

# Bahrain: Issues for U.S. Policy

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## Summary

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

Bahrain is ruled by a hereditary monarchy and is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC; Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman); its politics have been restive, though the monarchy's control has not been threatened. With a population of 1.5 million people, a little over half of whom are Bahraini citizens, Bahrain has a history of sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims. Bahrain is the only GCC state to have a Shia majority population, and Bahrain's politics were unsettled during a 2011 uprising by a mostly Shia opposition to the Sunni-minority-led government of Bahrain's Al Khalifa ruling family. Since 2014, the unrest has been relatively low-level. Several senior opposition leaders remain imprisoned.

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

Bahrain has fewer financial resources than most of the other GCC states. Bahrain's oil revenues emanate primarily from a Saudi oil field whose proceeds go partly to Bahrain. In 2004, the United States and Bahrain signed a free trade agreement (FTA). In 2005, bilateral trade was about \$780 million, and U.S.-Bahrain trade has since increased fourfold. In 2024, the total volume of bilateral trade stood at \$2.8 billion.

Naval Support Activity (NSA) Bahrain, the U.S. Navy base in Manama, Bahrain, is the headquarters of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, which oversees all Navy operations in the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility (AOR). As of 2023, there were over 8,000 U.S. military personnel and civilian employees assigned to NSA Bahrain. In FY2023, the U.S. Department of Defense estimated that it would spend over \$770 million on personnel, operations, maintenance, and family housing costs for U.S. personnel stationed in Bahrain.

Members of Congress travel with some frequency to Bahrain to visit U.S. armed services personnel and provide oversight over the U.S. bilateral relationship and defense presence in the kingdom. During the 119<sup>th</sup> Congress, H.R. 1385, the Strengthening Cooperation and Security in the Middle East Act, would mandate that the Secretary of State report on a strategy to increase membership in the Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement or C-SIPA, a major agreement initially between the United States and Bahrain.

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## Overview

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

## Historical Background

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

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

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

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

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<sup>1</sup> Ahisha Ghafoor and Paul Mitchell, "Secret Deals Ending Britain's Control in Gulf Revealed," *BBC*, August 30, 2022.

## Domestic Politics

### The Al Khalifa Dynasty

King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa (75 years old) is the 14<sup>th</sup> ruling Al Khalifa monarch and the second ruler since the island kingdom's independence in 1971 (until 2002 Bahrain's heads of state were first referred to as "Hakims" then "Emirs"). Educated at Sandhurst Military Academy in Britain, King Hamad (see **Figure 1**) was previously commander of the Bahraini Defense Forces (BDF) and has ruled Bahrain since 1999. The constitution gives the king broad powers, including appointing all ministers and judges and amending the constitution. Nevertheless, during his first two decades of rule, King Hamad's late uncle, the longtime Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, exercised widespread executive authority over the government, particularly its internal security services. According to one account, though King Hamad had early in his reign attempted to liberalize Bahrain's political system, "Khalifa frustrated that process."<sup>2</sup> At the time of his death in November 2020, Khalifa bin Salman had been the longest serving prime minister in the world.

Since his uncle's death, King Hamad has appeared to focus on consolidating power among his direct descendants, accelerating Bahrain's economic diversification, and incorporating younger Bahrainis into the political system.<sup>3</sup> His eldest son, 55-year-old Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa,<sup>4</sup> is the prime minister and the de facto face of the country's attempt to modernize its institutions. Another of the king's sons, 37-year-old Sheikh Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa, serves as national security advisor (appointed in October 2019) and royal guard commander. Sheikh Nasser also holds the title of major general and routinely meets with U.S. and other foreign defense officials. According to one commentator, Sheikh Nasser's role is growing increasingly prominent, as he and the crown prince vie for power among the next generation of Al Khalifa royals.<sup>5</sup> *The Economist* notes that Sheikh Nasser is "reportedly the king's favourite son."<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 1. King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa**



**Source:** Government of Bahrain.

<sup>2</sup> "Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa," *The Times*, December 16, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Kristin Smith Diwan, "Death of Bahrain's Prime Minister Promotes Reformer, but Perhaps not Reforms," The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, November 18, 2020.

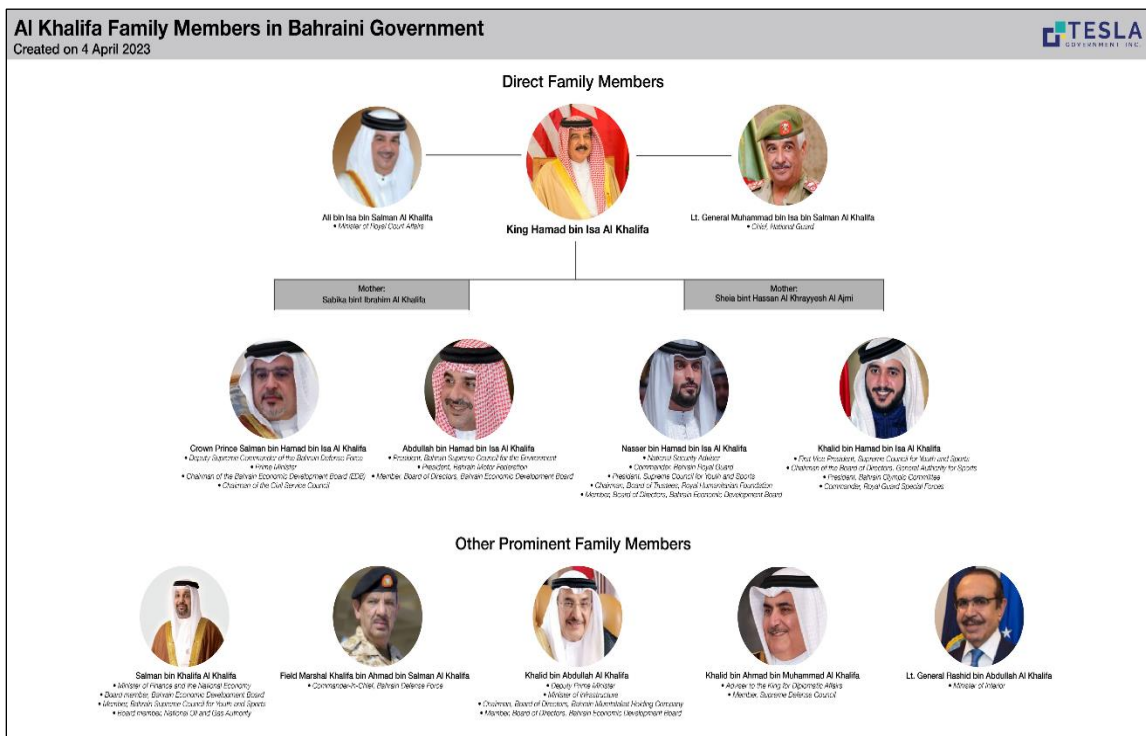
<sup>4</sup> According to Bahrain's constitution, royal succession is determined by agnatic (male only) primogeniture among the descendants of King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. The constitution does grant the king the power to appoint any of his other sons as his successor.

<sup>5</sup> Simon Henderson, "Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 14, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> "Sunnis and Shias in Bahrain Remain as Far Apart as Ever," *The Economist*, January 22, 2022.

**Figure 2. Prominent Members of the Al Khalifa Family**

As of April 2023



Source: Tesla Government Inc.

## The National Assembly

Bahrain's legislative branch of government consists of a bicameral National Assembly: the directly elected, 40-seat Council of Representatives (COR or *Majlis al Nuwab* in Arabic) and the royal-appointed, 40-seat Consultative Council (*Majlis al Shura* in Arabic). Enactment of any legislation requires concurrence by the king, but a veto can be overridden by a two-thirds majority vote of both chambers. In implementation of an agreement with the Shia opposition in 2012, King Hamad amended the constitution to designate the COR as the presiding chamber and give it the power to remove individual ministers by two-thirds majority. Still, the *Shura* Council's concurrence is needed to enact legislation, and King Hamad has tended to appoint only government supporters, including former high-ranking government officials, to that body. King Hamad also has typically appointed to the *Shura* Council several women and members of minority communities (Jewish and Christian) that have difficulty winning seats in the COR.

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

### Political Currents in Bahrain

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

Existing alongside its reputation for openness is a long history of Sunni-Shia sectarian tension.<sup>7</sup> Though at times, Sunnis and Shias have protested together, particularly during periods of labor unrest in the oil industry in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the 1979 Iranian revolution ushered in a period of Shia political activism and concomitant Sunni suspicion.<sup>8</sup> According to one account, "Since the Islamic revolution of 1979 that convulsed Iran and threatened the thrones of Sunni Arab monarchs across the Gulf, Bahrain has been on the fault line of the Sunni-Shia division."<sup>9</sup> Today, though many Bahraini Shia have risen to positions of power in the public and private sectors, Bahraini human rights organizations still report that the community is subjected to state-sponsored discrimination.

Foreign influence, particularly from neighboring Saudi Arabia, is a major factor in maintaining the political status quo in Bahrain. The island kingdom is dependent on the financial largesse of its Saudi neighbor, as Saudi Arabia seeks to keep Bahrain in its orbit, lest the Shia of Bahrain influence Saudi Arabia's own Shia population in its oil-rich Eastern Province. Some critics also assert that the U.S. naval presence in Bahrain legitimizes and bolsters Bahrain's unequal political structure.<sup>10</sup>

During the November 2022 COR elections, which some Shia groups had called on citizens to boycott, 73% of registered voters elected 40 members to the COR, of whom eight were women. One report suggests that since the pool of eligible voters in 2022 was actually smaller than in previous years (despite a population increase) that significant numbers of Bahraini citizens were deemed ineligible to vote.<sup>11</sup> With banned opposition parties unable to field candidates, most candidates were independents. According to one analysis, "Official figures claim a record turnout of 73%. However, a broad lack of enthusiasm about the candidates, few of which obtained the requisite 50% vote share in their constituencies in the first round, reflects broad disillusionment with the chamber's limited powers and the repressive political climate."<sup>12</sup> The next elections are slated for November 2026.

As a constitutional monarchy, legislative checks on executive decisionmaking tend to be most visible on fiscal matters. For example, during discussion of the most recent national budget, independent COR members negotiated with cabinet ministers to ensure that Bahraini citizens were not subject to cuts in social welfare payments and tax increases; instead, the government had to generate revenue from expatriates and the private sector.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> According to an older, but still relevant study from 1955, Bahrain's Shia population are "the oldest group among the present inhabitants of the shaykhdom and have been subjected through the centuries to successive conquests, so that although at present they equal or exceed the Sunnis in number - as the 1941 census indicates- they constitute the poorer and lower classes of society and manifest all the markings of a minority group." See, Fahim I. Qubain, "Social Classes and Tensions in Bahrain," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 3, Summer, 1955, pp. 269-280.

<sup>8</sup> Louay Bahry, "The Opposition in Bahrain: A Bellwether for the Gulf?" *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 5, Issue 2, May 1997.

<sup>9</sup> "Can Bahrain's Division Between Sunnis and Shias Be Healed?" *The Economist*, November 24, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Thérèse Postel, "Here's One Way to Stop the Brutal Repression in Bahrain," *The Atlantic*, March 13, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Dominic Dudley, "The Curious Case of Bahrain's Disappearing Voters," *Forbes*, November 19, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit, Bahrain Country Report, Updated February 8, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit, "Bahrain passes budget for 2025 and 2026," March 31, 2025.



# Human Rights

U.S. and global criticism of Bahrain’s human rights practices has focused in the past on the government response to political opposition, including lack of accountability of security forces, suppression of free expression, and treatment of prisoners. According to the 2023 U.S. Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices (most recent), significant human rights issues included, among other things

credible reports of: cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government; arbitrary arrest or detention; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; political prisoners or detainees; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, censorship, and enforcement or threat to enforce criminal libel laws to limit expression; serious restrictions on internet freedom; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including overly restrictive laws on the organization, funding, or operation of nongovernmental and civil society organizations.<sup>14</sup>

In April and June 2024, perhaps in an effort to deflect global criticism of Bahrain’s human rights record and respond to prisoner unrest inside the Bahraini penal system, King Hamad bin Isa bin Salman al Khalifa issued two mass pardons, freeing over 2,100 prisoners, including many political prisoners who had been detained since a 2011 uprising against the government. Combined, the pardons released over half the political prisoner population in the penal system; some Bahraini dissidents welcomed the moves, and others called for additional pardons of key opposition figures still imprisoned.<sup>15</sup>

Table 1. Democracy, Human Rights, and Development Indicators

Issue	Index	Ranking
Democracy	Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2025	“Not Free”
Press Freedom	Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index 2024	173/180 Countries
Corruption	Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2024	53/180 Countries
Human Development	United Nations Human Development Programme, Human Development Index 2022	34/193 Countries

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

# Women’s Rights

Though Bahraini leaders have sought to promote the role of women in government and society, Bahrain scores relatively low on international rankings of overall gender equality globally. The World Economic Forum’s 2024 Global Gender Gap report ranks Bahrain 116 out of 146 countries overall, though it is one of the four highest scoring countries in the Middle East and North Africa. The cabinet regularly has several female ministers (currently four), and, after the 2018 election, the COR elected its first woman speaker. There are several women’s advocacy organizations in Bahrain, including the Supreme Council for Women, backed by the wife of the king.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of State, *2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Bahrain*, April 22, 2024.  
<sup>15</sup> Nazeeha Saeed and Vivian Nereim, “Hundreds of Bahraini Political Prisoners Freed in ‘Bittersweet’ Royal Pardon,” *New York Times*, May 5, 2024.



Still, traditional customs and some laws tend to limit women's rights in practice. Women can drive, own and inherit property, and initiate divorce cases. However, the children of Bahraini men who are married to foreigners automatically are granted citizenship; Bahraini women married to non-nationals must petition the state to confer citizenship to their children.

## **Trafficking in Persons**

Bahrain is the only country in the Near East region that the U.S. State Department categorizes as a Tier 1 country (best) for its anti-human trafficking efforts. According to the U.S. State Department's 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report, Bahrain has "continued to demonstrate serious and sustained anti-trafficking efforts during the reporting period."<sup>16</sup> The Kingdom not only has multiple government agencies and law enforcement units committed to combating trafficking, but it also maintains an Expatriate Protection Center (EPC), which can shelter and protect trafficking victims and exploited foreign laborers.

## **Religious Freedom**

The State Department's 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom notes that "Sunni-Shia tensions continued, and both anti-Shia and anti-Sunni commentary appeared in social media."<sup>17</sup>

Bahrain's constitution declares Islam the official religion, but the government allows freedom of worship for Christians, Jews, and Hindus, although non-Muslim groups must register with the Ministry of Social Development to operate, and Muslim groups must register with the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs. There are 19 registered non-Muslim religious groups and institutions, including Christian churches of many denominations, and Hindu and Sikh groups. In 2022, Pope Francis visited Bahrain as part of a conference of religious leaders on peaceful coexistence; the kingdom is home to an estimated 80,000 Catholics and was the first Gulf country to open a Catholic church (1939). A small Jewish community—mostly from families of Iraqi Jews who settled in Bahrain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or from southern Iran—remains in Bahrain and is integrated into Bahraini society, including serving in appointed seats in the National Assembly and in diplomatic posts.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of State, 2024 *Trafficking in Persons Report: Bahrain*, June 2024.

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Department of State, 2023 *Report on International Religious Freedom: Bahrain*.

<sup>18</sup> "Jews Have Lived in Bahrain for 140 Years; the Israel Deal Changes Their Lives," *Times of Israel*, September 18, 2020.

## The Economy

Bahrain has fewer financial resources than do most of the other GCC states and runs chronically high budget deficits. As of the end of 2023, public debt is approximately 114% of gross domestic product (GDP), the highest level of indebtedness in the GCC.<sup>19</sup> Bahrain's oil revenues emanate primarily from a Saudi oil field whose proceeds go partly to Bahrain. Other GCC states also provide various forms of financial assistance. In 2018, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE provided Bahrain with a \$10 billion grants and loans aid package.

According to the International Monetary Fund, as of November 2024, economic growth in Bahrain is projected at 3.5% for 2025, due to upgrades in oil refining capacity and private sector credit growth,

Bahrain's overall economy has been diversified away from hydrocarbon production, and the IMF projects that the non-oil sector will comprise nearly 90% of Bahrain's economy by 2029.<sup>20</sup> Currently, the government remains dependent on oil and gas for 70%-80% of revenue. In April 2018, the government announced the discovery of an off-shore oil reservoir estimated of some 80 billion barrels of tight oil; those reserves continue to be under study, as well as other discoveries of off-shore gas.<sup>21</sup>

**Figure 3. Map of Bahrain**



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

## Foreign Policy Issues

Bahrain's regional and broader foreign policy generally mirrors that of its closest ally in the GCC, Saudi Arabia. The closeness of Bahraini-Saudi relations was demonstrated by the Saudi-led GCC intervention to help the government suppress the uprising in 2011, and Bahrain's joining of the June 2017 Saudi-led move to isolate Qatar and its dispatch of Bahraini military personnel to serve as part of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. Bahrain is also politically close to Kuwait, in part because of historic ties between their two ruling families. Both families hail from the Anizah tribe that settled in Bahrain and Kuwait.

<sup>19</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), "Bahrain," December 24, 2024.

<sup>20</sup> The International Monetary Fund, "IMF Executive Board Concludes 2024 Article IV Consultation with The Kingdom of Bahrain," November 27, 2024.

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Association, *Bahrain Country Commercial Guide*, May 8, 2024.

## Iran

Iran has contested Bahrain's sovereignty for centuries, and Bahraini leaders, who have the smallest Armed Forces of any Gulf state, have long seemed to fear that Iran aims to destabilize the kingdom.<sup>22</sup> Since 1979, as Iran's theocratic rulers have sought to export their model of religious governance to parts of the Arab world, Bahrain has publicly accused Iran of trying to organize coups by pro-Iranian Bahraini Shias.<sup>23</sup> Bahraini officials have also accused Iran of backing violent Shia groups in Bahrain. On March 12, 2024, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), in coordination with the Kingdom of Bahrain, sanctioned Iran-based operatives for the U.S. designated terrorist group Al Ashtar Brigades.<sup>24</sup> According to OFAC, these designations "highlight the critical role that the Iranian regime plays in providing support to Al-Ashtar Brigades."<sup>25</sup>

In 2016, Bahrain supported Saudi Arabia in a dispute with Iran over the Saudi execution of a dissident Saudi Shia cleric and attacks by Iranian protestors on two Saudi diplomatic facilities. Bahrain broke diplomatic relations with Iran at that time and those ties have not been restored, though relations may be warming.

Iran and Saudi Arabia restored ties in 2023, sparking some initial speculation that Bahrain would follow suit.<sup>26</sup> After Iran and Israel exchanged direct fire (and some Arab states permitted Israel to use their air space) in April 2024, Iran again made overtures to various Gulf Arab states, including Bahrain. In June 2024, the respective Iranian and Bahraini foreign ministers agreed to start talks aimed at resuming diplomatic relations.<sup>27</sup> In October 2024, after a second round of Israeli-Iranian direct attacks and a series of Iranian warnings to Arab Gulf states against cooperation with Israel,<sup>28</sup> Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi visited Bahrain – the first visit by an Iranian foreign minister to Bahrain since 2010.<sup>29</sup>

The Trump Administration has announced a maximum pressure campaign against Iran, and U.S. and other foreign officials may be considering various policy options toward Iran, including possible direct discussions. In March 2025, the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) announced that it had deployed missile systems to a series of small islands off the coast of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which Iran claims.<sup>30</sup> The UAE, Bahrain, and other small Gulf Arab monarchies may perceive this maneuver as a potential threat to their national security.

<sup>22</sup> Even before the formation of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Iran contested Bahrain's sovereignty throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In 1957, the Shah of Iran designated Bahrain as the country's fourteenth province ("Mishmahig Island" in Farsi).

<sup>23</sup> In 1981, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, a Bahraini Shia revolutionary group backed by Iran, attempted to carry out a coup in Bahrain. See John Vinocur, "1981 Plot in Bahrain Linked to Iranians," *New York Times*, July 25, 1982. See also, "Bahrain Coup Suspects Say They Trained in Iran," Reuters, June 6, 1996.

<sup>24</sup> The United States designated the Al Ashtar Brigades as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in 2018.

<sup>25</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, "U.S. Targets Al-Ashtar Brigades Operatives," March 12, 2024.

<sup>26</sup> "Bahrain, Iran Likely to Restore Diplomatic Ties Soon, US Diplomat Says," Reuters, June 13, 2023.

<sup>27</sup> "Iran, Bahrain to start talks on releasing Iranian funds, resuming political relations," Reuters, June 24, 2024.

<sup>28</sup> "Exclusive: Gulf states must not allow use of airspace against Iran, Iranian official says," Reuters, October 9, 2024.

<sup>29</sup> Mehran Haghiri, "Efforts To Restore Bahrain-Iran Ties Gather Momentum," *Afkar*, Middle East Council on Global Affairs, November 3, 2024.

<sup>30</sup> "Iran unveils missile systems on strategic Gulf islands," Agence France Presse, March 22, 2025.

## Israel

On September 16, 2020, Israel and Bahrain signed the Declaration of Peace, Cooperation, and Constructive Diplomatic and Friendly Relations, a diplomatic normalization agreement commonly referred to as one of the “Abraham Accords.”<sup>31</sup> For the next three years, Israel and Bahrain slowly advanced bilateral relations. In February 2022, Bahrain signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Israel on security cooperation.<sup>32</sup> In September 2023, Israel inaugurated a new embassy in the capital Manama, and foreign ministers from both countries agreed to cooperate to increase the number of direct flights, tourism, trade volume, and investments.<sup>33</sup>

However, the Hamas-led October 7, 2023, attack against Israel and Israel’s ensuing counter-attack in Gaza have largely disrupted momentum toward closer Israeli-Bahrain ties. Since the outbreak of war between Israel and Hamas, Bahrain’s Ambassador to Israel has continued to travel between the Kingdom and Israel, but has done so quietly and avoided public events.<sup>34</sup> Though ongoing conflict has hindered a deepening of ties, Israel and Bahrain have not severed relations. Bahrain has not engaged in as much bilateral trade and investment with Israel as its counterpart the United Arab Emirates.

Bahrain hosted the May 2024 Arab League summit at which Arab League members called for an end to Israeli military operations in Gaza and for, among other things, the establishment of a “sovereign Palestinian state on the lines of 4 June 1967 with East Jerusalem as its capital.”<sup>35</sup> Bahrain has joined other Arab League states in rejecting President Donald Trump’s calls for the relocation of the population in Gaza, and also joined other Arab states in condemning the resumption of Israeli military operations in Gaza in March 2025 and calling for the reestablishment of ceasefire, return to negotiations, and a sustainable end to the war.<sup>36</sup> Ongoing conflict in Gaza and the expansion of U.S. military operations against the Houthis in Yemen may deepen dilemmas facing Bahraini decisionmakers seeking to balance ties with Israel and the United States with concerns about domestic security and popular discontent.

## Yemen

In December 2023, in response to Houthi attacks against commercial shipping, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) launched Operation Prosperity Guardian, a 22-nation coalition aimed at protecting maritime commerce in the Red Sea. Bahrain, where NAVCENT is headquartered, is the only Arab member of the coalition. U.S. military statements have repeatedly noted how Bahrain has supported U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) forces in conducting air strikes against Houthi targets.<sup>37</sup> In September 2023, a Houthi drone strike near the Saudi-Yemeni border killed five additional Bahraini soldiers.

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Department of State, “The Abraham Accords,” accessed February 16, 2023.

<sup>32</sup> Rina Bassist, “Israel Signs Security Cooperation Agreement with Bahrain,” *Al Monitor*, February 3, 2022.

<sup>33</sup> “Israel Opens Embassy in Bahrain Three Years After Historic Abraham Accords,” Reuters, September 4, 2023.

<sup>34</sup> Lazar Berman, “Four years on, Abraham Accords are strained by Gaza war—but prove resilient,” *Times of Israel*, September 15, 2024.

<sup>35</sup> “Arab League’s Bahrain Declaration,” *The National*, May 16, 2024.

<sup>36</sup> Kingdom of Bahrain Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Statement by The Ministerial Committee Assigned by the Joint Arab Islamic Extraordinary Summit on Gaza,” March 20, 2025.

<sup>37</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “U.S. Forces, Allies Conduct Joint Strikes in Yemen,” February 26, 2024.

## U.S. Relations

### U.S. Defense Presence in Bahrain

A hallmark of the U.S.-Bahrain relationship is U.S. access to Bahrain's naval facilities. The United States has had a U.S. naval command presence in Bahrain since 1948: U.S. Middle East Force (MIDEASTFOR); its successor, NAVCENT; and the U.S. Fifth Fleet (reconstituted in 1995) have been headquartered at a sprawling facility called "Naval Support Activity (NSA) Bahrain," identified as the only permanent U.S. military base in the region. Also headquartered at NSA are the forward-deployed U.S. Marine Corps Fifth Marine Expeditionary Brigade and Marine Positioning Force, and the Coast Guard's Patrol Forces Southwest Asia (PATFORSWA), the Coast Guard's largest unit outside of the United States.<sup>38</sup> The Khalifa bin Salman Port, which sits at the end of a causeway connecting the port to NSA Bahrain, is one of the few facilities in the Gulf that accommodates U.S. aircraft carriers and amphibious ships (see **Figure 4** below).

**Figure 4. USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN 71) Transits to Khalifa bin Salman Port**



**Source:** U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1<sup>st</sup> Class Louis Rojas/Released

NSA Bahrain is the headquarters of the U.S. Navy's Fifth fleet, which oversees all Navy operation in the U.S. Central Command region (CENTCOM). According to the Department of Defense, the U.S. Fifth Fleet includes 8,000 American personnel and families.<sup>39</sup> Bahrain is the only country in CENTCOM to host military spouses and families.<sup>40</sup> For FY2025, the U.S. Department of Defense estimated that it would spend \$774.3 million on personnel, operations, maintenance, and family housing costs for U.S. personnel stationed in Bahrain.<sup>41</sup> P.L. 118-159 ,

<sup>38</sup> According to Jane's Defence, other units operating from NSA Bahrain include Destroyer Squadron 50, Submarine Squadron 21, Patrol and Reconnaissance Wing 57, Logistics Forces - U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, Mine Countermeasures Group 5, 831<sup>st</sup> Transportation Battalion, Maritime Expeditionary Security Group 2 - Detachment Bahrain, Fleet Anti-terrorism Security Team Company Central - Bahrain, Naval Special Warfare Group One Detachment Bahrain, Naval Surface Squadron 5, Military Sealift Command Central Command - Bahrain, and Navy Expeditionary Combat Forces Central - Bahrain, See, Jane's Defence, "Naval Support Activity Bahrain," January 30, 2024.

<sup>39</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "His Majesty the King of Bahrain Visits U.S. 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet Headquarters," April 17, 2023.

<sup>40</sup> The White House, "FACT SHEET: Biden-Harris Administration Strengthens Partnership with Kingdom of Bahrain and Launches 'Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement,'" September 13, 2023.

<sup>41</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, (Comptroller)/Chief Financial Officer, Defense Operation & Maintenance Overview Book, Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Request, March 2024. Overseas costs are (continued...)



the FY2025 National Defense Authorization Act, extended the project authorizations for U.S. Navy fleet maintenance (Section 2204) in Bahrain for \$26.3 million. The act also extended the authorization for energy conservation projects at U.S. Naval installations in Bahrain for \$15.3 million.

After the first Gulf War, Bahrain and the United States institutionalized their defense relationship by signing a Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) on October 28, 1991. It was renewed in 2017 for 15 years.<sup>42</sup> Under the DCA, Bahrain provides access, basing, and overflight privileges to facilitate U.S. regional military operations.<sup>43</sup> Since 1971, the United States and Bahrain have maintained a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which grants the U.S. government criminal jurisdiction over U.S. Armed Forces members stationed in Bahrain; the SOFA grants the Bahraini government civil jurisdiction over U.S. forces, “except for those matters arising in the course of the performance of their official duties.”<sup>44</sup>

## 2023 U.S.-Bahraini Cooperation Agreement

In September 2023, the United States and Bahrain signed a new bilateral agreement called the “Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement” (C-SIPA). The C-SIPA, which is an executive agreement requiring congressional notification but not approval, addresses defense, trade, and scientific-technical cooperation. The agreement commits the United States and Bahrain to regard external aggression or threats of external aggression against either of them as a matter of grave concern and “to develop and implement appropriate defense and deterrent responses” consistent with their respective constitutions and laws. While it is not a formal mutual defense treaty, National Security Advisor Sheikh Nasser said that the U.S. commitment falls “just short of Article 5 [collective defense article in the NATO treaty], but with all the guarantees.”<sup>45</sup>

Some observers have described the C-SIPA as a possible model for, and prelude to, closer U.S.-Saudi defense ties.<sup>46</sup> The United States and Bahrain signed the C-SIPA at a time of reportedly intense U.S.-Saudi diplomacy aimed at potentially expanding the Abraham Accords and, at the time, U.S. officials appeared to be touting the C-SIPA as a potential model for additional agreements with other U.S. partners.<sup>47</sup> The United Kingdom signed an agreement to join the C-SIPA in December 2024.<sup>48</sup> In the 119<sup>th</sup> Congress, H.R. 1385, the Strengthening Cooperation and

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funded by the following appropriations: Military Personnel; Operation and Maintenance; Family Housing Operation and Maintenance; Family Housing Construction; and Military Construction to support all DOD activities located outside the United States that are being performed on a permanent basis at U.S. military bases and other locations (U.S. Embassy, U.S. Consulates, U.S. Mission, etc.). Overseas costs also include the cost of transporting personnel, material, and equipment to and from overseas locations. The overseas amounts do not include incremental costs associated with contingency operations.

<sup>42</sup> “US, Bahrain Extend Defense Cooperation for 15 Years,” *Al Defaiya*, April 12, 2017.

<sup>43</sup> U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Security Cooperation with Bahrain,” fact sheet, June 14, 2021.

<sup>44</sup> See, 1971: Agreement for the Deployment in Bahrain of the United States Middle East Force (22 U.S.T. 2184) - modified by 1975 agreement for the Deployment in Bahrain of the United States Middle East Force (26 U.S.T. 3027) and 1977 agreement on the Status of Administrative Support Unit Personnel (28 U.S.T. 5312) 1991: Agreement concerning the deployment of United States forces (T.I.A.S. 12236).

<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Dent, “One Year of the U.S.-Bahrain C-SIPA: Signs of Progress, Regional Potential,” *PolicyWatch* 3919, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 21, 2024.

<sup>46</sup> Matthew Martin, “US, Bahrain Sign Security Pact That May Be Model For Saudi Deal,” *Bloomberg*, September 14, 2023.

<sup>47</sup> Karen DeYoung, “U.S. Pact with Bahrain Seen as Model for Strengthening Persian Gulf Ties,” *Washington Post*, September 13, 2023.

<sup>48</sup> UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, UK joins US-Bahrain agreement to build security across the Middle East, December 8, 2024.

Security in the Middle East Act, would mandate that the Secretary of State report on a strategy to increase membership in the C-SIPA.

While the C-SIPA reaffirms robust and ongoing U.S.-Bahraini defense and trade cooperation, for the first time, it formally commits both sides, subject to further agreement, to share digital network security standards in order to prevent inappropriate access to sensitive information on a party's digital information and communications network. According to one assessment, the C-SIPA "codifies a U.S. commitment to support the growth of Bahrain's technology sector ... intended from a US perspective to limit Chinese involvement in the region's technology architecture."<sup>49</sup>

### **Combined Maritime Forces (CMF)**

NSA-Bahrain also hosts and coordinates the CMF partnership, which brings together naval forces from 46 countries to operate a series of task forces (currently five) that target threats to maritime security in waters near the Arabian Peninsula. U.S.-Bahrain naval cooperation reportedly helped facilitate Bahrain's August 2019 decision to join and headquarter a U.S.-led maritime security operation ("International Maritime Security Construct" [IMSC], formerly called "Operation Sentinel") to secure the Gulf against Iranian attacks on commercial shipping.<sup>50</sup>

CMF, which was formed in 2001, counters piracy and bolsters maritime security across a vast area stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Suez Canal (over 4,300 miles of coastline). In order to counter weapons and drug trafficking in the Gulf of Oman, U.S. Naval forces, in conjunction with regional partners in the CENTCOM AOR, patrol coastal waters and routinely interdict suspected smuggling operations. From 2021 to 2023, CMF forces seized more than \$1 billion in illegal drugs.<sup>51</sup>

### **U.S.-Bahraini Defense Cooperation**

In October 2024, the United States and Bahrain conducted their fourth U.S.-Bahrain Strategic Dialogue to advance cooperation in border security, counterterrorism, and trusted technology. On an annual basis, the U.S. military and Bahrain Defense Force (BDF) conduct a maritime exercise known as "Diamond Defender" designed to enhance regional maritime security and stability. As a pillar of the C-SIPA agreement, U.S. and Bahraini defense officials also convene the U.S.-Bahrain Military Consultative Committee (MCC) to discuss intelligence cooperation, military cooperation, and security assistance.<sup>52</sup>

### **U.S. Arms Sales and Foreign Assistance**

Bahrain uses national funds to purchase major U.S. defense equipment through the Foreign Military Sales (FMS – direct from the U.S. government) and Direct Commercial Sales (DCS – an export license to purchase directly from U.S. contractors) programs. The Bahrain Defense Forces (BDF) are an estimated 11,000 personnel and handle external threats with several thousand others

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<sup>49</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit, "Bahrain and US Sign Symbolic Security Pact," September 19, 2023.

<sup>50</sup> Rebecca Kheel, "Bahrain Joins U.S.-Led Coalition to Protect Gulf Shipping," thehill.com, August 19, 2019.

<sup>51</sup> U.S. Naval Forces Central Command Public Affairs, "CMF Forces Seize Illegal Drugs in Gulf of Oman," January 2, 2024.

<sup>52</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "Readout of U.S.-Bahrain Military Consultative Committee," July 16, 2024.



in the Bahrain National Guard which handles internal security; as of April 2023, the defense budget is estimated at \$2 billion per year.<sup>53</sup>

### F-16 Sale to Bahrain

In 1998, Bahrain purchased 22 U.S.-made F-16 Block 40 aircraft. In 2016, the Obama Administration conditioned the sale of an additional 19 F-16s on an improvement in Bahrain's human rights record.<sup>54</sup> The first Trump Administration dropped that condition, and in September 2017, notified Congress of the possible sale to Bahrain of 19 F-16s and upgrading of Bahrain's existing F-16s, at an estimated value of nearly \$4 billion (if all options were exercised).<sup>55</sup> In 2018, Lockheed Martin received a \$1.1 billion contract to produce 16 F-16 Block 70 fighters for Bahrain, to be delivered in four batches of four starting in 2024. Bahrain is to become one of the first international customers to receive the most advanced F-16 Block 70 variant. In March 2023, Lockheed Martin rolled out the first F-16 Block 70 Fighting Falcon for Bahrain at a ceremony at Lockheed Martin's Greenville, South Carolina F-16 production line.

During the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress, the Biden Administration notified lawmakers of several major sales of U.S. defense equipment to Bahrain, including a \$2.2 billion sale of battle tanks (see **Table 1**). Senator Rand Paul introduced a joint resolution of disapproval against the sale (S.J.Res. 66 ), though it was not discharged from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee before the end of the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress.

According to the U.S. State Department, as of January 2025, the United States has \$6.08 billion in active FMS cases with Bahrain and, since 2016, the United States has authorized \$389 million in export licenses through the DCS process.<sup>56</sup> Over the past decade, the United States has provided Bahrain with \$22.5 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) grants, \$28.423 million in Department of Defense funds, and \$2.432 million in International Military Education and Training (IMET) to educate over 866 members of the Bahrain Armed Forces in the United States.<sup>57</sup>

**Table 2. Recent U.S. Foreign Military Sales to Bahrain Notified to Congress**

Fiscal Year	Major Defense Equipment	Dollar Value	Contractor
2024	M1A2 Abrams Main Battle Tanks	\$2.2 billion	General Dynamics Land Systems and others
2023	Refurbish Excess Defense Article (EDA) AH-1W multi-role helicopters	\$350 million	Bell Corporation
2022	M270 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS) Upgrade	\$175.98 million	Lockheed Martin

**Source:** Defense Security Cooperation Agency

### Major Non-NATO Ally Designation and Excess Defense Articles

In March 2002, President George W. Bush designated Bahrain a “major non-NATO ally” (MNNA) in Presidential Determination 2002-10. The designation qualifies Bahrain to purchase certain U.S. arms, receive excess defense articles (EDA), and engage in defense research

<sup>53</sup> Jane's Defence Budget, “Bahrain - Defence Budget Overview,” April 11, 2023.

<sup>54</sup> Anthony Capaccio, “Bahrain's Lockheed F-16 Buy Said to Come with U.S. Strings,” *Bloomberg News*, September 30, 2016.

<sup>55</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) Transmittal Numbers 16-60 and 16-59.

<sup>56</sup> U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Security Cooperation With Bahrain,” January 20, 2025.

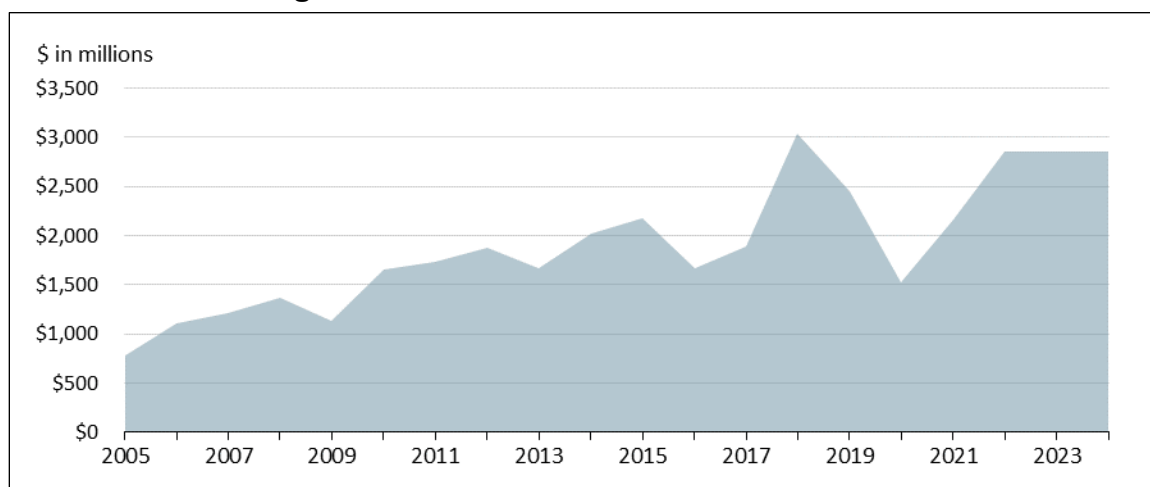
<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

cooperation with the United States for which it would not otherwise be eligible. Between 2010 and 2022, the United States provided Bahrain with \$54 million in EDA grant assistance.<sup>58</sup> Among the major military equipment transferred to Bahrain as EDA are Cyclone Class Patrol Craft, armored personnel carriers, and Mark V Special Operations Craft.

## U.S. Trade and Investment

To encourage economic reform and signal U.S. appreciation for Bahrain's security support, the United States and Bahrain signed a free trade agreement (FTA) on September 14, 2004. Implementing legislation was signed January 11, 2006 (P.L. 109-169). In 2005, bilateral trade was about \$780 million, and U.S.-Bahrain trade has increased fourfold since (see **Figure 5**). In 2024, the total volume of bilateral trade stood at \$2.85 billion with the United States running a trade surplus with Bahrain slightly under \$500 million.<sup>59</sup> Bahrain's other major trading partners include China, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

**Figure 5. U.S.-Bahrain Annual Volume of Trade**



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

The major U.S. import from the country is aluminum. State-owned Aluminum Bahrain (Alba) is an exporter of aluminum (Bahrain supplied 3.5% of U.S. aluminum imports in 2023), and it is unclear whether U.S. tariffs on aluminum will affect Alba's global sales, as Bahrain could shift exports to Europe.<sup>60</sup> A Saudi Arabian state entity purchased 20% of Alba in 2024.

In 2019, the United States and Bahrain signed an MOU for a "U.S. Trade Zone," located on land near the Khalifa bin Salman Port, to facilitate U.S. direct investment in Bahrain and U.S.-Bahrain trade.<sup>61</sup> The first phase of a buildout of the zone was inaugurated in February 2022.

<sup>58</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Security Cooperation Agency, EDA Database Tool, accessed on April 2, 2025.

<sup>59</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2024: U.S. trade in goods with Bahrain, available at <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5250.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit, "Bahrain's Alba prepares for new US aluminium tariff," *Viewpoint*, March 5, 2025.

<sup>61</sup> Hudhaifa Ebrahim, "Bahrain Begins Construction of US Trade Zone," *Jerusalem Post*, February 24, 2022.

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