war, Bahrain has participated in the coalition and has suffered several notable losses. In 2015, five Bahraini soldiers were killed along the Saudi-Yemeni border while on patrol. Several months later, a Bahraini F-16 fighter crashed near the Saudi-Yemeni border. In September 2023, a Houthi drone strike near the Saudi-Yemeni border killed five additional Bahraini soldiers. In December 2023, in response to Houthi attacks against commercial shipping, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) launched Operation Prosperity Guardian, a 22-nation coalition aimed at protecting maritime commerce in the Red Sea. Bahrain, where NAVCENT is headquartered, is the only Arab member of the coalition. U.S. military statements have repeatedly noted how Bahrain has

³⁷U.S. Department of State, “The Abraham Accords,” accessed February 16, 2023.

³⁸ Rina Bassist, “Israel Signs Security Cooperation Agreement with Bahrain,” *Al Monitor*, February 3, 2022.

³⁹ “Israel Opens Embassy in Bahrain Three Years After Historic Abraham Accords,” Reuters, September 4, 2023.

⁴⁰ “Bahrain seeks to balance anger over Gaza with ties to Israel, US,” Reuters, November 24, 2023.

⁴¹ “Bahrain leader condemns Hamas Oct. 7onslaught, calls for release of hostages,” *Times of Israel*, November 20, 2023.

⁴² “Will America pull the plug on Israel’s invasion of Gaza?” *The Economist*, November 7, 2023.

⁴³ “Bahrain says envoy to Israel returned home, Israel says ties stable,” Reuters, November 2, 2023.

⁴⁴ Susannah George, “Gaza war complicates U.S. efforts to normalize Arab relations with Israel,” *Washington Post*, November 29, 2023.

supported U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) forces in conducting air strikes against Houthi targets.⁴⁵

U.S. Relations

U.S. Defense Presence in Bahrain

A hallmark of the U.S.-Bahrain 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; and the U.S. Fifth Fleet (reconstituted in 1995), have been headquartered at a sprawling facility called "Naval Support Activity (NSA)-Bahrain," identified as the only permanent U.S. military base in the region. Also headquartered at NSA are the forward-deployed U.S. Marine Corps 5th Marine Expeditionary Brigade and Marine Positioning Force, and the Joint Special Operations Task Force-Arabian Peninsula. The Khalifa bin Salman Port is one of the few facilities in the Gulf that accommodates U.S. aircraft carriers and amphibious ships.⁴⁶

Naval Support Activity Bahrain

NSA Bahrain, the Navy port in Manama, Bahrain, is the headquarters of the U.S. Navy's 5th fleet, which oversees all Navy operation in the U.S. Central Command region. According to the Department of Defense, the U.S. 5th Fleet includes 8,000 American personnel and families.⁴⁷ Bahrain is the only country in the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) region to host military spouses and families.⁴⁸ In FY2023, the U.S. Department of Defense estimated that it would spend \$539.5 million on personnel, operations, maintenance, and family housing costs for U.S. personnel stationed in Bahrain.⁴⁹ The U.S. Navy has homeported several ships—most of them smaller vessels—at Manama, Bahrain for many years. Navy ships homeported at Manama as of December 2022, included one Expeditionary Support Base (ESB) ship, four mine countermeasures ships (MCMs), and one fleet tug (TATF).⁵⁰ The USS *Lewis B. Puller* ESB-3 ship in Bahrain is designed as an afloat forward staging base. Its hull design is based on an oil tanker and it includes a flight deck that can accommodate large helicopters. It is designed for use to support Special Operations missions in littoral regions. In addition to the Navy ships, six of the Coast Guard's Fast Response Cutters (FRCs), which are large patrol craft, are stationed in Bahrain.⁵¹ Patrol Forces Southwest Asia (PATFORSWA), which is stationed in Bahrain, is the Coast Guard's largest unit outside of the United States.

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 their defense

⁴⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, "U.S. Forces, Allies Conduct Joint Strikes in Yemen," February 26, 2024.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, "His Majesty the King of Bahrain Visits U.S. 5th Fleet Headquarters," April 17, 2023.

⁴⁸ The White House, FACT SHEET: Biden-Harris Administration Strengthens Partnership with Kingdom of Bahrain and Launches "Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement," September 13, 2023.

⁴⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, (Comptroller)/Chief Financial Officer, Defense Operation & Maintenance Overview Book, Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Request, May 2023. Overseas costs are funded by the following appropriations: Military Personnel; Operation and Maintenance; Family Housing Operation and Maintenance; Family Housing Construction; and Military Construction to support all DoD activities located outside the United States that are being performed on a permanent basis at U.S. military bases and other locations (U.S. Embassy, U.S. Consulates, U.S. Mission, etc.). Overseas costs also include the cost of transporting personnel, material, and equipment to and from overseas locations. The overseas amounts do not include incremental costs associated with contingency operations.

⁵⁰ Navy ship location data current as of the end of FY2022; information provided to CRS by the U.S. Navy.

⁵¹ See CRS Report R42567, *Coast Guard Cutter Procurement: Background and Issues for Congress*.

relationship by signing a Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) on October 28, 1991. It was renewed in 2017 for 15 years.⁵² Under the DCA, Bahrain provides access, basing, and overflight privileges to facilitate U.S. regional military operations.⁵³ Since 1971, the United States and Bahrain have maintained a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which grants the U.S. government criminal jurisdiction over U.S. armed forces members stationed in Bahrain; the SOFA grants the Bahraini government civil jurisdiction over U.S. forces, “except for those matters arising in the course of the performance of their official duties.”⁵⁴

2023 U.S.-Bahraini Cooperation Agreement

In September 2023, during Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa’s visit to Washington, D.C., the United States and Bahrain signed a new bilateral agreement called the “Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement (C-SIPA).⁵⁵ The C-SIPA, which is not formally a treaty and therefore requires congressional notification but not approval, addresses defense, trade, and scientific-technical cooperation. While the C-SIPA reaffirms robust and ongoing U.S.-Bahraini defense and trade cooperation, for the first time, it formally commits both sides, subject to further agreement, to share digital network security standards in order to prevent inappropriate access to sensitive information on a party’s digital information and communications network. According to one assessment, the C-SIPA “codifies a U.S. commitment to support the growth of Bahrain’s technology sector ... intended from a US perspective to limit Chinese involvement in the region’s technology architecture.”⁵⁶

During the signing of the C-SIPA, U.S. officials highlighted other aspects of the bilateral relationship with Bahrain, including:

- **Human Rights.** U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken highlighted that “Bahrain continues to make important headway” in combating trafficking in persons.⁵⁷ In Congress, however, Senator Chris Murphy met with Bahraini Foreign Minister Abdullatif bin Rashid al Zayani and expressed concern regarding the imprisonment of prisoners of conscience, including Abdulhadi al Khawaja, a Bahraini human rights activist who was imprisoned during the 2011 uprising.⁵⁸
- **Commercial Air Flights.** During the Crown Prince’s visit, the United States and Bahrain agreed to relaunch direct flights between the United States and Bahrain in 2024.⁵⁹

The United States and Bahrain signed the C-SIPA at a time of reportedly intense U.S.-Saudi diplomacy aimed at potentially expanding the Abraham Accords and, at the time, U.S. officials

⁵² “US, Bahrain Extend Defense Cooperation for 15 Years.” *Al Defaiya*, April 12, 2017.

⁵³ U.S. Department of State, U.S. Security Cooperation with Bahrain, Fact Sheet, June 14, 2021.

⁵⁴ See, 1971: Agreement for the Deployment in Bahrain of the United States Middle East Force (22 U.S.T. 2184) - modified by 1975 agreement for the Deployment in Bahrain of the United States Middle East Force (26 U.S.T. 3027) and 1977 agreement on the Status of Administrative Support Unit Personnel (28 U.S.T. 5312) 1991: Agreement concerning the deployment of United States forces (T.I.A.S. 12236).

⁵⁵ U.S. Department of State, “Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement,” September 13, 2023. The C-SIPA entered into force on October 20, 2023.

⁵⁶ Economist Intelligence Unit, “Bahrain and US sign symbolic security pact,” September 19, 2023.

⁵⁷ U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken And Bahraini Crown Prince and Prime Minister Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa at a Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement Signing Ceremony,” September 13, 2023.

⁵⁸ Senator Chris Murphy, “Murphy Statement on Meeting with Foreign Minister of Bahrain,” September 13, 2023.

⁵⁹ The White House, FACT SHEET: Biden-Harris Administration Strengthens Partnership, September 13, 2023.

appeared to be touting the C-SPIA as a potential model for additional agreements with other U.S. partners.⁶⁰ The deal did not contain a formal mutual defense guarantee, but rather commits the parties to consult on defense and security threats. Saudi Arabia reportedly has sought a security guarantee from the United States. After the October 7 Hamas attacks against Israel and ensuing Israeli military operations in Gaza, the possibility of Saudi normalization with Israel has become more overtly linked to Saudi requirements for steps related to the Palestinians. Nevertheless, U.S. officials have maintained the significance of the C-SIPA for U.S.-Bahraini relations in public statements, and may inform U.S. decisions in seeking a comprehensive multilateral post-war peace agreement to end the fighting in Gaza.⁶¹

Combined Maritime Forces (CMF)

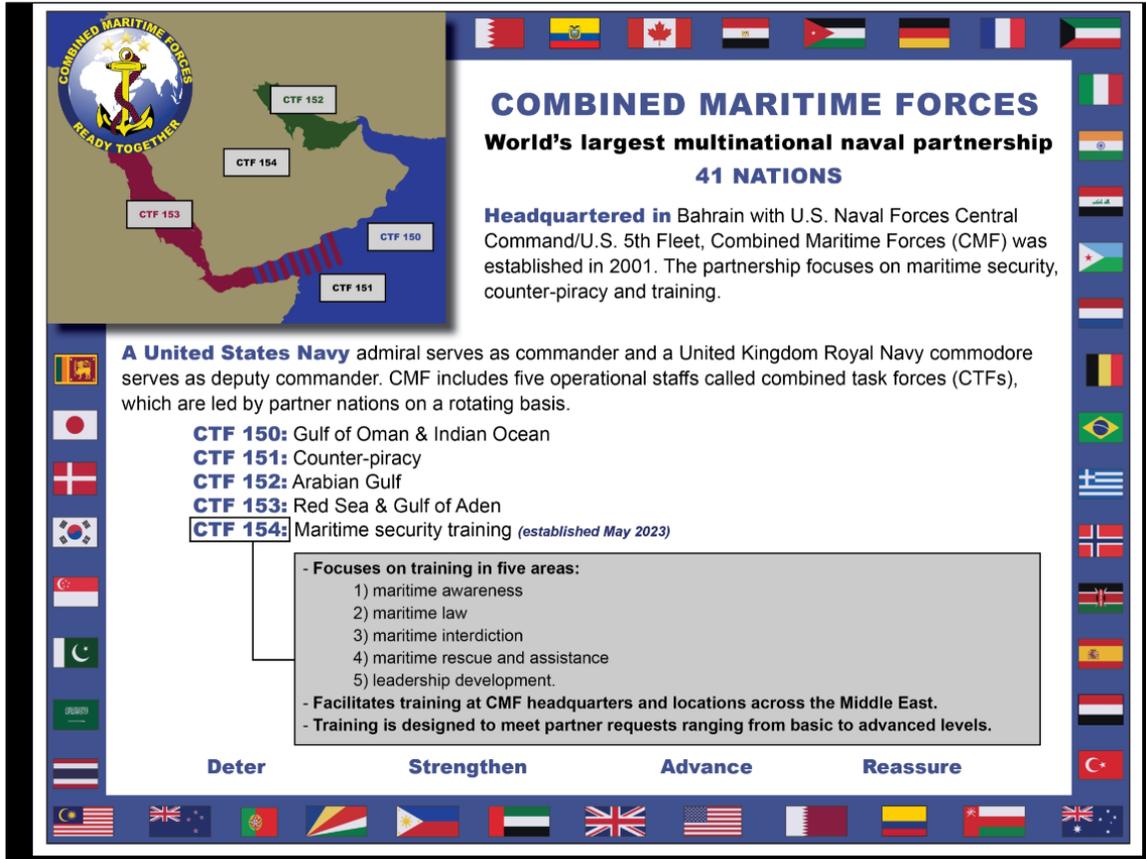
NSA-Bahrain also hosts and coordinates the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) partnership (see **Figure 4** below), which brings together naval forces from 41 countries to operate a series of task forces (currently five) that target threats to maritime security in waters near the Arabian Peninsula. U.S.-Bahrain naval cooperation reportedly helped facilitate 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.⁶²

⁶⁰ Karen DeYoung, "U.S. pact with Bahrain seen as model for strengthening Persian Gulf ties," *Washington Post*, September 13, 2023.

⁶¹ The White House, "Readout of Vice President Harris's Call with Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa of Bahrain," November 6, 2023.

⁶² Rebecca Kheel, "Bahrain Joins U.S.-led Coalition to Protect Gulf Shipping," *thehill.com*, August 19, 2019.

Figure 4. Combined Maritime Forces



Source: NAVCENT

CMF, which was formed in 2001, counters piracy and bolsters maritime security across a vast area stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Suez Canal (over 4,300 miles of coastline). In order to counter weapons and drug trafficking in the Gulf of Oman, U.S. Naval forces, in conjunction with regional partners in the CENTCOM AOR, patrol coastal waters and routinely interdict suspected smuggling operations. In 2023 and 2024, CMF reported several large drug (heroin, hashish) and weapons (rifles, explosives, and ammunition rounds) seizures in the Gulf of Oman and nearby waters.⁶³

The Biden Administration has reemphasized U.S. support for Bahrain’s defense. During their 2023 U.S.-Bahrain Strategic Dialogue, the United States and Bahrain “reiterated their shared commitment to deterring and confronting threats to the Kingdom of Bahrain and enhancing regional peace and security.”⁶⁴ On an annual basis, the United States military and Bahrain Defense Forces conduct a maritime exercise known as “Diamond Defender” designed to enhance

⁶³ For examples of drug seizures, see U.S. Naval Forces Central Command Public Affairs, “U.S. Coast Guard Seizes \$30 Million in Drugs with International Task Force,” May 8, 2023, “U.S. Seizes \$80 Million Heroin Shipment in Gulf of Oman,” May 10, 2023, “French Warship Seizes \$108 Million in Drugs during Indian Ocean Seizures,” May 24, 2023, “French-led Combined Task Force 150 seized more illegal narcotics in the Arabian Sea,” September 20, 2023, and “First Drug Interdiction of the Year for CMF French-led Combined Task Force 150,” January 8, 2024. For examples of weapons seizures, see USCENTCOM, “CENTCOM Forces Intercept More than 2,000 Assault Rifles Shipped from Iran,” January 10, 2023, and “U.S. Central Command Supports Partner Forces in Major Iranian Weapons Seizure,” February 1, 2023.

⁶⁴ U.S. Department of State, “Joint Statement on the U.S.-Bahrain Strategic Dialogue,” July 21, 2023.

regional maritime security and stability. In February 2024, CENTCOM commander General Michael Kurilla visited Bahrain to discuss various issues with his Bahraini counterparts, including the implementation of C-SIPA. He also thanked Bahrain for supporting operations to protect freedom of navigation in the Red Sea.⁶⁵ The Royal Bahraini Air Force is expected to receive its first batch of upgraded F-16 Block 70 aircraft this year (see below).

As the Biden Administration works to integrate the naval capabilities of the United States with GCC partner navies, Bahrain has become an operational hub for new U.S. naval technologies aimed at increasing domain awareness in the Persian Gulf. In 2021, NAVCENT established Task Force 59, which aims to use artificial intelligence technology in directing a fleet of Unmanned Surface Vessels (USVs) and unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs) in the CENTCOM AOR.⁶⁶ The Royal Bahrain Naval Force, in conjunction with U.S. and other international forces, has already participated in maritime exercises which combine manned and unmanned vessels working together to patrol the Persian Gulf.⁶⁷

Figure 5. Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa visits NAVCENT



Source: U.S. 5th Fleet Public Affairs, March 4, 2020.

U.S. Arms Sales and Foreign Assistance to Bahrain

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

⁶⁵ USCENTCOM, “CENTCOM Commander Visits Regional Partners,” February 9, 2024.

⁶⁶ U.S. Naval Forces Central Command Public Affairs, NAVCENT Expands Unmanned Integration, Operates Saildrone in Arabian Gulf, January 27, 2022.

⁶⁷ U.S. Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee, *Posture of United States Central Command and United States Africa Command in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for FY2024 and the Future Years Defense Program*, 118th Congress, 1st sess., March 16, 2023.

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. As previously mentioned, the Bahraini government’s response to the 2011 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 High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWV; alt: Humvee), until Bahrain had met U.S. conditions for improving its human rights record.⁶⁸ 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-16s.⁶⁹ The Biden Administration has not announced any policy changes on cooperation with Bahrain’s internal security agencies; whether the implementation of C-SIPA would include any internal security measures is unclear.

F-16 Sale to Bahrain

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.⁷⁰ The Trump Administration dropped that condition, and in September 2017, notified Congress of the possible sale to Bahrain of 19 F-16s and upgrading of Bahrain’s existing F-16s, at an estimated value of nearly \$4 billion (if all options would have been exercised).⁷¹ In 2018, Lockheed Martin received a \$1.1 billion contract to produce 16 F-16 Block 70 fighters for Bahrain to be delivered in four batches of four starting in 2024. Bahrain is to become one of the first international customers to receive the most advanced F-16 Block 70 variant. In March 2023, Lockheed Martin rolled out the first F-16 Block 70 Fighting Falcon for Bahrain at a ceremony at Lockheed Martin’s Greenville, South Carolina F-16 production line.

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.⁷² According to the U.S. Department of State (as of 2021), the United States has provided Bahrain with \$22.5 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) since 2014.⁷³ The State Department notes that “U.S. assistance strengthens Bahrain’s interoperability for regional security and counterterrorism cooperation, boosts Bahrain’s maritime defenses against smuggling and terrorism, and improves Bahrain’s ability to counter terrorism in a manner consistent with Bahrain’s international human rights obligations and commitments.”⁷⁴

Major Non-NATO Ally Designation and Excess Defense Articles

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. Between 2010

⁶⁸ Statement by Department of State spokesperson John Kirby, “Lifting Holds on Security Assistance to the Government of Bahrain,” June 29, 2015.

⁶⁹ “Trump administration drops human rights conditions to sell fighter jets to Bahrain,” *The Guardian*, March 30, 2017.

⁷⁰ Anthony Capaccio, “Bahrain’s Lockheed F-16 Buy Said to Come with U.S. Strings,” *Bloomberg News*, September 30, 2016.

⁷¹ U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) Transmittal numbers 16-60 and 16-59.

⁷² U.S. Department of State, U.S. Security Cooperation with Bahrain, Fact Sheet, June 14, 2021.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

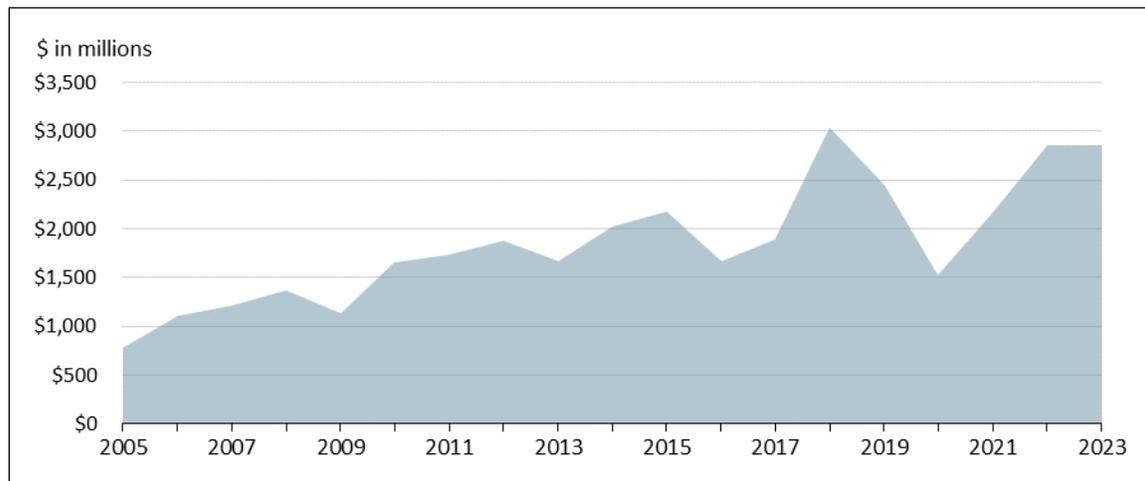
⁷⁴ U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Relations with Bahrain,” Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet, May 11, 2022.

and 2020, the United States provided Bahrain with \$36 million in EDA grant assistance.⁷⁵ Among the major military equipment transferred to Bahrain as EDA are armored personnel carriers and Mark V Special Operations Craft.

U.S. Trade and Investment

To encourage economic reform and signal U.S. appreciation for Bahrain’s security support, the United States and Bahrain signed a Free Trade Agreement (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 fourfold since (see **Figure 6**). In 2023, the total volume of bilateral trade stood at \$2.856 billion with the United States running a trade surplus with Bahrain slightly under \$500 million.⁷⁶ Bahrain’s other major trading partners include China, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Figure 6. U.S.-Bahrain Annual Volume of Trade



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Chart, CRS.

The United States buys very small volumes of oil and petroleum products from Bahrain: 2,000 barrels per day in November 2023, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.⁷⁷ The major U.S. import from the country is aluminum. 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.⁷⁸ The first phase of a buildout of the zone was inaugurated in February 2022.

⁷⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Security Cooperation Agency, EDA Database Tool, accessed on February 14, 2023.

⁷⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, 2023: U.S. trade in goods with Bahrain, available at <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5250.html>.

⁷⁷ U.S. Energy Information Administration, U.S. Net Imports from Bahrain of Crude Oil and Petroleum Products, available at https://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/hist/LeafHandler.ashx?n=PET&s=MTTNT_NUS-NBA_2&f=M.

⁷⁸ Hudhaifa Ebrahim, “Bahrain Begins Construction of US Trade Zone,” *Jerusalem Post*, February 24, 2022.

Recent Legislation

The following is a compilation of legislation in the 118th Congress concerning U.S.-Bahraini relations:

FY2023 Omnibus: In Division K of the Explanatory Statement accompanying P.L. 117-328, the FY2023 Omnibus Appropriations Act, lawmakers required the Secretary of State to report to the Committees on Appropriations “detailing efforts made on behalf of political prisoners in Bahrain and the Government of Bahrain's response.”

FY2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA): Section 1229 of P.L. 118-31, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024, requires the Secretary of State to submit to Congress a review of the legal protections afforded by bilateral agreements between the United States and Bahrain, amongst other countries. Section 2204 extends a \$26.3 million authorization of Navy Military Construction Funds for U.S. facilities in Bahrain through FY2024. Section 7338 of the Act mandates that the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency submit to Congress an assessment of the “current effects on the intelligence community of the agreements between Israel and 4 other foreign countries, including Bahrain, collectively known as the Abraham Accords.”

Author Information

Jeremy M. Sharp
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

Disclaimer

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