

Bahrain: Issues for U.S. Policy

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Summary

The Kingdom of Bahrain is a small island nation connected by a causeway to Saudi Arabia (15.5 miles away) and once claimed by Iran (124 miles away). 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 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 durably 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. 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; a Saudi military intervention helped Bahrain's government repress protests. 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. 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." During the war between Israel and Hamas, Bahrain and Israel did not sever relations, though some Bahrainis have protested bilateral ties.

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 FY2025, the U.S. Department of Defense, (DOD)—which is using a secondary Department of War designation, under Executive Order 14347—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. In the 119th 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 (C-SIPA), a multilateral agreement initially between the United States and Bahrain. The recently-released compromise text of the FY2026 National Defense Authorization bill (amendment to S. 1071) includes most of the text of H.R. 1385.

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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 some of 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 has ruled Bahrain since 1783, when it left the Arabian Peninsula and captured a Persian garrison controlling the main island of Bahrain (the Persian Safavid dynasty had an intermittent presence in Bahrain from 1602-1782). During the 19th century, Bahrain's Al Khalifa rulers signed various treaties with the United Kingdom, which was then the dominant foreign naval power in the Gulf. In the late 19th century, the British Empire entered into additional treaties with Bahrain, making the island 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 Bahrain.

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

By 1968, as Britain reduced its military presence in the Gulf, Bahrain and the other smaller Persian Gulf emirates (principalities) sought a permanent status. At the time, Iran also claimed sovereignty over Bahrain and refused at first to recognize its independence.¹ A 1970 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 its more than 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. 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, releasing some opposition activists in 2024.

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

Domestic Politics

The Al Khalifa Dynasty

King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa (born 1950) is the 14th ruling Al Khalifa monarch and the second ruler since the island kingdom's independence in 1971 (until 2002, Bahrain's heads of state were first referred to as "Hakims" then "Emirs"). Educated at Sandhurst Military Academy in Britain, King Hamad (see **Figure 1**) was previously commander of the Bahraini Defense Forces (BDF) and has ruled Bahrain since 1999. The constitution gives the king broad powers, including appointing all ministers and judges and amending the constitution. Nevertheless, during his first two decades of rule, King Hamad's late uncle, the longtime Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, exercised widespread executive authority over the government, particularly its internal security services. According to one account, though King Hamad had early in his reign attempted to liberalize Bahrain's political system, "Khalifa frustrated that process."² At the time of his death in November 2020, Khalifa bin Salman had been the longest serving prime minister in the world.

Since his uncle's death, King Hamad has appeared to focus on consolidating power among his direct descendants, accelerating Bahrain's economic diversification, and incorporating younger Bahrainis into the political system.³ His eldest son, 56-year-old Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa,⁴ is the prime minister and the de facto face of the country's attempt to modernize its institutions. Another of the king's sons, 38-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.⁵ *The Economist* notes that Sheikh Nasser is "reportedly the king's favourite son."⁶

Figure 1. King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa



Source: Government of Bahrain.

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

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

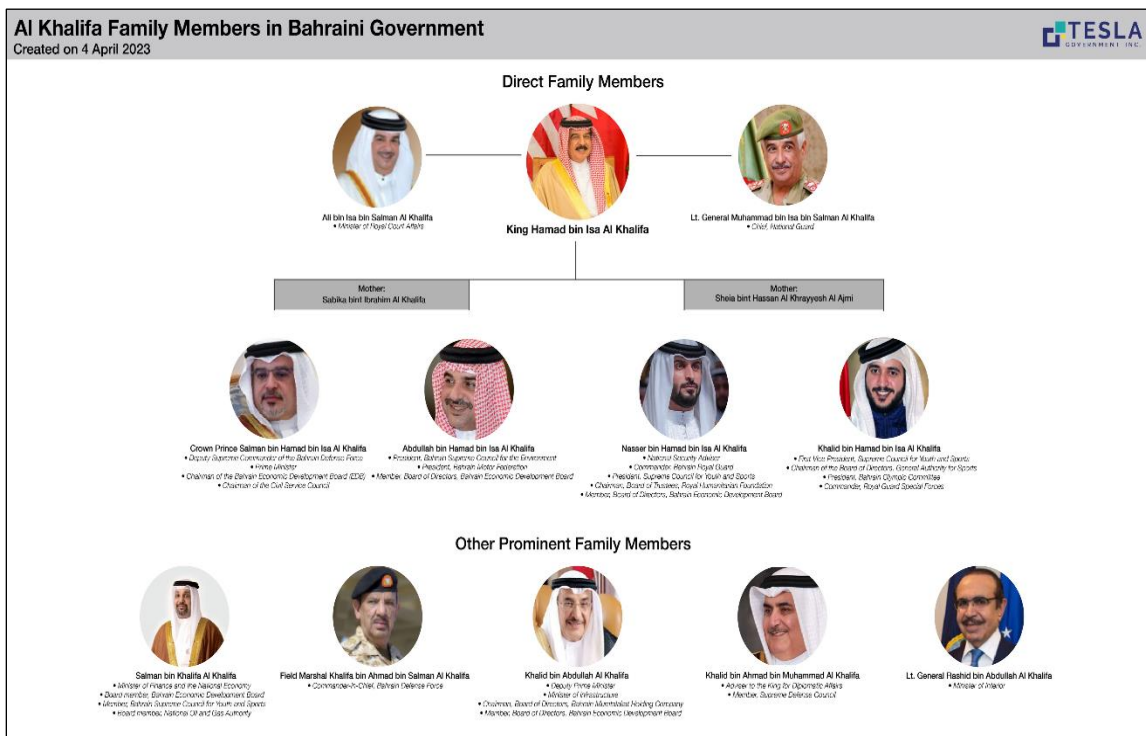
⁴ According to Bahrain's constitution, royal succession is determined by agnatic (male only) primogeniture among the descendants of King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. The constitution does grant the king the power to appoint any of his other sons as his successor.

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

⁶ "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 bicameral legislature (the National Assembly) consists of 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 (in the current COR, women hold eight seats) 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.

In 2025, the Bahraini parliament passed significant legislation aimed at attracting foreign investment and high-income professionals.⁷ The next COR election is scheduled for November 2026.

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. Tourists from Saudi Arabia frequently visit using the 15.5-mile King Fahd causeway that connects Bahrain to the Arabian Peninsula, though limited social liberalization in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia may be eroding Bahrain's relative appeal.

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

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.¹¹

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 2024 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; arbitrary arrest or detention; and serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, and censorship.¹²

The State Department assessment also stated that the Bahraini government took "credible steps to identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses" and noted the release of 3,400 prisoners during the reporting period.¹³

⁷ "Bahrain makes Golden Visa more affordable, slashes investment threshold," *Gulf News*, November 25, 2025.

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

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

¹⁰ "Can Bahrain's Division Between Sunnis and Shias Be Healed?" *The Economist*, November 24, 2022.

¹¹ Thérèse Postel, "Here's One Way to Stop the Brutal Repression in Bahrain," *The Atlantic*, March 13, 2013.

¹² U.S. Department of State, *2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Bahrain*, August 12, 2025.

¹³ Ibid.

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 several thousand prisoners, including many political prisoners who had been detained since the 2011 uprising. 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.¹⁴

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	157/180 Countries
Corruption	Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2024	53/180 Countries
Human Development	United Nations Human Development Programme, Human Development Index 2023	38/193 Countries

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

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 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report, Bahrain has “continued to demonstrate serious and sustained efforts during the reporting period, therefore, Bahrain remained on Tier 1.”¹⁵ 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. In 2025, the Chargé d’Affaires at the U.S. Embassy Manama Elizabeth Litchfield said: “We commend Bahrain for once again earning Tier 1 status in the U.S. Department of State’s 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report—its eighth consecutive year at the highest ranking. This accomplishment highlights Bahrain’s sustained dedication and leadership in the effort to end human trafficking.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Nazeeha Saeed and Vivian Nereim, “Hundreds of Bahraini Political Prisoners Freed in ‘Bittersweet’ Royal Pardon,” *New York Times*, May 5, 2024.

¹⁵ U.S. Department of State, 2025 *Trafficking in Persons Report: Bahrain*.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of State, U.S. Embassy in Bahrain, “Statement from Chargé d’Affaires Elizabeth Litchfield.”

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 2025, public debt is approximately 107% of gross domestic product (GDP), the highest level of indebtedness in the GCC.¹⁷ 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. GCC states also are the primary investors in Bahrain's infrastructure development.

According to the International Monetary Fund, while Bahrain's GDP grew by 2.6% in 2024, the government needs to reduce debt by committing to the introduction of additional corporate taxes and a reduction in energy subsidies while maintaining some social welfare for the most vulnerable households.¹⁸ In 2024, Bahrain introduced jurisdictional corporate taxes on multinational enterprises, though the government does not tax personal income or capital gains. The Heritage Foundation's Index of Economic Freedom ranks Bahrain 55th worldwide (out of 184 countries) and notes that it "continues to be a dynamic business hub."¹⁹

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 2029.²⁰ Currently, the government remains dependent on oil and gas for 70%-80% of revenue. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, in the short term, there are existing market opportunities for U.S. oil companies in Bahrain; in the long term, the Bahraini government may seek to partner with the United States to build a small, nuclear modular reactor to supplement power generation for Bahraini industries.²¹

Figure 3. Map of Bahrain



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

¹⁷ Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), "Bahrain," October 13, 2025.

¹⁸ IMF, "IMF Staff Completes 2025 Article IV Mission to The Kingdom of Bahrain," November 24, 2025.

¹⁹ See <https://www.heritage.org/index/pages/country-pages/bahrain>.

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

²¹ U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Association, *Bahrain Country Commercial Guide*, December 1, 2025.

Foreign Policy Issues

Bahrain's regional and broader foreign policy generally mirrors that of its de facto patron and 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, Bahrain's joining of the June 2017 Saudi-led move to isolate Qatar,²² and Bahrain's dispatch of 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.

In 2026 and 2027, the Kingdom of Bahrain is to serve a term as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

Iran

Iran, which ruled Bahrain at various points over the past several hundred years, has at times contested Bahrain's sovereignty, fueling Bahraini fears that Iran aims to destabilize the kingdom, which has the smallest armed forces of any Gulf state.²³ 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.²⁴ Bahraini officials have also accused Iran of backing violent Shia groups in Bahrain.

In 2016, Bahrain supported Saudi Arabia in a dispute with Iran over the Saudi execution of a dissident Saudi Shia cleric and attacks by Iranian protestors on two Saudi diplomatic facilities. Bahrain, along with Saudi Arabia, broke diplomatic relations with Iran at that time and those ties have not been restored. Iran and Saudi Arabia restored ties in 2023, sparking some initial speculation that Bahrain would follow suit.²⁵ 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 Iranian and Bahraini foreign ministers agreed to start talks aimed at resuming diplomatic relations.²⁶ 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,²⁷ Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi visited Bahrain – the first visit by an Iranian foreign minister to Bahrain since 2010.²⁸

²² Bahrain's relations with neighboring Qatar have been strained over time by competing claims rooted in the Al Khalifa families' historic ties to areas in and adjacent to Qatar. In 2001, Qatar and Bahrain accepted an International Court of Justice ruling settling a border dispute between the two countries over the Hawar Islands and the town of Zubarah in western Qatar. Yoel Guzansky, *Lines Drawn in the Sand: Territorial Disputes and GCC Unity*, 70 MIDDLE EAST J. 543, 543–59 (2016); Gwenn Okruhlik & Patrick Conge, *The Politics of Border Disputes: On the Arabian Peninsula*, 54 INT'L J. 203, 203–48 (1999).

²³ Bahrain was a part of various political entities, including Oman and the Persian and Portuguese Empires, before becoming a British protectorate in the early 19th century. In 1957, the Shah of Iran designated Bahrain as the country's fourteenth province, a claim officially renounced in 1970 (when Iran recognized Bahrain's independence) but periodically raised by some Iranian officials, including under the Islamic Republic.

²⁴ 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.

²⁵ "Bahrain, Iran Likely to Restore Diplomatic Ties Soon, US Diplomat Says," Reuters, June 13, 2023.

²⁶ "Iran, Bahrain to start talks on releasing Iranian funds, resuming political relations," Reuters, June 24, 2024.

²⁷ "Exclusive: Gulf states must not allow use of airspace against Iran, Iranian official says," Reuters, October 9, 2024.

²⁸ Mehran Haghirian, "Efforts To Restore Bahrain-Iran Ties Gather Momentum," *Afkar*, Middle East Council on Global Affairs, November 3, 2024.

The June 2025 12-day war between Israel and Iran, which witnessed U.S. strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities and Iranian retaliatory strikes against U.S. defense installations in Qatar, reportedly stoked fear amongst Bahraini officials that the kingdom would be caught in the conflict's crossfire.²⁹ Officially, Bahrain, along with other GCC states, condemned Israel's initial strikes on Iran, warning of "uncalculated and reckless steps" which could lead fighting to spill over into the Gulf.³⁰ Bahrain also condemned "in the strongest terms the attack that targeted its [Qatar's] sovereignty and airspace by Iran, in a clear violation of international law and the United Nations Charter."³¹

During the conflict, U.S. and Bahraini defense officials took extraordinary measures to protect U.S. personnel and equipment located at Naval Support Activity Bahrain (NSA Bahrain), which is home to nearly 8,000 U.S. service people and their families (see **below**). During the first few days of the war, only essential personnel reported to work and military dependents were evacuated to Naples, Italy; U.S. ships and portions of the Bahraini Navy also departed the base. After Iran attacked Qatar, NSA Bahrain shut down temporarily. Bahrain has purchased several Patriot missile defense systems.³² Patriot batteries inside Qatar were used to intercept the Iranian attack on Qatar. In August 2025, the U.S.S. *Nimitz* Carrier Strike Group visited Bahrain, marking the first time a U.S. carrier had made a port call in Bahrain since 2020.³³

Israel

Bahrain, like some other GCC states, has been building ties to Israel and, in September 2020, signed agreements at the White House to fully normalize its relations with Israel as part of the "Abraham Accords."

Throughout the 2023-2025 war between Israel and Hamas, Bahrain retained ties to Israel, albeit at a distance, perhaps reflecting public opposition to Israel's war in Gaza. In 2023, Crown Prince and Prime Minister Salman bin Hamad al Khalifa became the first Arab leader to publicly condemn Hamas' October 7 attacks.³⁴ Though the conflict hindered a deepening of ties, Israel and Bahrain have not severed relations. In September 2025, Bahrain's foreign minister officially received the credentials of Israel's new ambassador to the kingdom, an event which sparked a small public protest in Manama. As of November 2025, Bahrain's ambassador to Israel has reportedly returned to Manama having been appointed as an undersecretary at the Foreign Ministry.³⁵ Bahrain has not engaged in as much bilateral trade and investment with Israel as fellow Abraham Accords signatory the United Arab Emirates.

With momentum to bring Saudi Arabia into the Abraham Accords having stalled, and with conflict continuing between Israel and various Iran-supported groups, Bahraini-Israeli relations are not expected to advance in a significant way in the near term. According to Israel's first Ambassador to Bahrain Eitan Na'eh, Israel's best achievement vis-a-vis Bahrain since 2020 has

²⁹ Vivian Nereim, "Iran's Attack on a U.S. Base in Qatar Is a Nightmare Come True for Gulf States," *New York Times*, June 25, 2025.

³⁰ "UAE warns of 'uncalculated, reckless steps' amid Israel-Iran air war," Reuters, June 17, 2025.

³¹ Bahrain News Agency, "Council of Representatives condemns Iranian missile attack on Qatar," June 24, 2025.

³² U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation With Bahrain," January 20, 2025.

³³ "Bahrain Sees First U.S. Carrier Visit in 5 Years," *USNI News*, August 11, 2025.

³⁴ "Bahrain leader condemns Hamas Oct. 7 onslaught, calls for release of hostages," *Times of Israel*, November 20, 2023.

³⁵ "What happened to Bahrain's Ambassador to Israel?" *Arutz Sheva* (7Israel National News), November 11, 2025.

been “our ability to maintain the dialogue from the highest levels in Jerusalem to the same levels here.”³⁶

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.³⁷ 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 1st 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—which is using a secondary Department of War designation, under Executive Order 14347—the U.S. Fifth Fleet includes 8,000 American personnel and families.³⁸ Bahrain is the

³⁶ Maayan Hoffman, “Outgoing ambassador Eitan Na’eh: Israel and Bahrain defied the odds,” *Ynet Global* (Israel), August 18, 2025.

³⁷ 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, 831st 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.

³⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, “His Majesty the King of Bahrain Visits U.S. 5th Fleet Headquarters,” April 17, 2023.

only country in CENTCOM to host military spouses and families.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ P.L. 118-159, 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. The text of the conferenced bill for the FY2026 National Defense Authorization bill (amendment to S. 1071) would authorize \$42 million in military construction for maintenance and facility upgrades at NSA Bahrain.

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.⁴¹ Under the DCA, Bahrain provides access, basing, and overflight privileges to facilitate U.S. regional military operations.⁴² 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.”⁴³

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. The United Kingdom signed an agreement to join the C-SIPA in December 2024.⁴⁴ In the 119th 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 C-SIPA. The recently-released compromise text of the FY2026 National Defense Authorization bill (amendment to S. 1071) includes most of the text of H.R. 1385.

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

³⁹ 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.

⁴⁰ 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 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.

⁴¹ “US, Bahrain Extend Defense Cooperation for 15 Years,” *Al Defaiya*, April 12, 2017.

⁴² U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Security Cooperation with Bahrain,” fact sheet, June 14, 2021.

⁴³ 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).

⁴⁴ UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, UK joins US-Bahrain agreement to build security across the Middle East, December 8, 2024.

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."⁴⁵

Combined Maritime Forces (CMF)

NSA-Bahrain also hosts and coordinates the CMF partnership, which brings together naval forces from 47 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.⁴⁶

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.

⁴⁵ Economist Intelligence Unit, "Bahrain and US Sign Symbolic Security Pact," September 19, 2023.

⁴⁶ Rebecca Kheel, "Bahrain Joins U.S.-Led Coalition to Protect Gulf Shipping," *thehill.com*, August 19, 2019.

Figure 5. Combined Maritime Forces at Naval Support Activity Bahrain

Source: Combined Maritime Forces, August 20, 2025

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.⁴⁷

In December 2025, CENTCOM and Bahrain opened a new bilateral Combined Command Post (CCP) for air defense in the kingdom (Ras al Bar Camp). This new facility is designed not only to coordinate U.S.-Bahraini air defense, but also to serve as a regional hub for integrated air defense planning, coordination, and operations.⁴⁸ CENTCOM the previous month announced the launch of a similar CCP in Qatar. The new post in Bahrain has raised some speculation that CENTCOM

⁴⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, “Readout of U.S.-Bahrain Military Consultative Committee,” July 16, 2024.

⁴⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, Central Command, “U.S., Bahrain Open New Bilateral Combined Command Post for Air Defense,” December 1, 2025.

is advancing longtime efforts to create an integrated air defense system with GCC and other partners in its area of responsibility.⁴⁹

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 in the Bahrain National Guard which handles internal security; as of January 2024, the defense budget is estimated at \$2.5 billion per year.⁵⁰

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.⁵¹ 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).⁵² 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 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. In December 2025, the U.S. Department of Defense notified Congress of an F-16 FMS sustainment package to Bahrain worth up to \$445 million with General Electric Aerospace (Evendale, OH) and Lockheed Martin Aeronautics (Fort Worth, TX) as the principal contractors.

Over the past five years, successive administrations have notified Congress of over \$3.6 billion worth of FMS sales to Bahrain (see **Table 2**). 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.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴

In the Senate report accompanying S. 2572 (119th Congress), the Senate Appropriations Committee reported version of the FY2026 Defense Appropriations bill, lawmakers included a new item, \$50 million for the Defense Security Cooperation Agency's "International Security Cooperation Programs—Bahrain" without specific explanation of its intended use. The House-passed version of the bill (H.R. 4016) does not include this measure.

⁴⁹ Jeremy Binnie, "US, Bahrain inaugurate air-defence command post," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, December 4, 2025.

⁵⁰ Jane's Defence Budget, "Bahrain - Defence Budget Overview," January 11, 2024.

⁵¹ Anthony Capaccio, "Bahrain's Lockheed F-16 Buy Said to Come with U.S. Strings," *Bloomberg News*, September 30, 2016.

⁵² U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) Transmittal Numbers 16-60 and 16-59.

⁵³ U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation With Bahrain," January 20, 2025.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

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

Fiscal Year	Major Defense Equipment	Dollar Value	Contractor
2026	F-16 Sustainment	\$445 million	General Electric Aerospace and Lockheed Martin
2025	M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System	\$500 million	Lockheed Martin
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 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.⁵⁵ 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 7**). 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.⁵⁶ Bahrain’s other major trading partners include China, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

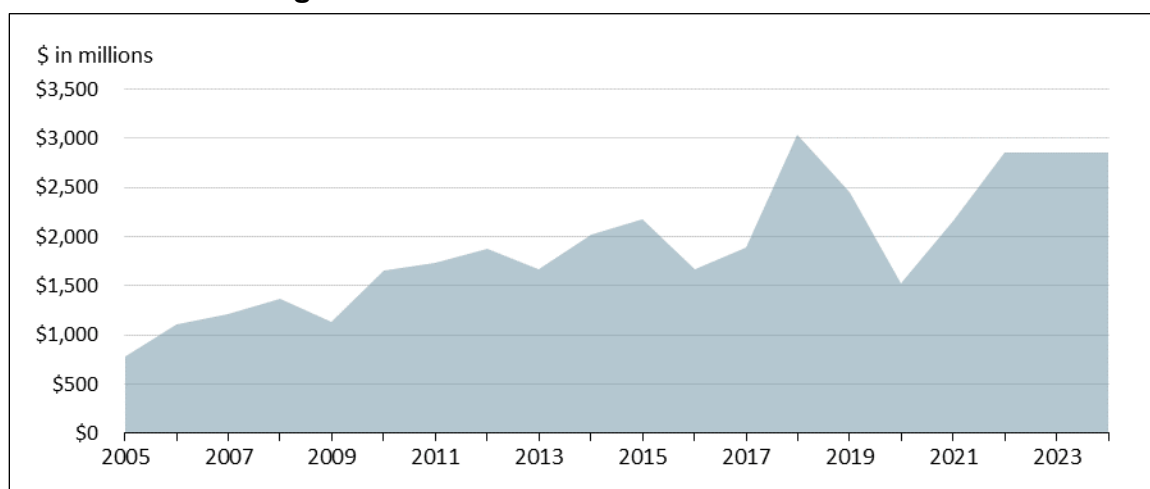
⁵⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Security Cooperation Agency, EDA Database Tool, accessed on April 2, 2025.

⁵⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, 2024: U.S. trade in goods with Bahrain, available at <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5250.html>.

Figure 6. President Trump and Crown Prince Salman Discuss Commercial Ties

Source: Official White House Photo by Daniel Torok, July 16, 2025.

As with other wealthy GCC states, the Trump Administration has sought to build on strong bilateral ties with Bahrain by expanding U.S. defense cooperation with the kingdom and Bahraini investment in the United States. In July 2025, Crown Prince Salman visited the United States which resulted in several billion dollars' worth of U.S.-Bahraini commercial deals, including a \$4.6 billion purchase by Gulf Air (Bahrain's national carrier) of 18 wide-body aircraft from Boeing and a \$2 billion strategic cooperation agreement between Bahrain's sovereign wealth fund (Mumtalakat) and U.S. aluminum firms.⁵⁷ The United States and Bahrain also signed the U.S.-Bahrain Nuclear Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding to enhance cooperation in the nuclear energy sector.⁵⁸ Currently, Bahrain produces electricity using natural gas and crude oil.

Figure 7. U.S.-Bahrain Annual Volume of Trade

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

⁵⁷ Economist Intelligence Unit, "Bahrain signs slew of deals with US," August 4, 2025.

⁵⁸ U.S. Department of State, "United States and Bahrain Sign Memorandum of Understanding Concerning Strategic Civil Nuclear Cooperation," July 16, 2025.

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.⁵⁹ A Saudi Arabian state entity purchased 20% of Alba in 2024. As of December 2025, U.S. reciprocal tariffs on Bahraini exports to the United States are 10%. As of December 2025, Section 232 Tariffs on steel and aluminum are 50%.⁶⁰

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.⁶¹ The first phase of a buildout of the zone was inaugurated in February 2022.

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⁵⁹ Economist Intelligence Unit, "Bahrain's Alba prepares for new US aluminium tariff," *Viewpoint*, March 5, 2025.

⁶⁰ The White House, "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Increases Section 232 Tariffs on Steel and Aluminum," June 3, 2025.

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