

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

(name redacted)

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Summary

An uprising against Bahrain's Al Khalifa ruling family that began on February 14, 2011, has diminished in intensity, but incarceration of dissident leaders, opposition boycotts of elections, and periodic small demonstrations continue. The mostly Shiite opposition to the Sunni-minority-led regime has not achieved its goal of establishing a constitutional monarchy, but the unrest has compelled the ruling family to undertake modest reforms. The mainstream opposition uses peaceful forms of dissent, but small factions, possibly backed by Iran, reportedly are stockpiling increasingly sophisticated weaponry and have claimed responsibility for bombings and other attacks primarily against security officials.

The Bahrain government's repression has presented a policy dilemma for the United States because Bahrain is a longtime ally that is pivotal to maintaining Persian Gulf security. The country has hosted the U.S. naval headquarters for the Gulf region since 1948; the United States and Bahrain have had a formal Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) since 1991; and Bahrain was designated by the United States as a "major non-NATO ally" in 2002. There are over 7,000 U.S. forces in Bahrain, mostly located at a naval headquarters site. Bahrain has relied on U.S.-made arms, but, because of the government's use of force against protesters, the Obama Administration held up some new weapons sales to Bahrain and curtailed U.S. assistance to Bahrain's internal security organizations led by the Ministry of Interior. In 2014, perhaps in part to mitigate the differences with the United States, Bahrain joined the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State and flew strikes against the organization in Syria that year.

The Trump Administration has prioritized countering Iran and addressing other regional security issues, aligning the Administration more closely with Bahrain's leadership than was the Obama Administration. The Administration has corroborated Bahrain leadership assertions that Iran is providing material support to violent opposition factions in Bahrain and lifted conditionality on some major arms sales, particularly the sale of additional F-16 combat aircraft. The policy shift has prompted Bahrain opposition criticism that the new Administration is ignoring human rights concerns in the interests of countering Iran.

Within the Gulf Cooperation Council alliance (GCC: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman), Bahrain has staunchly supported Saudi policies. It has joined Saudi Arabia-led military action to try to restore the government of Yemen that was ousted by Iran-backed Houthi rebels. In June 2017, it joined a Saudi and UAE move to isolate Qatar for its purported support for Muslim Brotherhood-linked Islamist movements. Bahrain has accused Qatar of hosting some Bahraini dissidents and of allying with Iran. Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa did not attend the December 5, 2017, GCC summit in Kuwait, which was abbreviated and unproductive because of this rift, although Bahrain's foreign minister did attend the meeting.

Bahrain has fewer financial resources than do most of the other GCC states and has always had difficulty improving the living standards of the Shiite majority. The unrest has, in turn, further strained Bahrain's economy by driving away potential foreign investment in Bahrain—an effect compounded by the fall in oil prices since mid-2014. Bahrain's small oil exports emanate primarily from an oil field in Saudi Arabia that the Saudi government has set aside for Bahrain's use. In 2004, the United States and Bahrain signed a free trade agreement (FTA); legislation implementing it was signed January 11, 2006 (P.L. 109-169). Some U.S. labor organizations assert that Bahrain's arrests of dissenting workers should void the FTA.

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The Political Structure, Reform, and Human Rights¹

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

The Al Khalifa family, which is Sunni Muslim and generally not as religiously conservative as the leaders of neighboring Saudi Arabia, has ruled Bahrain since 1783. That year, the family, a branch of the Bani Utbah tribe, arrived from the Saudi peninsula and succeeded in capturing a Persian garrison controlling the island. In 1830, the ruling family signed a treaty establishing Bahrain as a protectorate of Britain, which was the dominant power in the Persian Gulf until the early 1970s. 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 (some refer to it as a “referendum”) determined that Bahrain’s inhabitants did not want to join with Iran, a finding that was endorsed by U.N. Security Council Resolution 278 and recognized formally by Iran’s parliament. Bahrain negotiated with eight other Persian Gulf emirates during 1970-1971 to try to form a federation, but Bahrain and Qatar each ultimately decided to become independent, and Bahrain became independent on August 15, 1971. The seven other emirates formed the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The Ruling Family and Its Dynamics

Bahrain is led by King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa (68 years old), who succeeded his father, Shaykh Isa bin Sulman Al Khalifa, upon his death in March 1999. Educated at Sandhurst Military Academy in Britain, King Hamad was previously commander of the Bahraini Defense Forces (BDF). The king is considered to be a proponent of accommodation with Bahrain’s Shiites, who constitute a majority of the citizenry² but many of whom have long asserted they are treated as “second class citizens,” deprived of political power and of a fair share of the nation’s economic wealth. About 25% of the citizen population is age 14 or younger.

Within the upper echelons of the ruling family, the most active proponent of accommodation with the Shiite opposition is the king’s son and designated successor, the U.S.- and U.K.-educated Crown Prince Shaykh Salman bin Hamad, who is about 50 years old. The Crown Prince and his allies, including deputy Prime Minister, Muhammad bin Mubarak Al Khalifa and Foreign Minister Khalid bin Ahmad bin Muhammad Al Khalifa,³ assert that further reforms should be considered in order to calm Bahrain’s internal strife. The Crown Prince and his faction was strengthened by his appointment in 2013 to a newly created position of first deputy Prime Minister, staffed with young, well-educated reformists. A younger son of the king, Shaykh Nasser

¹ Some of the information in this section is from recent State Department human rights reports. CRS has no means of independently investigating the human rights situation in Bahrain.

² Government officials dispute that the Shiite community is as large a majority as the 70% figure used in most factbooks and academic work on Bahrain. The Shiite 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. Shiites of Persian ethnicity, referred to as Ajam, arrived in Bahrain over the past 400 years and are less numerous than the Baharna. The Ajam speak Persian and generally do not integrate with the Baharna or with Sunni Arabs.

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

bin Hamad Al Khalifa, who is about 32 years old, could potentially succeed King Hamad should Salman step aside as heir apparent.⁴

The “anti-reform” faction—who assert that concessions to the Shiite majority cause the Shiites to only increase their political demands—is led by the King’s uncle (the brother of the late Amir Isa), Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, who has been in position since Bahrain’s independence in 1971. He is about 80 years old but still active. The King is widely seen as being unwilling to remove him or to override his hardline royal family allies, who include Minister of the Royal Court Khalid bin Ahmad bin Salman Al Khalifa⁵ and his brother, BDF Commander Khalifa bin Ahmad Al Khalifa. These brothers are known as “Khawalids”—they hail from a branch of the ruling family traced to a Khalid bin Ali Al Khalifa—and oppose compromise with the Shiite opposition.⁶ The Khawalids reportedly have allies throughout the security and intelligence services and the judiciary. In September 2013, Bahrain appointed Lieutenant Colonel Abdullah bin Muhammad bin Rashid Al Khalifa, a subordinate of the BDF commander, as Ambassador to the United States.

Executive and Legislative Powers

The king, working through the Prime Minister and the cabinet, has broad powers, including appointing all ministers and judges and amending the constitution. Al Khalifa family members hold 12 out of 26 cabinet posts, including the ministries of defense, interior (internal security), and foreign affairs. Typical Bahrain cabinets include five or six Shiite ministers.

Upon taking office, Hamad assumed the title of king—a leadership title that implies somewhat more accountability than the traditional title “Amir.” He held a referendum on February 14, 2001, that adopted a “National Action Charter,” provisions of which were incorporated into a new constitution issued by the King in 2002. However, many Shiites and reform-minded Sunnis criticized the constitution because it was not put to a public vote and because it contrasted with the 1973 constitution by establishing an all-appointed *Shura* (Consultative) Council of equal size (40 seats each) with powers nearly equal to those of to an elected Council of Representatives (COR).⁷ Together, these bodies constitute the National Assembly. The government has tended to appoint generally more educated, pro-Western, and pro-government members to the Shura Council. There is no “quota” for females in the National Assembly.

- The Assembly only partially checks government power, despite constitutional amendments of May 2012 that gave the body greater authority. The amendments declared the elected COR as the presiding chamber of the Assembly, enhancing its authority on issues on which the two chambers disagree.
- The National Assembly does not have the power to confirm individual cabinet appointments. However, as a consequence of May 2012 constitutional amendments, it now has the power to reject the government’s four-year work plan—and therefore the whole cabinet. The COR has always had the power to remove sitting ministers through a vote of no-confidence (requiring a two-thirds

⁴ Simon Henderson. “Gulf Succession: Qatar’s Model Could be a Way Forward.” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 25, 2016.

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

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

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

majority). The COR can also, by a similar super-majority, declare that it cannot “cooperate” with the Prime Minister, but the king rules on whether to dismiss the Prime Minister or disband the COR. None of these authorities has been used.

- Either chamber of the National Assembly can originate legislation but enactment into law requires concurrence by the king.⁸ Prior to the May 2012 constitutional amendments, only the COR could originate legislation. The king’s “veto” can be overridden by a two-thirds majority vote of both chambers. A 2012 decree issued by the king gives the National Assembly the ability to recommend constitutional amendments, which are then vetted by a “Legislation and Legal Opinion Commission” before consideration by the king.

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

Political Groups and Elections

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

Formal political parties are banned, but factions organize, for the elections and other political activity, as “political societies”—the functional equivalent of parties:

- *Wifaq*, formally named the *Al Wifaq* (Accord) National Islamic Society, has been the most prominent Shiite political society. While it is the vanguard of the opposition, its officials also have participated in the national dialogues with the government and royal family since 2011. *Wifaq*’s leaders are Secretary-General and Shiite cleric Shaykh Ali al-Salman and his deputy Khalil al-Marzuq. Shaykh Salman remains jailed. Another top figure in the faction is the 79-year-old hardline Shiite cleric Isa Qasim, whose citizenship was revoked by the government on June 20, 2016. In July 2014, the government barred *Wifaq* from operating for a three-month period for alleged breaches of Bahrain’s law on political societies. In mid-2016, Bahraini courts approved government requests to dissolve *Wifaq* entirely and to seize and auction off its assets. *Wifaq* allies include the National Democratic Action Society, the National Democratic Assembly, the Democratic Progressive Tribune, and Al Ekhaa.
- *Al Haq* (Movement of Freedom and Democracy), a small Shiite faction, is outlawed because of its calls for outright change of regime and has boycotted all

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

- the COR elections. Its key leaders are wheelchair-bound Dr. Abduljalil Alsingace and Hassan Mushaima, both of whom have been imprisoned since the uprising.
- The *Bahrain Islamic Action Society*, a small Shiite faction, also is outlawed. It is a successor to the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB), a party linked to alleged Iran-backed plots to overthrow Bahrain's government in the 1980s and 1990s. Another IFLB offshoot, *Amal*, has ties to radical Shiite clerics in Iran. *Amal*'s leader, Shaykh Muhammad Ali al-Mafoodh, has been in prison since 2011 and *Amal* was outlawed in 2012.
 - *Waad* ("promise") is a secular opposition group that includes both Sunnis and Shiites. Its former leader, Ibrahim Sharif, has been repeatedly arrested, released, and rearrested. Its current leader is Sami Fuad Sayedi. On May 31, 2017, the High Civil Court approved a government request to dissolve it.
 - *Sunni Islamist factions*. Among the prominent Sunni factions are *Minbar* (Arabic for "platform"), which is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, and *Al Asala*, which is a harder-line "Salafist" political society. Smaller Sunni Islamist factions include *Al Saff*, the *Islamic Shura Society*, and the *Al Wasat Al Arabi Islamic Society*. In June 2011, a non-Islamist, generally pro-government Sunni political coalition—the *National Unity Assembly (NUA)*—was formed as a response to the uprising.

Pre-uprising Elections

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

- *October 2002*. In the first elections under the National Charter and constitution, *Wifaq* and other Shiite political groups boycotted on the grounds that establishing an elected COR and an appointed Shura Council of the same size diluted popular will. There were 170 candidates, including 8 women. Sunnis won two-thirds of the 40 COR seats, and none of the women was elected.
- *November 2006*. Sunni-Shiite tensions escalated in advance of the COR and municipal elections, perhaps aggravated by the election-based accession of a Shiite majority in Iraq. The election was also clouded by a government adviser's revelations that the government had adjusted election districts to favor Sunni candidates and had issued passports to Sunnis to increase the number of Sunni voters. *Wifaq* participated, helping lift turnout to 72%, and the faction won 17 seats (virtually all it contested) to become the largest COR bloc. Sunnis won the remaining 23 seats, of which 8 were secular Sunnis and 15 were Islamists. One woman, unopposed in her district, was elected out of 18 female candidates. The King appointed a new Shura Council with 20 Shiites, 19 Sunnis, and 1 Christian. Nine of those named were women. In the post-election cabinet, a *Wifaq* supporter was named minister of state for foreign affairs.
- *October 2010*. Shiite oppositionists again accused the government of gerrymandering to favor Sunni candidates, and 23 Shiite leaders were arrested the month before the election under a 2006 antiterrorism law. *Wifaq* participated nonetheless. Of the 200 candidates, six were women. Turnout was about 67%. The election increased *Wifaq*'s representation to 18 seats, reduced Sunni Islamists to five seats from 15; and greatly increased the number of Sunni independents to 17 seats (from nine in the previous COR). The one female incumbent was

reelected. The king reappointed 30 of the 40 Shura Council incumbents. Of the total membership, 19 were Shiites, including the speaker, Ali bin Salih al-Salih. Four were women, of which one was Jewish (out of a Jewish population in Bahrain of about 40 persons) and one was Christian, of a Christian population of about 1,000. Municipal elections were held concurrently.

2011 Uprising: Origin, Developments, and Prognosis

The aspirations of Bahraini Shiites were demonstrated as unsatisfied when a major uprising began on February 14, 2011, following the toppling of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak.⁹ After a few days of confrontations with security forces, mostly Shiite demonstrators converged on the interior of a major traffic circle ("Pearl Roundabout"). The unrest escalated on February 17-18, 2011, when security forces using rubber bullets and tear gas killed four demonstrators. All 18 *Wifaq* deputies in the COR resigned. Following large demonstrations in late February, the Crown Prince invited protester representatives to formal dialogue, many demonstrators were released, and two Al Khalifa family members were dropped from the cabinet. In March 2011, the Crown Prince advanced a "seven principles" proposal for a national dialogue that would agree on a "parliament with full authority"; a "government that meets the will of the people"; fair voting districts; and several other measures.¹⁰ Protest leaders welcomed dialogue but asserted that the seven principles fell short of their demands for a constitutional monarchy in which the Prime Minister and cabinet are selected by the fully elected parliament. They also demanded ending gerrymandering of election districts to favor Sunnis, and more jobs and economic opportunities - demands encapsulated in the October 2011 "Manama Document" unveiled by *Wifaq* and *Waad*.

Saudi-led Direct Intervention on Behalf of the Government

On March 13, 2011, protesters blockaded the financial district of Manama, triggering the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, UAE, Qatar, and Oman) to send forces into Bahrain on March 14, 2011. Members of the GCC's joint Peninsula Shield force, including 1,200 Saudi armored forces and 600 UAE police, crossed into Bahrain and took up positions at key locations and Kuwait sent naval forces to help secure Bahrain's maritime borders. On March 15, the King declared a three-month state of emergency. Security forces backed by the GCC deployment cleared demonstrators from Pearl Roundabout and demolished the Pearl Monument on March 18, 2011.¹¹ Perceiving it had restored order, the king ended the state of emergency as of June 1, 2011. The GCC forces began to depart in late June 2011, although some UAE police and other GCC security forces remained.

Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI)

On June 29, 2011, as a gesture toward the opposition and international critics, the king named a five-person "Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry" (BICI), headed by international legal expert Dr. Cherif Bassiouni, to investigate the government response to the unrest—and not the

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

¹⁰ BICI report, op. cit., p. 165.

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

broader sources of the unrest. The 500+ page BICI report, released on November 23, 2011, provided support for the narratives of both sides as well as recommendations. It stated that¹²

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

The report contained 26 recommendations to prevent abuses of protesters and to hold accountable those government personnel responsible for abuses during the uprising. King Hamad promised full implementation of all recommendations. *Wifaq* said the report failed to state that abuses of protesters were deliberate government policy. On November 26, 2011, the king issued a decree to establish a 19-member National Commission to oversee implementation of the recommendations, chaired by Shura Council Chairman Ali al-Salih (a Shiite). Subsequently, a “Follow-Up Unit,” headed by Ms. Dana Al Zayani, was established by the Ministry of Justice.¹³

Assessments of Government Compliance with the BICI Recommendations

Bahrain Government. Bahrain officials assert that the government has fully implemented the vast majority of the 26 BICI recommendations. However, other assessments broadly agree that Bahrain has only partially implemented those recommendations that address prevention of torture, provision of legal counsel, allowing free access to media, holding security officials accountable, or integrating Shiites into the security services. There appears to be consensus that the government has rebuilt almost all of the 53 Shiite religious sites demolished in 2011.

State Department. The FY2013 defense authorization act (P.L. 112-239) directed the Secretary of State to report to Congress within 180 days of enactment (by July 2, 2013) on Bahrain’s implementation of the BICI recommendations. The FY2016 Consolidated Appropriation (P.L. 114-113), required State Department reports on Bahrain’s implementation of the BICI recommendations. The latter of the mandated reports was submitted to Congress on June 21, 2016¹⁴ and indicating that the Bahrain government had:

- made the office of the inspector general of the Ministry of Interior independent of the ministry’s hierarchy;
- stripped the National Security Agency of law enforcement powers and limited it to purely intelligence gathering. That occurred with the issuing of an amendment to the 2002 decree establishing that agency and transferring its arrest powers to the Ministry of Interior;
- provided compensation and other remedies for families of the deceased victims of the government’s response to the unrest. About \$26 million was budgeted by the government to provide the compensation;
- ensured that dismissed employees were not dismissed because of the exercise of their right to freedom of expression, association, or assembly. This assessment

¹² <http://files.bici.org.bh/BICIREportEN.pdf>.

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

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

- was based on data that almost all of 2,700+ workers who had been fired for participating in the unrest had been rehired; and
- developed programs to promote religious, political, and other forms of tolerance and promotion of human rights and the rule of law.
- The report recommended that the government needs to allow oversight agencies greater independence, and implement recommendations on freedom of expression.

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

2017 Empowerment of Military Tribunals. In April 2017, the government took a step that appeared, at least indirectly, to conflict with its commitments to implement the BICI recommendations. The King signed a National Assembly-enacted bill amending the constitution to allow military courts the right to try civilians accused of terrorism. Human rights organizations called the move an attempt to deny due process to the many oppositionists whose activities are routinely described by the government in charging documents as “terrorism.”

BICI-Related Legislation. In the 114th Congress, S. 2009 and H.R. 3445, would have prohibited specific U.S. weapons and crowd control equipment sales to Bahrain (tear gas, small arms, light weapons and ammunitions for same, Humvees, and “other” crowd control items) until the State Department certified that Bahrain has fully implemented all BICI recommendations. A Senate-passed State Department operations authorization bill, S. 1635, would have required, 60 days after enactment, another State Department assessment of Bahrain’s implementation of the BICI recommendations, and the effect of such State Department findings on the U.S. defense posture in the Gulf. However, the provision was not included in P.L. 114-323.

The “National Dialogue” Process

The BICI process has been widely credited for creating conditions for a government-opposition “National Dialogue” process, which was inaugurated on July 2, 2011, under the chairmanship of COR speaker Dhahrani. About 300 delegates participated, of which 40-50 were member of the Shiite opposition, including five members of *Wifaq*.¹⁸ The several-week dialogue broadly addressed political, economic, social, and human rights issues, but the detention of senior oppositionists clouded the meetings and *Wifaq* exited the talks on July 18, 2011. In the course of the dialogue, King Hamad pardoned some protesters. The dialogue concluded in late July 2011

¹⁵ POMED. “One Year Later: Assessing Bahrain’s Implementation of the BICI Report.” November 2012.

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

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

¹⁸ Mohamed Hasni. “Bahrain Opens Dialogue Buoyed by Shiite Attendance.” Agence France Presse, July 2, 2011.

after reaching consensus on the following recommendations, which were endorsed by the government on July 29, 2011:

- an elected parliament (lower house) with expanded powers, including to confirm a nominated cabinet; to vote on the government's four-year work plan; to discuss any agenda item; and to question ministers on their performance or plans. In addition, the overall chairmanship of the National Assembly should be exercised by the elected COR, not the Shura Council;
- a government "reflecting the will of the people";
- "fairly" demarcated electoral boundaries;
- reworking of laws on naturalization and citizenship;
- combating financial and administrative corruption; and
- efforts to reduce sectarian divisions.

Despite the opposition's assertions that the consensus dialogue recommendations did not resolve core issues, the National Assembly adopted significant elements of them in January 2012 and the King signed them into law on May 3, 2012, as constitutional amendments that

- imposed limitations on the power of the king to appoint the members of the Shura Council, and a requirement that he consult the heads of the two chambers of the National Assembly before dissolving the COR;
- gave either chamber of the National Assembly the ability to draft legislation or constitutional amendments;
- changed the overall chair of the National Assembly to the speaker of the elected COR instead of the chairman of the appointed Shura Council; and
- gave the COR the ability to veto the government's four-year work plan—essentially an ability to veto the nomination of the entire cabinet—without the concurrence of the Shura Council. This was an expansion of previous powers to vote no confidence against individual ministers.

Second National Dialogue. In January 2013, the King called for a restart of political dialogue; *Wifaq* and five allied parties accepted that proposal. The second dialogue began on February 10, 2013, consisting of twice per week meetings attended by the Minister of Justice (an Al Khalifa family member) and two other ministers, eight opposition representatives (*Wifaq* and allied parties), eight representatives of pro-government organizations, and five members of the National Assembly (both the upper and lower house). The dialogue quickly bogged down over opposition insistence that consensus recommendations be put to a public referendum, while the government insisted that agreements be enacted by the parliament. The opposition also demanded that the dialogue include representatives of the King rather than various ministers. In September 2013, the opposition began boycotting the talks because of lack of progress and the arrest of Khalil al-Marzuq, *Wifaq's* deputy chief and representative to the dialogue. The dialogue was suspended on January 8, 2014.

The Crown Prince sought to revive negotiations by meeting with Marzuq and *Wifaq* leader Shaykh Ali al-Salman on January 15, 2014, despite the fact that both were charged for their roles in the uprising. The meeting addressed *Wifaq's* demand that political dialogue be conducted with senior Al Khalifa members. In September 2014, the Crown Prince issued a five-point "framework" for a new dialogue including: (1) redefining electoral districts; (2) revising the process for appointing the Shura Council; (3) giving the elected COR new powers to approve or reject the formation of a new cabinet; (4) having international organizations work Bahrain's

judiciary; and (5) introducing new codes of conduct for security forces. Opposition political societies rejected the proposals as not satisfying a core demand that an elected COR select the Prime Minister. No further national dialogue has convened to date.

COR Elections in November 2014

In an effort to achieve “normalization,” the government urged the opposition to participate in the November 22, 2014, COR election. However, it reduced the number of electoral districts to four, from five, further reducing the chances that Shiites would win a majority of COR seats. *Wifaq* and its allies boycotted, reducing the turnout to about 50% (Bahrain official figures). There was little violence during the vote or a November runoff.

The seats were mostly won by independent candidates, suggesting that voters sought a less polarized climate. Only three candidates of the Sunni Islamist political societies won, and none of the 10 progovernment Al Fatiḥ coalition candidates was elected. The 14 Shiites elected ran as independents, although some reportedly were members of *Wifaq* or other opposition factions. Ahmad Ibrahim al-Mulla was elected COR speaker, and the deputy speaker selected was Jawad al Ra’id, a Shiite. Ali bin Salih Al Salih, a Shiite, remained chairman of the Shura that was appointed on December 8, 2014, which again had rough parity in the number of Shiites and Sunnis as well as one Christian and one Jewish representative.

The next Assembly elections are planned for the fall of 2018.

Table 1. Comparative Composition of the National Assembly

| | 2006 | 2010 | Post-By-Election (October 2011) | 2014 |
|--|----------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|---|
| Council of Representatives (COR) | | | | |
| Wifaq (Shiite Islamist) | 17 | 18 | 0 | 0 |
| Shiite Independent | 0 | 0 | 8 | 14 |
| Sunni Independent (mostly secular) | 8 | 17 | 27 | 23 |
| Minbar (Sunni Islamist, Muslim Brotherhood) | 7 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| Asala (Sunni Islamist, Salafi) | 8 | 3 | 3 | 2 |
| COR Sect Composition | 23 Sunni, 17 Shiite | 22 Sunni, 18 Shiite | 32 Sunni, 8 Shiite | 26 Sunni, 14 Shiite |
| Women in COR | 1 | 1 | 4 | 3 |
| Shura Council (Upper House, appointed) | | | | |
| Sectarian, Religious Composition Upper House (Shura Council) | 20 Shiite, 19 Sunni, 1 Christian | 19 Shiite, 19 Sunni, 1 Christian, 1 Jew | No change | roughly equal numbers of Sunnis and Shiites, 1 Christian, 1 Jew |
| Number of Women | 9 | 4 | 11 | 9 |

Unrest Status and Prospects

As of early 2018, unrest continues, although at far lower levels of intensity than during 2011–2012. Reflecting increased government efforts to crush the opposition outright, it has arrested or revoked the citizenship of opposition leaders such as Shaykh Ali Salman and Isa Qasim, and disbanded *Wifaq* and *Waad* entirely. The State Department criticized the dissolution of those political societies as unhelpful to political reconciliation.¹⁹ The government also has stepped up citizenship revocations and expulsions of Bahrain’s Shiites who are of Persian origin, accusing them of loyalty to Iran.²⁰ As noted above, in March 2017, the government empowered military courts to prosecute civilians. Signaling that unrest and resentment continue, each year, including February 14, 2018, demonstrations—and clashes with security forces—have taken place to mark the February 14 anniversary of the uprising.²¹

The government and the opposition have, at times, discussed confidence-building measures such as appointments of oppositionists to the cabinet. The King appears to have ruled out replacing the Prime Minister; some oppositionists have suggested they would accept a more moderate ruling family member or a Sunni figure non-royal as Prime Minister, but the King appears unwilling to risk unrest among Prime Minister Khalifa’s hardline supporters in the family or the Sunni community more broadly. And, hardline Sunnis within and outside the government, some with support of Saudi officials, continue to urge the ruling family to refuse compromise.

Violent Underground Groups Clouds Outlook

Possibly reducing the potential for a political settlement is the activity of apparently small but violent underground groups that have periodically attacked security forces with bombs and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) against. These groups have not targeted civilians, although on at least one occasion civilians have been killed or injured. Mainstream opposition factions deny any connection to these groups and assert that these groups lack organization and public support.

The most well-known violent groups include the following:²²

- The “*14 February Coalition*” (named for the anniversary of the Bahrain uprising) claims to be inspired by the “Tamarod” protests in Egypt that prompted the Egyptian military to remove Muslim Brotherhood president Mohammad Morsi. The group claimed responsibility for an April 14, 2013, explosion in the Financial Harbour district. In September 2013, 50 Shiites were sentenced to up to 15 years in prison for alleged involvement in the group. On November 10, 2017, militants allegedly from the group attacked a key pipeline that supplies Saudi oil to the Bahrain Petroleum Company refinery in Sitra, Bahrain.
- *Ashtar Brigades*. This group, probably the most prominent of the underground groups, issued its first public statement in April 2013 and has since claimed

¹⁹ <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-05-31/court-orders-last-main-opposition-group-in-bahrain-dissolved>.

²⁰ CRS conversation with Shiite opposition activist Matar al Matar in Washington, DC, March 2016; and <http://www.amnestyusa.org/news/press-releases/bahrain-alarming-spike-in-expulsion-of-citizens-arbitrarily-stripped-of-their-nationality>.

²¹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/02/clashes-mark-anniversary-bahrain-2011-uprising-180214075612644.html>

²² Matthew Levitt. “Iran and Bahrain: Crying Wolf, or Wolf at the Door?” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 16, 2014.

responsibility for about 20 bombings against security personnel, including one in March 2014 that killed three police officers, including a UAE police officer. In January 2017, the government executed three Shiite men for the March 2014 attack—the first executions since the 2011 uprising began. On March 17, 2017, the Trump Administration designated two Ashtar Brigades members, one of which is Iran-based, as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs) under Executive Order 13324, which blocks U.S.-based property of entities that conduct terrorism.

- *Others:* Other groups might be offshoots of the Ashtar Brigades, or separate small cells. A group called the Mukhtar Brigades has claimed responsibility for several attacks on security forces, including use of IEDs. Other groups have used names including the Bahrain Liberation Movement, the Resistance Brigades, the Basta organization, and the Imam Army.

A major question is the degree of outside support, if any.²³ Oppositionists accuse the government of exaggerating Iran's support for these groups, but the State Department's international terrorism report for 2016 said that some Bahraini groups are working with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF). The IRGC-QF assists and advises Bahrain militants who are based in or have fled to Iran, and the IRGC-QF reportedly has delivered weapons, such as those discussed below, to the Bahrain militants by boat. In June 2017, Bahrain justified its joining a Saudi-led boycott of Qatar in part by accusing Qatar of supporting the above-mentioned violent groups, although Qatar has not previously been accused by Bahrain or any outside organization of doing so. Some violent activists reportedly also might undergo training with Shiite militias in Iraq, such as Kata'ib Hezbollah, and might flee not only to Iran but to Iraq if facing capture in Bahrain.

Some experts assert that there is potential for escalating violence by these groups. In April 2015, the government arrested 29 persons for a December 2014 bombing that wounded several police officers; they were sentenced to prison in December 2015 and two of them had their citizenship revoked. A July 28, 2015, bomb attack killed two policemen, days after the government announced it had disrupted an alleged attempt by Iran to arm opposition groups. An April 16, 2016, bomb attack killed one policeman and critically injured two others. On December 25, 2017, six Bahraini Shiites were sentenced to death for allegedly forming a terrorist cell and plotting to assassinate a senior Bahrain military official. On January 1, 2017, 10 detainees who had been convicted of militant activities such as those discussed above broke out of Bahrain's Jaw prison with the help of attackers outside the jail.

The underground groups are said to be acquiring, although not necessarily using, increasingly sophisticated weaponry. In late 2016, Bahraini authorities uncovered a large warehouse containing equipment, apparently supplied by Iran, that is tailored for constructing "explosively-forced projectiles" (EFPs) such as those Iran-backed Shiite militias used against U.S. armor in Iraq during 2004-2011. No EFPs have actually been used in Bahrain, to date,²⁴ and some speculate that underground groups might use them in the event of another armored intervention by Saudi Arabia or other countries supporting the government.

²³ See: Michael Knights and Matthew Levitt. "The Evolution of the Shi'a Insurgency in Bahrain." CTC Sentinel, January 2018.

²⁴ Souad Mekhennet and Joby Warrick. "In Bahrain's Militant Cells, U.S. Sees Iran." *Washington Post*, April 2, 2017.

Table 2. Status of Prominent Dissidents/Other Metrics

| | |
|--|---|
| Wifaq Leaders | Secretary-General Ali al-Salman was arrested in 2013 for “insulting authorities” and “incitement to religious hatred.” He was rearrested and, in June 2015, convicted and sentenced to four years in prison. In May 2016, a court increased his sentence to nine years. In November 2017, the government charged him additionally with spying for Qatar. Deputy leader Khalil al-Marzuq was arrested in September 2013, for “inciting terrorism,” but was acquitted in June 2014. Isa Qasim’s home was raided by the regime in May 2013 and again in late November 2014. In June 2016, his citizenship was revoked, and he remains under house arrest. As of December 2017, his health is said to be deteriorating. |
| Bahrain Center for Human Rights Leaders and “Bahrain 13” | Abdul Hadi al-Khawaja, founder of BHCRC, Arrested April 9, 2011, was one of 13 prominent dissidents (“Bahrain 13”) tried by state security court in 2011, and sentenced to life in prison for conspiring to overthrow the government. Daughters Zainab and Maryam also repeatedly arrested for opposition activities; Zainab released in May 2016 and left Bahrain. Khawaja’s successor as head of BHCRC, Nabeel Rajab, has been arrested and his travel banned several times for allegedly orchestrating antigovernment activity. He was arrested most recently in June 2016 and an appeals court, in November 2017, upheld a two year prison sentence. Among the other members of the “Bahrain 13,” four are sentenced to life in prison. |
| Ibrahim Sharif | Waad leader, imprisoned in 2011 and released on June 19, 2015, but rearrested in July 2015 for “incitement” against the government. In February 2016, he was sentenced to one year in jail, but was released in July 2016. He was detained again for several days in November 2016. |
| Mohammad al Tajer | Prominent human rights lawyer. Arrested and released in 2011. Rearrested in December 2016 for “insulting government institutions.” |
| Salmaniya Medical Complex personnel | Twenty-one medical personnel were arrested in April 2011 and tried for, among other charges, forcibly occupying a public building. All were eventually acquitted, most recently in late March 2013, but have not regained their jobs. |
| Protesters Killed | About 100 since the uprising began |
| Citizenship Revocations and Expulsions | Over 350, including 92 revocations in 2016, and several expulsions, mostly Bahraini Shiites of Persian origin. In January-February 2018, eight Bahrainis whose citizenship was revoked in 2012 were expelled. to Iraq |
| Number Arrested | Approximately 3,000 total detentions since 2011. |

Sources: Various press and interest group reports.

U.S. Posture on the Uprising

The United States has repeatedly urged Bahraini authorities not to use force against protesters and to release jailed opposition leaders, but has not at any time call for the Al Khalifa regime to step down, asserting that the government has tried to address many opposition grievances. High level U.S. engagement with Bahraini leaders has continued and no sanctions have been imposed on any Bahraini officials. The Obama Administration withheld or conditioned some arms sales to Bahrain, but U.S. military cooperation with Bahrain continued without interruption. In September 21, 2011, speech to the U.N. General Assembly, President Obama said:

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

Then-Secretary of State Kerry stated upon the July 17, 2016, dissolution of *Wifaq* that

This ruling is the latest in a series of disconcerting steps in Bahrain.... These actions are inconsistent with U.S. interests and strain our partnership with Bahrain.... We call on the Government of Bahrain to reverse these and other recent measures, return urgently to the path of reconciliation, and work collectively to address the aspirations of all Bahrainis.

The Crown Prince represented Bahrain at the May 13-14, 2015, U.S.-GCC summit at Camp David, organized to reassure the Gulf states about a potential nuclear deal with Iran, and King Hamad attended the April 21, 2016 U.S.-GCC summit.

Critics of Obama Administration policy toward Bahrain said that the Administration was insufficiently critical of Bahrain's leaders.²⁵ Some cite then-Secretary of State Clinton's comments in Bahrain on December 3, 2010, referring to the October 2010 elections, saying: "I am impressed by the commitment that the government has to the democratic path that Bahrain is walking on ..."²⁶ Bahraini officials asserted that Obama Administration criticism was too harsh. On July 7, 2014, the government ordered then-Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) Tom Malinowski out of Bahrain for meeting with *Wifaq* leader Shaykh Salman. Then-Secretary Kerry, in a phone call to Bahrain's Foreign Minister, called that expulsion "unacceptable." A July 18, 2014, letter to King Hamad, signed by 18 Members of the House of Representatives, called on the king to invite Assistant Secretary Malinowski back.²⁷ Bahrain reversed its position subsequently, and Malinowski and Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East Anne Patterson visited Bahrain in December 2014.

Trump Administration Policy

As part of the Trump Administration's emphasis on countering Iran, the United States has downplayed U.S. concerns about Bahrain's human rights record, dropped Obama Administration human rights conditions on the approval of new combat aircraft to Bahrain,²⁸ and imposed U.S. sanctions on members of underground violent opposition groups. In late May 2017, during his visit to Saudi Arabia, President Trump met with King Hamad and assured him that U.S.-Bahrain relations would be free of the "strain" that characterized U.S.-Bahrain relations on the human rights issue during the Obama Administration.²⁹ In September 2017, the Administration notified Congress of nearly \$4 billion in arms sales to Bahrain, including F-16s and fast patrol boats. Crown Prince Salman visited Washington, D.C. in late November 2017 and met with President Trump to discuss a wide range of regional and bilateral issues, including defense and economic relations. Bahrain opposition figures have expressed concerns about the apparent Trump Administration policy shift, and some oppositionists argue that increased U.S. support for the government could cause the opposition to draw close to Iran.

Ongoing Programs to Foster Bahrain Democracy and Human Rights

The United States has had programs in place to accelerate political reform in Bahrain and empower its political societies since long before the 2011 uprising. The "Middle East Partnership

²⁵ Stephen McInerney. "Silence on Bahrain." *Washington Post* op-ed. November 5, 2012.

²⁶ Department of State. "Remarks With Foreign Minister Al Khalifa After Their Meeting." December 3, 2010.

²⁷ Congress of the United States. Letter to King Hamad. July 18, 2014.

²⁸ <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/feb/7/trump-ready-to-approve-weapons-packages-to-saudi-a/>.

²⁹ "After Assurances by Trump, Bahrain Stages Deadly Raid Against Opposition." *Washington Post*, May 25, 2017.

Initiative (MEPI)” began funding pro-democracy programs in Bahrain in 2003.³⁰ MEPI funds have been used for programs such as an American Bar Association (ABA) program to support the Ministry of Justice’s Judicial and Legal Studies Institute (JLSI), which conducts specialized training for judges, lawyers, law schools, and Bahrain’s bar association. The ABA also provided technical assistance to help Bahrain implement the BICI recommendations, including legislation on fair trial standards. MEPI funds are also used to train Bahraini journalists. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) had received some U.S. funds for its programs to enhance the capabilities of Bahrain’s National Assembly. For example, in FY2016, the United States provided about \$350,000 for democracy and human rights promotion programs in Bahrain, of which about \$250,000 was provided through NDI.

Other Human Rights Issues³¹

The bulk of recent criticism of Bahrain’s human rights practices has focused on the government response to the unrest, including relative lack of accountability of security forces, suppression of free expression, and treatment of prisoners. The government, as have several of the other Gulf states, has increasingly used laws allowing jail sentences for “insulting the king” to silence opponents. However, the State Department human rights reports, and outside assessments, note additional problems in Bahrain for non-Muslims and for non-Shiite opponents of the government, as well as other issues that predated and might be unrelated to the unrest.

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

In 2013, in line with the BICI report, the king issued a decree reestablishing the “National Institution for Human Rights” (NIHR) to investigate human rights violations. It issues annual reports.³² In October 2016, King Hamad issued a decree enhancing the NIHR’s powers, including the ability to make unannounced visits to detention centers and to request formal responses by the various ministries to NIHR recommendations.

Bahrain has drawn increasing attention from U.N. human rights bodies and other governments. Each March since the uprising began, the U.N. Human Rights Council has issued statements condemning the government’s human rights abuses. The United States, Britain, and eight other EU countries have sometimes opposed these statements on the grounds that the government has sought to address international concerns on this issue. Opposition activists reportedly have requested the appointment of a U.N. Special Rapporteur on human rights in Bahrain and the establishment of a formal U.N. office in Bahrain that would monitor human rights practices there. That step has not been taken. The Arab League announced in September 2013 that Bahrain would host the headquarters of an “Arab Court for Human Rights.” Bahrain has often denied entry to

³⁰ Statement from the U.S. Embassy in Bahrain Concerning MEPI. June 17, 2014.

³¹ Much of this section is from the State Department’s country report on human rights practices for 2016 and from reports by Human Rights Watch and other outside groups. The text of the State Department report is at <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/265704.pdf>.

³² The full text of the National Commission’s March 20, 2012, report is at <http://www.biciactions.bh/wps/portal/BICI/>.

international human rights researchers and activists, including from U.S. organizations such as Human Rights Watch.

Women's Rights

Experts and other observers have long perceived Bahrain as advancing women's rights, particularly relative to Saudi Arabia. The Council of Ministers (cabinet) regularly has at least one, and often several, female ministers. The number of women in the National Assembly is provided in

Table 1. Huda Azar Nonoo, an attorney and formerly the only Jew in the Shura Council, was ambassador to the United States during 2008-2013.

Still, traditional customs and some laws tend to limit women's rights in practice. Women can drive, own and inherit property, and initiate divorce cases, but religious courts may refuse a woman's divorce request. A woman cannot transmit nationality to her spouse or children. Some prominent Bahraini women, backed by the wife of the King and the "Supreme Council for Women" have campaigned for a codified family law. Other women's rights organizations in Bahrain include the Bahrain Women's Union, the Bahrain Women's Association, and the Young Ladies Association.

Religious Freedom³³

The State Department's recent reports on international religious freedom focus extensively on matters related to the ongoing unrest, asserting that the government discriminates against the Shiite majority and Shiite clergy. In 2014, the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs, which regulates Islamic affairs, dissolved the Islamic Ulema Council, the main assembly of Shiite clerics in Bahrain, for allegedly engaging in illegal political activity. A Court of Cassation upheld that dissolution in April 2015. In June 2016, the king signed an amendment to a 2005 law regulating political societies, banning persons who are active in religious positions from engaging in political activities – an amendment that appeared to be an effort to further weaken *Wifaq*.³⁴

In July 2017, Bahrain became the first country in the region to enact a unified personal status law, covering both Shiites and Sunnis, and thereby weakening the power of religious courts to regulate matters such as marriage and divorce. However, the law was enacted despite opposition from Shiite legislators who argue that only senior Shiite clerics, such as Iraq-based Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, have the authority to legislate on such matters.³⁵

According to the recent State Department reports, the government allows freedom of worship for Christians, Jews, and Hindus although the constitution declares Islam the official religion. 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 religious groups and institutions, including Christian churches and a Hindu temple. The government donated land for the Roman Catholic Vicariate of Northern Arabia to relocate from Kuwait to Bahrain. A small Jewish community of about 36-40 persons – mostly from families of Iraqi Jews who settled in Bahrain in the 19th century – remains in Bahrain, and apparently does not face any harassment or other difficulty. Some of Bahrain's Jews came from southern Iran.

³³ This section is based on the State Department report on International Religious Freedom for 2016. <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269130.pdf>.

³⁴ "Bahrain King 'Bans Mixing Religion and Politics.'" <http://www.alaraby.co.uk>. June 12, 2016.

³⁵ <http://gulfnnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-s-shura-approves-unified-family-draft-law-1.2061301>.

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

Human Trafficking and Labor Rights

Bahrain remains a destination country for migrant workers from South and East Asia, as well as some countries in Africa. Domestic workers are highly vulnerable to forced labor and sexual exploitation because they are largely unprotected under the labor law. The State Department's "Trafficking in Persons Report" for 2017, for the third year in a row, placed Bahrain in "Tier 2" on the grounds that while it does not meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking in persons, it continues to make efforts to do so.³⁶ During the year, the government developed a national referral mechanism and disseminated the strategy to relevant government and civil society stakeholders.

Bahrain's rating in the 2014 report was, for a third year in a row, "Tier 2: Watch List. Bahrain was given an Administration waiver for a mandatory downgrade to Tier 3 (a requirement if a country is on the Watch List for three consecutive years) on the grounds that it had a written plan to come into compliance with international standards on this issue. The upgrade as of the 2015 report was based on "notable progress in [the government's efforts to investigate, prosecute, and convict trafficking offenses."

Regarding the related issue of labor rights, U.S. government reports credit Bahrain with significant labor reforms, particularly a 2002 law granting workers, including noncitizens, the right to form and join unions. The law holds that the right to strike is a legitimate means for workers to defend their rights and interests, but that right is restricted for workers in the oil and gas, education, and health sectors. There are about 50 trade unions in Bahrain, but all unions must join the General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions (GFBTU). The GFBTU has many Shiite members, and during the height of the unrest in 2011, the federation called at least two general strikes to protest use of force against demonstrators. During March-May 2011, employers dismissed almost 2,500 workers from the private sector, and almost 2,000 from the public sector, including 25% of the country's union leadership. The government claims that virtually all were subsequently rehired. The State Department has asserted that the government made efforts in 2015 to reinstate workers dismissed or suspended during the period of high unrest. Some U.S. MEPI funds (see above) have been used for AFL-CIO projects with Bahraini labor organizations.

The architect of some recent labor reforms is the Labor Market Regulatory Authority (LMRA), which is separate from and considered more forward looking than the Ministry of Labor and Social Development. The LMRA has made strides to dismantle the "sponsorship system" that prohibited workers from changing jobs, and has helped institute requirements that every expatriate worker must be provided with health insurance. The LMRA has also instituted public awareness campaigns against trafficking in persons and has established a publicly funded "labor fund" to upgrade worker skill levels.³⁷

Executions and Torture

Well before the 2011 uprising, Human Rights Watch and other groups asserted that Bahrain was running counter to the international trend of ending executions. From 1977 until 2006, there were

³⁶ The text of the State Department report can be accessed at <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/271341.pdf>.

³⁷ Author conversations with Bahrain LMRA top officials, 2015-2016.

no executions in Bahrain, but, in November 2009, Bahrain's Court of Cassation approved the execution of an expatriate (citizen of Bangladesh). In February 2010, Human Rights Watch issued a study alleging systematic use by Bahraini security forces of torture.³⁸ A May 13, 2011, hearing of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission asserted that torture was being used regularly on those (mostly Shiites) arrested in the unrest. The State Department human rights report for 2011 said there were numerous reports of torture during the state of emergency (March-June 2011). In 2013, the government cancelled planned visits by the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.³⁹

U.S.-Bahrain Security Relations⁴⁰

U.S.-Bahrain ties are longstanding. The American Mission Hospital was established in 1903 as the first hospital in what is now Bahrain. A U.S. Embassy opened in Manama, Bahrain's capital, immediately after Bahrain became independent. Hundreds of Bahraini students come to the United States each year to study. The U.S. Ambassador to Bahrain is Justin Siberell, a career diplomat.

The U.S.-Bahrain 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 such as those posed by Iran and by terrorist movements in the region.⁴¹ There are over 7,000 U.S. military personnel deployed in Bahrain, mostly Navy, implementing various missions discussed below, including against the Islamic State. Bahrain signed a formal Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with the United States in 1991.

As a GCC member, Bahrain also engages in substantial defense cooperation with other GCC states. Bahrain also has formal relations with NATO under a 2004 NATO-GCC "Istanbul Cooperation Initiative" (ICI). As do the other GCC members in that forum (Kuwait, UAE, and Qatar), Bahrain has opened a diplomatic mission at NATO headquarters in Brussels.

U.S. Naval Headquarters

The cornerstone of U.S.-Bahrain defense relations is U.S. access to Bahrain's naval facilities; the United States has had a U.S. naval command presence in Bahrain since 1948. MIDEASTFOR (U.S. Middle East Force) and its successor, NAVCENT (naval component of U.S. Central Command), as well as the Fifth Fleet (reconstituted in June 1995), have been headquartered in Bahrain, at a sprawling facility called "Naval Support Activity (NSA)-Bahrain." It is also home to U.S. Marine Forces Central Command, Destroyer Squadron Fifty, and three Combined Maritime Forces.⁴² The "on-shore" U.S. command presence in Bahrain was established after the 1991 U.S.-led war against Iraq; prior to that, the U.S. naval headquarters in Bahrain was on a command ship docked and technically "off shore."

³⁸ Human Rights Watch. "Bahrain: Torture Redux." February 2010.

³⁹ <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/HRF-King-Al-Khalifa-Letter.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Information in this section obtained from a variety of press reports, and the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA).

⁴¹ A very small number of Bahrain nationals have joined the Islamic State organization.

⁴² For an extended discussion of the U.S. military presence in Bahrain, see Brookings Institution, Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence, Policy Paper "No 'Plan B': U.S. Strategic Access in the Middle East and the Question of Bahrain. June 2013, by Commander Richard McDaniel, U.S.N.

Some smaller U.S. ships (e.g., minesweepers) are home-ported there, but the Fifth Fleet consists mostly of ships that are sent to the region on six- or seven-month deployments. Generally operating in and around the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean/Northern Arabian Sea are an aircraft carrier strike group, an amphibious ready group, and surface combatants. In March 2012, the U.S. Navy began augmenting the fleet by doubling the number of minesweepers to eight, and sending additional mine-hunting helicopters. In 2013, the U.S. Navy added five coastal patrol ships.

NSA-Bahrain coordinates the operations of over 20 U.S. and allied warships in Combined Task Force (CTF) 151 and 152 that seek to interdict the movement of terrorists, pirates, arms, or weapons of mass destruction (WMD)-related technology and narcotics across the Arabian Sea. Bahrain has taken several turns commanding CTF-152, and it has led an antipiracy task force in Gulf/Arabian Sea waters—operations that are offshoots of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) that ousted the Taliban from power in Afghanistan in 2001. The coalition conducts periodic naval exercises, such as mine-sweeping drills, intended at least in part to signal resolve to Iran.

To further develop the NSA-Bahrain, the U.S. military is implementing a planned \$580 million military construction program that ran from 2010 until the end of 2017.⁴³ The latest round of construction doubled the size of the facility (to over 150 acres) by integrating the decommissioned Mina (port) Al Salman Pier, leased by the Navy under a January 2008 agreement, and adding buildings for administration, maintenance, housing, warehousing, and dining. The expansion supports the deployment of additional U.S. coastal patrol ships and the Navy's new littoral combat ship, and the docking of larger U.S. ships.⁴⁴ The expansion has also allowed for infrastructure for families of U.S. military personnel, including schools for young children. Including the latest expansion, the United States has spent about \$2 billion to improve the facility.

The NSA-Bahrain took on additional significance in December 2014 when Britain announced a deal with Bahrain to establish a fixed naval base in part of the Mina Al Salman pier. Under the reported agreement, facilities at Mina Al Salman are being improved to allow Britain's royal Navy to plan, store equipment, and house military personnel there.⁴⁵ And, also in December 2014, the GCC announced it would establish a joint naval force based in Bahrain to cooperate with the United States and other navies.

Among other facilities, a separate deep water port in Bahrain, Khalifa bin Salman Port, is one of the few facilities in the Gulf that can accommodate U.S. aircraft carriers and amphibious ships.⁴⁶ Shaykh Isa Air Base, improved with about \$45 million in U.S. funds, hosts a variety of U.S. aircraft, including F-16s, F-18s, and P-3 surveillance aircraft are stationed. About \$19 million was used for a U.S. Special Operations Forces facility.

Exploration of Alternatives? Some say that the United States should examine alternatives to NSA-Bahrain on the grounds that the unrest in Bahrain poses threats to U.S. personnel deployed there. Some express concerns that the Al Khalifa government could fall to a regime that demands a U.S. departure, although most Bahraini Shiite opposition leaders publicly support the U.S. military presence in Bahrain. The U.S. military has, through social media and other directives, instructed its personnel in Bahrain to avoid any areas of Bahrain where demonstrations are taking

⁴³ Among the recent appropriations to fund the expansion are: \$54 million for FY2008 (Division 1 of P.L. 110-161); \$41.5 million for FY2010 (P.L. 111-117); \$258 million for FY2011 (P.L. 112-10). \$100 million was requested for FY2012 for two projects, but was not funded in the FY2012 Consolidated Appropriation (P.L. 112-74).

⁴⁴ Hendrick Simoes. "Bahrain Expansion Latest Sign of Continued Presence." *Stars and Stripes*, December 16, 2013.

⁴⁵ "U.K. to Boost Military Presence in the Persian Gulf." Associated Press, December 7, 2014.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

place.⁴⁷ In 2013, then-Defense Secretary Hagel answered a Senator's inquiry about contingency planning in the event U.S. personnel at the facility come under threat. The enacted FY2016 National Defense Authorization Act, referenced above, did not contain a provision of an earlier version (H.R. 1735) to mandate a Defense Department report on alternative locations for the NSA-Bahrain. The department reportedly has done an assessment of the security situation in Bahrain and contingency planning to move the NSA, but the assessment has not been released publicly.⁴⁸ Still, continued funding for and performance of military construction to enhance the NSA would indicate that the Administration has no plans to relocate the facility in the near future.

Should there be a decision to relocate the NSA, potential alternatives would include Qatar's New Doha Port, Kuwait's Shuaiba port, and the UAE's Jebel Ali.⁴⁹ All three are close U.S. allies, but none has stated a position on whether it would be willing to host such a facility. U.S. officials say that the potential alternatives do not provide large U.S. ships with the ease of docking access that Bahrain does, and that many of the alternatives share facilities with commercial operations.

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

Bahrain was part of the U.S.-led allied coalition that ousted Iraq from Kuwait in 1991, hosting 17,500 U.S. troops and 250 U.S. combat aircraft that participated in the 1991 "Desert Storm" offensive against Iraqi forces. Bahraini pilots flew strikes during the war, and Iraq fired nine Scud missiles at Bahrain, of which three hit facilities there. Bahrain and the United States subsequently agreed to further institutionalize the defense relationship by signing a Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) on October 28, 1991, for an initial period of 10 years. It remains in effect.⁵⁰ The pact reportedly gives the United States access to Bahrain's air bases (Shaykh Isa Air Base) and to preposition strategic materiel (mostly U.S. Air Force munitions), requires consultations with Bahrain if its security is threatened, and provides for joint exercises and U.S. training of Bahraini forces.⁵¹ It reportedly includes a "Status of Forces Agreement" (SOFA) under which U.S. military personnel serving in Bahrain operate under U.S. law.

The DCA was the framework for U.S.-Bahrain cooperation to contain Saddam Hussein's Iraq during the 1990s. Bahrain hosted the U.S.-led Multinational Interdiction Force (MIF) that enforced a U.N. embargo on Iraq during 1991-2003 as well as the U.N. Special Commission (UNSCOM) inspection mission that worked to dismantle Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

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 deployed its U.S.-supplied frigate warship (the *Subha*) to help protect U.S. ships, and it sent ground and air assets to Kuwait in support of OIF. Bahrain and UAE have been the only GCC states to deploy forces to Afghanistan; Bahrain deployed 100 police officers to Afghanistan during 2009-2014.

⁴⁷ Facebook posts of NSA-Bahrain from 2013. Accessed June 2016. <https://www.facebook.com/NSABahrain/?fref=nf>.

⁴⁸ Bockenfeld statement to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, September 9, 2016. op.cit.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ "U.S.-Bahrain Defense Pact Renewed." *Agence France Presse*, August 5, 2011.

⁵¹ Details of the U.S.-Bahrain defense agreement are classified. Some provisions are discussed in Sami Hajjar, *U.S. Military Presence in the Gulf: Challenges and Prospects* (U.S. Army War College: Strategic Studies Institute), March 2002, p. 27. The State and Defense Departments have not provided CRS with requested information on the duration of the pact, or whether its terms had been modified in recent years.

Major Non-NATO Ally Designation

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

U.S. Security Assistance and Arms Transfers

Bahrain’s small annual government budget (approximately \$10 billion), allows for only modest amounts of national funds to be used for purchases of major combat systems. The United States provides small amount of military assistance that goes towards Bahrain’s arms buys from the United States, in order to enhance Bahrain’s ability to participate in regional security missions. The government’s response to the political unrest caused the Obama Administration to put on hold sales to Bahrain of arms that could easily be used against protesters, primarily those used by the Interior Ministry, as well as to hold up or condition the sale of combat systems such as combat aircraft. The Trump Administration has maintained restrictions on sales of equipment that could be used against protesters, while dropping conditions or holds on sales of most major combat systems. On September 8, 2017, the Administration notified Congress of potential arms sales to Bahrain with an estimated total value of nearly \$4 billion.

Assistance to the Bahrain Defense Forces/Ministry of Defense

The main recipient of U.S. military assistance is the Bahrain Defense Force (BDF)—Bahrain’s regular military force—which totals about 8,000 active duty personnel, of which 2,000 are Bahraini Air Force and Navy personnel. There are another 2,000 personnel in Bahrain’s National Guard - a unit that is separate from both the BDF and the Ministry of Interior. The BDF, as well as Bahrain’s police forces, are run by Sunni Bahrainis, but supplement their ranks with unknown percentages of paid recruits from Sunni Muslim neighboring countries, including Pakistan, Yemen, Jordan, and elsewhere. Some human rights groups say that BDF equipment, such as Cobra helicopters, has been used against protesters.

Most U.S. military assistance to Bahrain is in the form of Foreign Military Financing (FMF), used to help Bahrain buy and maintain U.S.-origin weapons, to enhance interoperability with U.S. forces as well as with other GCC forces, to augment Bahrain’s air defenses, and to improve counterterrorism capabilities. In recent years, some FMF funds have been used to build up Bahrain’s Special Operations forces and to help the BDF use its U.S.-made Blackhawk helicopters.⁵² The Defense Department estimates that about 50% of Bahrain’s forces are fully capable of integrating into a U.S.-led coalition.

The United States has reduced FMF to Bahrain since the unrest began, in part to try to compel the government to undertake political reforms. The Obama Administration’s FY2012 aid request, made at the start of the unrest, included \$25 million in FMF for Bahrain, but only \$10 million was provided. FMF amounts provided or requested since are depicted in the table below. FY2017 funds were used to support Bahrain’s maritime security capacity by assisting the Bahrain Coast Guard and upgrading the Coast Surveillance System that reportedly provides Bahrain and the U.S. Navy a 360-degree field of vision.⁵³

⁵² “Revealed: America’s Arms Sales to Bahrain Amid Bloody Crackdown,” op. cit.

⁵³ “Bahrain Government’s Ties With the United States Run Deep,” op. cit.

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

Excess Defense Articles (EDA)

The BDF is eligible to receive grant “excess defense articles” (EDA), and it has received over \$400 million worth of EDA since the program began for Bahrain in 1993. In June 1995, the United States provided 50 M-60A3 tanks to Bahrain as a “no cost” five-year lease. Bahrain later received title to the equipment. In July 1997, the United States transferred the FFG-7 “Perry class” frigate *Subha* (see above) as EDA. The Obama Administration supported providing another frigate (an “extended deck frigate”) as EDA because the *Subha* is approaching the end of its service life, but Bahrain decided instead to devote U.S. military aid to maintaining the *Subha*.

International Military Education and Training Funds (IMET)

As noted in **Table 4**, small amounts of International Military Education and Training funds (IMET) are provided to Bahrain to inculcate principles of civilian control of the military, democracy, and interoperability with U.S. forces. Approximately 100 BDF students attend U.S. military schools each year through the IMET program. A roughly equal number train in the United States under the U.S. Foreign Military Sales program (using FMF). Amounts provided are shown in the table below.

Major Foreign Military Sales (FMS)

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

- *F-16s and other U.S.-made Aircraft.* Since 1998, Bahrain has purchased 22 U.S.-made F-16 Block 40 aircraft. In 2016, Bahrain submitted a request for 17-19 new production F-16Vs, with an estimated value of nearly \$4 billion.⁵⁴ The Obama Administration notified the sale to Congress with the condition that it would not finalize approval until Bahrain improves its human rights record.⁵⁵ The Trump Administration dropped that condition, asserting that maintaining the conditionality is not the optimum way to influence Bahrain’s policy on its domestic unrest.⁵⁶ On September 8, 2017, the Administration notified Congress of a potential sale of 19 F-16Vs at an estimated value of \$2.785 billion, and of an upgrade of Bahrain’s existing F-16 Block 40s to the F-16V configuration, at an estimated cost of \$1.082 billion.⁵⁷ The sale process was far along enough to avoid Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker’s July 2017 restriction on providing informal concurrence to arms sales to the GCC states – a

⁵⁴ Craig Hoyle. “Bahrain Considering F-16V Order, Fleet Upgrade.” *Flight Global*, January 26, 2016.

⁵⁵ Anthony Capaccio, Bloomberg News, September 30, 2016. <http://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2016-09-30/bahrain-s-lockheed-f-16-purchase-said-to-come-with-u-s-strings>.

⁵⁶ <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/feb/7/trump-ready-to-approve-weapons-packages-to-saudi-a/>.

⁵⁷ DSCA Transmittal numbers 16-60 and 16-59.

- restriction imposed in connection with the intra-GCC rift discussed below. That restriction was dropped by Chairman Corker on February 8, 2018.⁵⁸
- *Air-to-Air Missiles.* In 1999 and 2009, the United States sold Bahrain Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAMs) to arm the F-16s. In 2012, the Obama Administration approved a sale of additional AMRAAMs.
 - *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 2007, the United States sold Bahrain several hundred “Javelin” anti-armor missiles worth up to \$42 million; nine UH-60M Blackhawk helicopters worth up to \$252 million; and six Bell search and recovery helicopters, valued at about \$160 million.
 - *Stingers.* Section 581 of the FY1990 foreign operations appropriation act (P.L. 101-167) made Bahrain the only Gulf state eligible to receive the Stinger shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missile, and the United States has sold Bahrain about 70 Stingers since 1990. (This authorization has been repeated subsequently.)
 - *Humvees and TOWs.* In September 2011, the Obama Administration announced a sale to the BDF and National Guard of 44 “Humvee” (M115A1B2) armored vehicles and several hundred TOW missiles of various models, including 50 “bunker busters,” with an estimated total value of \$53 million. State Department officials said the sale would not violate the intent of the “Leahy amendment,” a provision of U.S. law that forbids U.S. sales of equipment to security units that have committed human rights abuses.⁵⁹ But, two joint resolutions introduced in the 112th Congress (S.J.Res. 28 and H.J.Res. 80) would have prohibited the sale unless the Administration certified that Bahrain is rectifying alleged abuses.⁶⁰ In October 2011, even though Congress did not formally block the sale, the Obama Administration told Congress it would delay it pending assessment of the BICI report. In January 2012, the Administration put the sale on hold indefinitely. On June 20, 2015, the State Department announced that the sale would proceed because the government had “made some meaningful progress on human rights reforms and reconciliation.”⁶¹ Separately, on September 8, 2017, the Trump Administration notified Congress of a potential sale of 221 TOW missiles of various types, with an estimated valued of \$27 million.
 - *Maritime Defense Equipment and Spare Parts.* The Obama Administration did approve sales to Bahrain of equipment mostly, but not exclusively, for maritime security. In May 2012, in conjunction with a visit to Washington, DC, by Bahrain’s Crown Prince, the Administration announced the release of additional U.S. arms for the BDF, Bahrain’s Coast Guard (a Ministry of Interior-controlled

⁵⁸ Letter to Secretary of State Rex Tillerson from SFRC Chairman Bob Corker. February 8, 2018.

⁵⁹ James Lobe. “Bahrain: U.S. Congress Urged to Reject Arms Sales.” IPS News Service, September 29, 2011.

⁶⁰ To block a proposed arms sale would require passage of a joint resolution to do so, presumably with a veto-proof majority.

⁶¹ Statement by State Department spokesman John Kirby. “Lifting Holds on Security Assistance to the Government of Bahrain.” June 29, 2015.

force), and the National Guard, stating that the weaponry was not suited for use against protesters and supported Bahrain's maritime defense. The Administration did not release a complete list of weapons to be sold, but it gave a few examples: (1) the Perry-class frigate, as EDA, discussed above, but later mooted; and (2) harbor security boats for the Bahrain Coast Guard, as EDA.⁶² No legislation to block the sale was enacted. Separately, on September 8, 2017, the Trump Administration notified Congress of a potential sale of two 35-Meter Fast Patrol Boats, at an estimated cost of \$60 million. Bahrain is also upgrading six naval vessels under a \$70 million contract with Italy's Leonardo firm.

- *Missile Defense.* U.S.-made Patriot missile defense batteries are deployed in Bahrain. However, Bahrain's limited budget largely precludes it from any major role in the U.S. effort to forge a coordinated missile defense for the Gulf.

Counterterrorism Cooperation/Ministry of Interior⁶³

Bahrain's security services assert that they are working against terrorist group members, but critics assert that the government uses anti-terrorism laws and operations to suppress Shiite dissidents, even those who do not use violence. Bahrain has arrested, charged, and in some cases stripped the citizenship of some Bahrainis accused of supporting the Islamic State, and no terrorist attacks by that group have been reported in Bahrain. On June 23, 2016, Bahraini courts sentenced 24 supporters of the Islamic State for plots in Bahrain, including attacks on Shiites.

The United States cooperates with Bahrain's Interior Ministry on counterterrorism issues, although U.S. cooperation with the ministry has been subject to restrictions since 2011 because of the ministry's role in internal security. The ministry has retained a reputation among the Shiite population for brutality, although it had reformed somewhat since the departure in the late 1990s of security services chief Ian Henderson, a former British colonial-era commander. The February 2014 expulsion of Malinowski led the Obama Administration to suspend most cooperation with the Ministry,⁶⁴ but U.S. cooperation with it resumed later in 2014 after Bahrain joined the anti-Islamic State coalition. The Trump Administration has retained restrictions on working with the Ministry, according to September 12, 2017, testimony by Ambassador-nominee Justin Siberell. U.S. assistance to MOI personnel is analyzed below.

- *Arms Sales to the MOI.* Sales of U.S.-made small arms such as those sold to the Interior Ministry are generally commercial sales, licensed by State Department, with Defense Department concurrence. In May 2012, the State Department put "on hold" license requests for sales to Bahrain of small arms, light weapons, and ammunition⁶⁵—all of which could potentially be used against protesters. Appearing to refer to Bahrain, the FY2014 Consolidated Appropriation Act (P.L. 113-76) prohibited use of U.S. funds for "tear gas, small arms, light weapons, ammunition, or other items for crowd control purposes for foreign security forces that use excessive force to repress peaceful expression, association, or assembly in countries undergoing democratic transition." The Trump Administration has maintained the hold on new sales of U.S. arms and equipment to MOI-led forces.

⁶² Nicole Gaouette. "U.S. Resumes Bahrain Arms Sales Citing Security Interests." Bloomberg News, May 11, 2012.

⁶³ Much of the information in this section is derived from the State Department report on international terrorism for 2015, cited previously.

⁶⁴ Michael Gordon. "Expelled U.S. Official to Return to Bahrain." *New York Times*, December 2, 2014.

⁶⁵ Email from the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Legislative Affairs, May 20, 2013.

- *U.S. Training/NADR Funding.* The United States provides assistance to the MOI primarily through programs funded by Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining and Related Programs (NADR) funds, which have been provided to Bahrain since 1987, to help the MOI confront violent extremists and terrorist groups. U.S. officials assert that a general lack of training and antiquated investigative methods had slowed the MOI Police Force's progress on counterterrorism and criminal investigations. The ministry's role in putting down unrest prompted an Obama Administration "review" of the use of NADR-ATA (Antiterrorism Assistance) funding for the ministry to ensure that none of the funding was used against protestors. The State Department report on international terrorism for 2014 stated that the "Leahy Law" requirement to vet Bahrain personnel participating in ATA programs prompted the cancellation of planned ATA courses for Bahrain in 2015. However, that report for 2015 stated that one ATA-related course took place that year; the report for 2016 did not mention any. The Trump Administration requested \$400,000 in NADR funds for FY2018 to train MOI personnel in investigative techniques, with a human rights focus, and to help MOI personnel respond to violent factions' use of explosives. Some NADR-ATA funds have previously been used to augment the ability of Bahraini forces to protect U.S. diplomatic and military facilities in Bahrain.
- *Bahrain's Coast Guard.* This force, which is under the Ministry of Interior, polices Bahrain's waterways and contributes to the multilateral mission to monitor and interdict the seaborne movement of terrorists and weapons. U.S. restrictions on support for the Ministry of Interior forces have generally not applied to the Bahrain Coast Guard, as noted above.

Countering Terrorism Financing

Bahrain has been a regional leader in countering terrorism financing since well before the Islamic State organization emerged as a threat. Bahrain has hosted the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force (MENA/FATF) secretariat, and its Central Bank, Financial Information Unit (within the Central Bank). Bahrain's banks cooperate with U.S. efforts against terrorism financing and money laundering. In 2013, the government amended the Charity Fundraising Law of 1956 to increase terrorism financing monitoring and penalties. In October 2017, King Hamad issues a series of decrees mandating extensive prison sentences and financial penalties on persons found guilty of raising funds for groups engaged in terrorist activities in Bahrain or internationally.⁶⁶

In April 2015, Bahrain hosted the 8th European Union-GCC Workshop on Combating Terrorist Financing, and Bahrain is a member of the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition's Counter-ISIS Finance Group. In 2015, Bahrain hosted a workshop focused on preventing the abuse of the charitable sector to fund terrorism, and a U.S.-GCC anti-Hezbollah workshop in 2016.

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

⁶⁶ Release by the Embassy of Bahrain in Washington, DC. October 4, 2017.

Foreign Policy Issues

Bahrain is unique in the GCC in having a majority Shiite population. Bahrain is politically closest to Saudi Arabia, as demonstrated by the Saudi-led GCC intervention to help the government suppress the uprising in 2011, and Bahrain's joining of the June 2017 Saudi-led move to isolate Qatar. That dispute remains unresolved. King Hamad did not attend the December 5, 2017, annual GCC summit in Kuwait, convened in part to try to resolve the intra-GCC rift. However, Bahrain did not join a Saudi-UAE cooperation committee announced the day the GCC summit began, and which was viewed in part as undermining GCC solidarity.

Many Saudis visit Bahrain to enjoy the relatively more liberal social atmosphere there, using a causeway constructed in 1986 that links Bahrain to the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia, where most of the kingdom's Shiites (about 10% of the population) live. King Hamad's fifth son, Khalid bin Hamad, married a daughter of the late Saudi King Abdullah in 2011. In May 2012, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain announced a proposal to form a political and military union among the GCC states ("Riyadh Declaration"), but opposition by the other four GCC states caused it to languish.

Bahrain is also politically close to Kuwait, in part because of historic ties between their two royal families. Both royal families hail from the Anizah tribe that settled in Bahrain and Kuwait. Kuwait has sometimes sought to mediate the Bahrain political crisis, but Shiites in Kuwait's parliament argued that the Kuwaiti ruling family has sided firmly with the Al Khalifa. Kuwait, as noted, joined the GCC intervention in Bahrain in 2011 and has financially aided Bahrain.

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

In March 2014, Bahrain joined Saudi Arabia and UAE in removing its ambassador from Qatar, a disagreement centered on Qatar's support for Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated opposition movements in several Middle Eastern countries. Qatar views the Brotherhood as a constructive movement that can help bring peaceful transition to democracy in the region. That stance runs counter to the views of almost all the other GCC states, who view the Brotherhood as a source of unrest within the GCC states. The dispute eased in November 2014 and the GCC ambassadors returned to Doha. In the June 2017 Saudi-led isolation of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE asserted, among other allegations, that Qatar was backing violent Bahraini Shiite opposition groups such as those discussed above—a charge the three GCC states had not previously leveled against Qatar and which most experts assess as unlikely.

Iran

Bahrain has long blamed Iran for encouraging Bahrain's Shiite opposition to rebel against the government, and for supplying the violent opposition with arms and explosives, including machinery to manufacture antitank weaponry discussed above. Since 2015, U.S. officials have

generally corroborated that Iran is arming radical underground oppositionists by stating, in the annual State Department report on international terrorism for 2015, that

Iran has also provided weapons, funding and training to Shia militants in Bahrain. In 2015, the Government of Bahrain raided, interdicted, and rounded up numerous Iran-sponsored weapons caches, arms transfers, and militants.

The Trump Administration has tilted toward the government view that Iran is attempting to promote antigovernment violence. The U.S. designation as terrorists of the two Ashtar Brigades figures, noted above, stated that the designations “follow a recent increase in militant attacks in Bahrain, where Iran has provided weapons, funding, and training to militants.” As noted above, the State Department report on terrorism for 2016 noted that several violent Shiite groups have been accused of working with the IRGC-QF to launch domestic attacks.

Bahrain’s leaders cite Iranian statements as evidence that Iran seeks to promote the overthrow of the government. Iranian leaders reacted harshly to the Bahrain government’s June 2016 revocation of Shaykh Isa Qasim’s citizenship. On June 19, 2016, Major General Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the IRGC-QF, warned that the citizenship revocation would “ignite a response ...to make the Al Khalifa disappear.”⁶⁷ Six days later, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene’i called the revocation “blatant foolishness and insanity” that would mean “removing a barrier between fiery Bahrain youths and the state.”

Bahrain sided decisively with Saudi Arabia in the Saudi-Iran dispute of January 2016 in which Iranian protesters attacked two Saudi diplomatic facilities in Iran in response to the Saudi execution of dissident Shiite cleric Nimr al-Baqr Al Nimr. As did Saudi Arabia, Bahrain broke diplomatic relations with Iran, going beyond a 2011-2012 cycle of tensions in which Iran and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors. In March 2016, all the GCC states declared Lebanese Hezbollah, a key Iran ally, a terrorist organization and discouraged or banned their citizens from visiting Lebanon. Bahrain simultaneously closed Future Bank, a Bahrain bank formed and owned by two major Iranian banks (Bank Saderat and Bank Melli). Earlier, in 2013, Bahrain declared Hezbollah a terrorist organization, accusing it of helping a Shiite-led “insurgency” in Bahrain.⁶⁸

Bahrain expressed support for Iran’s right to civilian nuclear power, but it said that “when it comes to taking that [nuclear] power, to developing it into a cycle for weapon grade, that is something that we can never accept, and we can never live with in this region.”⁶⁹ It supported the U.S. strategy of placing economic pressure on Iran to compel it to limit its nuclear program. In March 2008, the United States sanctioned Future Bank, mentioned above, under Executive Order 13382 (anti-proliferation). Bahrain did not take direction action against Future Bank initially but, in April 2015, Bahrain seized control of Future Bank as well as the Iran Insurance Company. Bahrain’s closure of the Bank outright in February 2016 came despite the fact that the United States “de-listed” the bank from sanctions in January 2016 in conjunction with the Iran nuclear agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)).

As did the other GCC states, Bahrain expressed initial concern about the U.S. diplomatic approach to Iran that produced the JCPOA. Perhaps out of concern that the United States might accept an enhanced regional role for Iran after a JCPOA was reached, King Hamad announced, a

⁶⁷ Simon Henderson. “High Noon in Bahrain: Will Tehran Blink First?” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 27, 2016.

⁶⁸ The United States designated Hezbollah as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, FTO, in 1997 when that list was established by the Immigration and Naturalization Act, 8 U.S.C. 1189.

⁶⁹ Department of State. Transcript of Remarks by Secretary Clinton and Foreign Minister Al Khalifa. December 3, 2010.

few days in advance, that he would not attend the U.S.-GCC summit at Camp David during May 13-14, 2015 and sent the Crown Prince in his stead. At the summit, the Administration offered new sales to the GCC states of sophisticated weaponry and establishing expanded cooperation on maritime security, cybersecurity, missile defense, and other issues, and the lifting of the hold on the Humvee and TOW sale, discussed above, came several weeks after that meeting. King Hamad attended the second U.S.-GCC summit in April 2016, which announced some new initiatives including U.S. training for GCC special forces, and a program of U.S.-GCC military exercises.⁷⁰ Bahrain later joined the GCC in publicly supporting the JCPOA's nuclear curbs on Iran while at the same time calling for increased vigilance against Iran's "destabilizing regional activities."

At the same time, Bahrain maintains relatively normal trade with Iran, and some Bahrain energy firms may still be supplying gasoline to Iran. No U.N. Security Council Resolution barred such sales, but a 2010 U.S. law—the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act of 2010 (CISADA, P.L. 111-195)—provided for sanctions against foreign firms that sell more than \$1 million worth of gasoline to Iran.⁷¹ No Bahraini gasoline traders were sanctioned, and that provision has been waived to implement the JCPOA. A 2007 visit to Bahrain by then-President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad resulted in a preliminary agreement for Bahrain to buy 1.2 billion cubic feet per day (for 25 years) of Iranian gas via a planned undersea pipeline and for Bahrain to invest \$4 billion to develop Phases 15 and 16 of Iran's South Pars gas field (the source of the gas supply). Largely because of the Bahrain-Iran political rift, the arrangement has not advanced.

Bahrain's allegations about Iran are long-standing. In December 1981, and then again in June 1996, Bahrain publicly accused Iran of trying to organize a coup by pro-Iranian Bahraini Shiites. In 2009, an advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader, referred to Bahrain as Iran's 14th province, reviving Bahrain's long-standing concerns that Iran would again challenge its sovereignty. Persian officials contested Bahrain's sovereignty repeatedly during the 19th and 20th centuries, including in 1957, when a bill was submitted to the Iranian Majlis (legislature) to make Bahrain a province of Iran. Bahrain considers the independence issue closed: when Iran reasserted its claim to Bahrain in 1970, prior to the end of British rule in Bahrain, the U.N. Secretary-General dispatched a representative to determine the views of Bahrainis, who found that the island's residents overwhelmingly favored independence from all outside powers, including Iran. The findings were endorsed by U.N. Security Council Resolution 278 and Iran's Majlis ratified them.

Iraq/Syria/Islamic State Organization

Bahrain cooperated with the U.S.-led effort in 2003 to overthrow Iraq's Saddam Hussein militarily. Bahrain-Iraq relations deteriorated after 2005 as Iraq's Shiite-dominated government marginalized Sunni leaders, and particularly after Iraqi Shiite leaders—and Iraqi Shiites generally—expressed support for the 2011 Bahrain uprising. Bahrain did not contribute financially to Iraq reconstruction, but it participated in the "Expanded Neighbors of Iraq" regional dialogue on Iraq that ended in 2008, and it posted its first post-Saddam ambassador to Iraq in October 2008. Bahrain sent a low-level delegation to the March 27-29, 2012, Arab League summit in Baghdad. As have the other GCC states, Bahrain's government has blamed Iraqi government policy toward its Sunni minority for the rise of the Islamic State organization.

Similarly, Bahrain and the other GCC states have blamed Syrian President Bashar Al Assad for authoritarian policies that have alienated Syria's Sunni Arab majority and fueled support for the

⁷⁰ White House Fact Sheet. April 21, 2016. For text, see <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/21/fact-sheet-implementation-us-gulf-cooperation-council-strategic>.

⁷¹ See CRS Report RS20871, *Iran Sanctions*, by (name redacted) .

Islamic State. In 2011, Bahrain and the other GCC countries withdrew their ambassadors from Syria and voted to suspend Syria's membership in the Arab League. Bahrain's government has not, by all accounts, been providing funding or weaponry to any Syrian rebel groups.

Asserting that the Islamic State poses a regional threat, on September 22, 2014, Bahrain and the other GCC states joined the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition. Bahrain conducted air strikes against Islamic State positions in Syria, as did several other GCC states, but the State Department's report on terrorism for 2016 stated that Bahrain "has not contributed substantively to coalition [anti-ISIS] military efforts since 2014." None of the GCC states engaged in anti-Islamic State air operations in Iraq, on the grounds that the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government is aligned with Iran. Domestically, according to the State Department report, Bahrain's counter-terrorism efforts have been directed not only at Shiite militants but at ISIS sympathizers as well.

Yemen

Bahrain joined the GCC diplomatic efforts to persuade Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh to cede power to a transition process in 2012, but the successor government was weak. In 2015, Zaidi Shiite "Houthi" militia rebels, backed to some degree by Iran, took control of the capital, Sanaa, and forced President Abdu Rabbu Mansur Al Hadi to leave Yemen. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia assembled a coalition of Arab states, including Bahrain and all the other GCC countries except Oman, to combat the Houthis and try to compel them to accept a restoration of the previous government. Bahrain has conducted air strikes and contributed some ground forces to the effort. Eight members of the BDF have been killed in the engagement, to date, and a Bahraini Air Force F-16 crashed in Yemen-related operations on December 30, 2015. The pilot survived.

Israeli-Palestinian Dispute

On the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, Bahraini leaders have on occasion taken positions outside a GCC consensus. In a July 2009, op-ed, Crown Prince Salman called on the Arab states to do more to communicate to the Israeli people ideas for peaceful resolution of the dispute.⁷² In October 2009, Bahrain's then-foreign minister called for direct talks with Israel and in September 2017, King Hamad called for the Arab states to forge direct ties to Israel and an end to the Arab boycott of Israel. Still, Bahrain supports the efforts of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to obtain U.N. recognition for a State of Palestine. Bahraini leaders publicly criticized the announcement by President Trump on December 6, 2017, recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital as an obstacle to forge an Israeli-Palestinian peace.

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

Economic Issues

Bahrain's economy has been affected by the domestic unrest and by the sharp fall in oil prices since mid-2014. Hydrocarbons still account for about 80% of government revenues, and most of that hydrocarbons revenue consists of oil exports from a field that Saudi Arabia shares equally

⁷² "Arabs Need to Talk to the Israelis." *Washington Post*, July 16, 2009.

with Bahrain, the Abu Safa field, which produces 300,000 barrels per day. Bahrain's oil and gas reserves are the lowest of the GCC states, estimated respectively at 210 million barrels of oil and 5.3 trillion cubic feet of gas. The fall in oil prices since 2014 has caused Bahrain to cut subsidies of some fuels and some foodstuffs. The financial difficulties have also contributed to a lack of implementation of government promises to provide more low-income housing (presumably for Shiites, who tend to be among the poorer Bahrainis). To try to diversify, Bahrain is investing in its banking and financial services sectors (about 25.5% of GDP combined). A comprehensive assessment of Bahrain's economy is provided in the Economist Intelligence Unit country report.⁷³

U.S.-Bahrain Economic Relations

The United States buys virtually no oil from Bahrain. The major U.S. import from the country is aluminum. That product and other manufacturing account for the existence in Bahrain of a vibrant middle and working class. Most of the workers who are citizens are Shiite Bahrainis, but many Bahraini Shiites own businesses and have done well economically.

To encourage reform and signal U.S. appreciation, the United States and Bahrain signed an FTA on September 14, 2004. Implementing legislation was signed January 11, 2006 (P.L. 109-169). However, in light of the unrest, the AFL-CIO has urged the United States to void the FTA on the grounds that Bahrain is preventing free association of workers and abridging their rights. In 2005, total bilateral trade was about \$780 million, and, as depicted in the table below, U.S.-Bahrain trade has more than doubled since the U.S.-Bahrain FTA to about \$1.7 billion in 2016. About 180 U.S. companies do business in Bahrain. In concert with Crown Prince Salman's visit to Washington, DC in November 2017, Bahrain-based companies in several sectors signed trade deals with U.S. based firms, including a memorandum of understanding between Aluminum Bahrain (Alba) and General Electric. More than 200 American companies operate in Bahrain, and Amazon Web Services is slated to open its first regional headquarters in Bahrain.⁷⁴

Some U.S. funds have been used to provide assistance to Bahrain for purposes that are not purely security related. In 2010, MEPI supported the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the Small Business Administration and Bahrain's Ministry of Industry and Commerce to support small and medium enterprises in Bahrain. The report on a Senate foreign operations appropriations bill for FY2015 (S.Rept. 113-195 on S. 2499) states that the Appropriations Committee directs that at least \$3.5 million in Economic Support Funds (ESF) be made available for "programs and activities to promote reconciliation, democratic reform, and adherence to international human rights and labor rights standards in Bahrain." However, not all those funds were spent that fiscal year. MEPI funds have also been used to fund U.S. Department of Commerce programs ("Commercial Law Development Program") to provide Bahrain with technical assistance in support of trade liberalization and economic diversification, including modernization of the country's commercial laws and regulations.

⁷³ http://country.eiu.com/FileHandler.ashx?issue_id=1644685748&mode=pdf.

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

Table 3. Some Basic Facts About Bahrain

| | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Population | About 1.3 million, of which slightly less than 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. |
| GDP (purchasing power parity, PPP) | \$67 billion (2016). Would be \$32 billion at official exchange rate. |
| GDP per capita (PPP basis) | \$50,300 (2016) |
| GDP Real Growth Rate | 2% (2016)—about 1% slower than 2015 and 2.4% lower than 2014 |
| Budget | \$4.5 billion revenues, \$8.8 billion expenditures (2016) |
| Inflation Rate | 2.0% (2015) |
| Unemployment Rate | 4% (2014) |
| U.S. Exports to Bahrain | \$902 million (2016), down from \$1.275 billion in 2015 |
| U.S. Imports from Bahrain | \$768 million (2016), down from \$900 million in 2015 |

Source: CIA, *The World Factbook*.

Table 4. U.S. Assistance to Bahrain

(\$ in millions)

| | FY2003 | 04 | 05 | 06 | 07 | 08 | 09 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 |
|--------------------------|--------|------|------|------|-------|-------|------|------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| FMF | 90.0 | 24.6 | 18.9 | 15.6 | 15 | 3.968 | 8.0 | 19.0 | 15.46 | 10 | 13.0 | 10 | 7.5 | 5.0 | 5.0 | 0 |
| IMET | 0.448 | 0.60 | 0.65 | 0.65 | 0.616 | 0.622 | .661 | .670 | .435 | .554 | .487 | .522 | .577 | .416 | .800 | .400 |
| NADR | | | 1.49 | 2.76 | .776 | 0.744 | .500 | 1.10 | 1.5 | .500 | .900 | .790 | .610 | .800 | .800 | .400 |
| “Section 1206” | | | | 5.3 | 24.54 | 4.3 | 16.2 | | | | | | | | | |
| ESF/Dem. and Gov. | | | | | | | | | | | .300 | .52 | .685 | .350 | | |

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

Figure I. Bahrain



Source: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ba.html>.

Author Contact Information

(name redacted)
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs
fedacted@crs.loc.gov , 7-....

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