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

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Summary

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

The Bahrain government's use of repression against the dissent has presented a policy dilemma for the United States because Bahrain is a longtime ally that is pivotal to maintaining Persian Gulf security. The country has hosted the U.S. naval headquarters for the Gulf region since 1948; the United States and Bahrain have had a formal Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) since 1991; and Bahrain was designated by the United States as a "major non-NATO ally" in 2002. There are over 7,000 U.S. forces in Bahrain, mostly located at the continually expanding naval headquarters site. Bahrain has flown strikes against the Islamic State organization in Syria, but it has not provided weapons to groups fighting President Bashar Al Assad in Syria. Apparently to address the use of force against the uprising, the Obama Administration conditioned or blocked new weapons sales to Bahrain and curtailed U.S. assistance to Bahrain's internal security organizations led by the Ministry of Interior.

The Trump Administration's stance on Iran comports closely with that of Bahrain's leadership, which has repeatedly asserted that Iran is providing material support to violent opposition factions. Bahrain expressed the same concerns about the Iran nuclear agreement ("Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," JCPOA) that have been articulated by President Trump and by the other Gulf states—that sanctions relief has contributed to Iran's expansion of its regional influence. However, as part of a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) consensus, Bahraini leaders have publicly supported the JCPOA as precluding Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. The Trump Administration has lifted conditionality on some major arms sales, particularly the sale of additional F-16 combat aircraft, prompting Bahrain opposition criticism that the new Administration is sacrificing human rights concerns to focus on countering Iran.

Within the GCC (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman), Bahrain has been a staunch supporter of Saudi policies and proposals. It has joined Saudi Arabia-led military action to try to restore the government of Yemen that was ousted by Iran-backed Houthi rebels. In June 2017, it joined a Saudi and UAE move to isolate Qatar for its purported support for Muslim Brotherhood-linked Islamist movements.

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

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The Political Structure, Reform, and Human Rights¹

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

The Al Khalifa family, which is Sunni Muslim and generally not as religiously conservative as the leaders of neighboring Saudi Arabia, has ruled Bahrain since 1783. That year, the family, a branch of the Bani Utbah tribe, arrived from the Saudi peninsula and succeeded in capturing a Persian garrison controlling the island. In 1830, the ruling family signed a treaty establishing Bahrain as a protectorate of Britain, which was the dominant power in the Persian Gulf until the early 1970s. In the 1930s, Reza Shah Pahlavi of Iran unsuccessfully sought to deny Bahrain the right to grant oil concessions to the United States and Britain. As Britain reduced its military presence in the Gulf in 1968, Bahrain and the other smaller Persian Gulf emirates (principalities) sought a permanent status. A 1970 U.N. survey (some refer to it as a “referendum”) determined that Bahrain’s inhabitants did not want to join with Iran. Those findings were endorsed by U.N. Security Council Resolution 278, which was ratified by Iran’s parliament. Bahrain negotiated with eight other Persian Gulf emirates during 1970-1971 to try to form a broad federation, but Bahrain and Qatar each decided to become independent. The seven other emirates formed a federation called the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Bahrain declared itself independent on August 15, 1971, and a U.S. Embassy opened in Manama, Bahrain’s capital, immediately thereafter. In July 2017, the Administration nominated the State Department’s Coordinator for Counterterrorism Justin Siberell, a career diplomat, as the next U.S. Ambassador to Bahrain.

The Ruling Family and Its Dynamics

Bahrain is led by King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa (about 66 years old), who succeeded his father, Shaykh Isa bin Sulman Al Khalifa, upon his death in March 1999. Educated at Sandhurst Military Academy in Britain, King Hamad was previously commander of the Bahraini Defense Forces (BDF). The king is considered to be a proponent of accommodation with Bahrain’s Shiites, who constitute a majority of the citizenry² but many of whom have long asserted they are treated as “second class citizens,” deprived of political power and of a fair share of the nation’s economic wealth. About 25% of the citizen population is age 14 or younger.

Within the upper echelons of the ruling family, the most active proponent of accommodation with the Shiite opposition is the king’s son and designated successor, the U.S.- and U.K.-educated Crown Prince Shaykh Salman bin Hamad, who is about 47 years old. The Crown Prince and his allies, including deputy Prime Minister, Muhammad bin Mubarak Al Khalifa and Foreign Minister Khalid bin Ahmad bin Muhammad Al Khalifa,³ assert that further reforms should be

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

² Government officials dispute that the Shiite community is as large a majority as the 70% figure used in most factbooks and academic work on Bahrain. The Shiite community in Bahrain consists of the more numerous “Baharna,” who are of Arab ethnicity and descended from Arab tribes who inhabited the area from pre-Islamic times. Shiites of Persian ethnicity, referred to as Ajam, arrived in Bahrain over the past 400 years and are less numerous than the Baharna. The Ajam speak Persian and generally do not integrate with the Baharna or with Sunni Arabs.

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

considered in order to calm Bahrain's internal strife. The Crown Prince and his faction was strengthened by his appointment to a newly created position of first deputy Prime Minister. A younger son of the king, Shaykh Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa, who is about 30 years old, could potentially succeed King Hamad should Salman step aside as heir apparent, although there are no firm indications that this is likely.⁴

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

Executive and Legislative Powers

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

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

- The Assembly serves as only a partial check on government power, despite constitutional amendments of May 2012 that gave it greater authority. The amendments declared the elected COR as the presiding chamber of the Assembly, enhancing its authority on issues on which the two chambers disagree.
- The National Assembly does not have the power to confirm individual cabinet appointments. However, as a consequence of May 2012 constitutional

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

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

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

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

- amendments, it now has the power to reject the government’s four-year work plan—and therefore the whole cabinet. The COR has always had the power to remove sitting ministers through a vote of no-confidence (requiring a two-thirds majority). The COR can also, by a similar super-majority, declare that it cannot “cooperate” with the Prime Minister, but the king rules on whether to dismiss the Prime Minister or disband the COR. None of these authorities has been used.
- Either chamber of the National Assembly can originate legislation but enactment into law requires concurrence by the king.⁸ Prior to the May 2012 constitutional amendments, only the COR could originate legislation. The king’s “veto” can be overridden by a two-thirds majority vote of both chambers. A decree issued by the king on August 23, 2012, gives the National Assembly the ability to recommend constitutional amendments, which are then vetted by a “Legislation and Legal Opinion Commission” before consideration by the king.

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

Political Groups and Elections

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

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

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

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

- *Al Haq* (Movement of Freedom and Democracy), a small Shiite faction, is outlawed because of its calls for outright change of regime and has boycotted all the COR elections. Its key leaders are wheelchair-bound Dr. Abduljalil Alsingace and Hassan Mushaima, both of whom have been imprisoned since the uprising.
- The *Bahrain Islamic Action Society*, a small Shiite faction, also is outlawed. It is a successor to the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB), a party linked to alleged Iran-backed plots to overthrow Bahrain's government in the 1980s and 1990s. Another IFLB offshoot, *Amal*, has ties to radical Shiite clerics in Iran. *Amal*'s leader, Shaykh Muhammad Ali al-Mafoodh, has been in prison since 2011 and *Amal* was outlawed in 2012.
- *Waad* ("promise") is a left-leaning secular political opposition society whose members are both Sunni and Shiite. *Waad*'s former leader, Ibrahim Sharif, has been repeatedly arrested, released, and rearrested for opposition activities. Its current leader is Sami Fuad Sayedi. In March 2017, the government filed suit to have the organization disbanded; the government began but cancelled a similar action in 2014.⁹ On May 31, 2017, the High Civil Court ordered *Waad* dissolved, although its activists continue to operate informally.
- There are two major Sunni Islamist political societies that criticize the government for refusing to seek a larger role for Islamic law and values in Bahraini society, and both of them have no history of violence. The two are *Minbar* (Arabic for "platform"), which is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, and *Al Asala*, which is a harder-line "Salafist" political society. Smaller Sunni Islamist factions include Al Saff, the Islamic Shura Society, and the Al Wasat Al Arabi Islamic Society. In June 2011, a non-Islamist, generally progovernment Sunni political society—the National Unity Gathering/National Unity Association—was formed as a response to the uprising.

Preuprising Elections

Several elections were held during 2002-2010, with tensions between the Shiite majority and the regime escalating with each successive vote.

- *October 2002 Election*. In the first elections under the National Charter and constitution, *Wifaq* and other Shiite political groups boycotted on the grounds that establishing an elected COR and an appointed Shura Council of the same size diluted popular will. There were 170 candidates, including 8 women. Sunnis won two-thirds of the 40 COR seats, and none of the women was elected.
- *November 2006 Election*. Sunni-Shiite tensions escalated in advance of the COR and municipal elections, perhaps aggravated by the election-based accession of a Shiite majority in Iraq. The election was also clouded by a government adviser's revelations that the government had adjusted election districts to favor Sunni candidates and had issued passports to Sunnis to increase the number of Sunni voters. *Wifaq* participated, helping lift turnout to 72%, and the faction won 17 seats (virtually all it contested) to become the largest COR bloc. Sunnis won the remaining 23 seats, of which 8 were secular Sunnis and 15 were Islamists. One woman, unopposed in her district, was elected out of 18 female candidates. The

⁹ <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/bahrain-seeks-to-dissolve-secular-opposition-group>.

King appointed a new Shura Council with 20 Shiites, 19 Sunnis, and 1 Christian. Nine of those named were women. In the post-election cabinet, a *Wifaq* supporter was named minister of state for foreign affairs.

- *October 2010 Election.* Shiite oppositionists again accused the government of gerrymandering to favor Sunni candidates, and 23 Shiite leaders were arrested the month before the election under a 2006 antiterrorism law. *Wifaq* participated nonetheless. Of the 200 candidates, six were women. Turnout was about 67%. The election increased *Wifaq's* representation to 18 seats, reduced Sunni Islamists to five seats from 15; and greatly increased the number of Sunni independents to 17 seats (from nine in the previous COR). The one female incumbent was reelected. The king reappointed 30 of the 40 serving Shura Council members and 10 new members. Of its membership, 19 were Shiites, including the speaker, Ali bin Salih al-Salih. Four were women, of which one was Jewish (out of a Jewish population in Bahrain of about 40 persons) and one was Christian, of a Christian population of about 1,000. Municipal elections were held concurrently.

2011 Uprising: Origin, Developments, and Prognosis

Shiite demands were demonstrated as unsatisfied when a major uprising began on February 14, 2011, following the toppling of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak.¹⁰ After a few days of confrontations with security forces, mostly Shiite demonstrators converged on the interior of a major traffic circle ("Pearl Roundabout"). The unrest escalated on February 17-18, 2011, when security forces using rubber bullets and tear gas killed four demonstrators. *Wifaq* pulled all of its 18 deputies from the COR. In part at the reported urging of the United States, on February 19, 2011, the government pulled security forces back, and on February 22 and 25, 2011, large demonstrations were held. The Crown Prince invited protester representatives to formal dialogue, and the King pardoned 308 Bahrainis and dropped two Al Khalifa members from the cabinet.

Protest leaders demanded altering the constitution to create a constitutional monarchy in which the Prime Minister and cabinet are selected by the fully elected parliament; ending gerrymandering of election districts to favor Sunnis; and providing more jobs and economic opportunities. These demands were encapsulated in the "Manama Document," a manifesto unveiled in October 2011 by *Wifaq* and *Waad* and which represented opposition rejection of government efforts to meet at least some major opposition demands. The primary government reform proposal at that time was Crown Prince Salman's "seven principles," announced in March 2011, that would guide a national dialogue, including a "parliament with full authority"; a "government that meets the will of the people"; fair voting districts; and several other measures.¹¹ The seven principles rejected opposition demands for a constitutional monarchy, but gave Shiite opposition leaders justification to pursue their demands through dialogue.

King Hamad has repeatedly refused opposition demands to replace Prime Minister Khalifa. Moderate oppositionists have suggested they would accept a more moderate ruling family member or a Sunni figure non-royal as Prime Minister, but the King appears unwilling to risk unrest among Khalifa's hardline supporters in the family or the Sunni community more broadly.

¹⁰ The events of the uprising, and the government's political and security reaction, are examined in substantial detail in the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report released November 23, 2011. Text of the report is at <http://files.bici.org.bh/BICIreportEN.pdf>.

¹¹ BICI report, op. cit., p. 165.

Saudi-led Direct Intervention on Behalf of the Government

Government attempts to address opposition demands did not calm the protests. On March 13, 2011, protesters blockaded the financial district of Manama, triggering the government to request that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, UAE, Qatar, and Oman) send forces, which the GCC did on March 14, 2011. Members of the GCC's joint Peninsula Shield force, including 1,200 Saudi armored forces and 600 UAE police, crossed into Bahrain and took up positions at key locations and Kuwait sent naval forces to help secure Bahrain's maritime borders. On March 15, the King declared a three-month state of emergency. Security forces backed by the GCC deployment cleared demonstrators from Pearl Roundabout and demolished the Pearl Monument on March 18, 2011.¹² Perceiving it had restored order, the king ended the state of emergency as of June 1, 2011. The GCC forces began to depart in late June 2011, although some UAE police and other GCC security forces remained.

Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI)

On June 29, 2011, as a gesture toward the opposition and international critics, the king named a five-person "Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry" (BICI), headed by international legal expert Dr. Cherif Bassiouni, to investigate the government response to the unrest—and not the broader sources of the unrest. The 500+ page BICI report, released on November 23, 2011, provided support for the narratives of both sides as well as recommendations. It stated that¹³

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

The report contained 26 recommendations to prevent abuses of protesters and to hold accountable those government personnel responsible for abuses during the uprising. King Hamad promised full implementation of all recommendations. *Wifaq* said the report failed to state that abuses of protesters were deliberate government policy. On November 26, 2011, the king issued a decree to establish a 19-member National Commission to oversee implementation of the recommendations, chaired by Shura Council Chairman Ali al-Salih (a Shiite). Subsequently, a "Follow-Up Unit," headed by Ms. Dana Al Zayani, was established by the Ministry of Justice.¹⁴

Assessments of Government Compliance with the BICI Recommendations

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

¹² Some accounts differ on the involvement of the Peninsula Shield force, with some observers arguing that members of the force participated directly in suppressing protests, and others accepting the Bahrain/GCC view that the GCC force guarded key locations and infrastructure.

¹³ <http://files.bici.org.bh/BICIreportEN.pdf>.

¹⁴ The Follow-Up Unit's June report can be found at http://www.iaa.bh/downloads/bici_followup_report_en.pdf.

State Department. The conference report on the FY2013 defense authorization act (P.L. 112-239, signed January 2, 2013) directed the Secretary of State to report to Congress within 180 days of enactment (by July 2, 2013) on Bahrain's implementation of the BICI recommendations. The FY2016 Consolidated Appropriation (P.L. 114-113), required another State Department report, to be submitted by February 1, 2016, on Bahrain's implementation of the BICI recommendations.

The two State Department reports mandated by these laws, the latter of which was submitted to Congress on June 21, 2016,¹⁵ indicate that

- the government has made the office of the inspector general of the Ministry of Interior independent of the ministry's hierarchy;
- the government has stripped the National Security Agency of law enforcement powers and limited it to purely intelligence gathering. That occurred with the issuing of an amendment to the 2002 decree establishing that agency and transferring its arrest powers to the Ministry of Interior;
- the government has provided compensation and other remedies for families of the deceased victims of the government's response to the unrest. About \$26 million was budgeted by the government to provide the compensation;
- the government has ensured that dismissed employees were not dismissed because of the exercise of their right to freedom of expression, association, or assembly. This assessment was based on data that almost all of 2,700+ workers who had been fired for participating in the unrest had been rehired
- the government has developed programs to promote religious, political, and other forms of tolerance and promotion of human rights and the rule of law; and
- the government needs to allow oversight agencies greater independence, and implement recommendations on freedom of expression.

Outside Assessments. Reports and testimony by the staff of the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) have asserted that the government has fully implemented only three BICI recommendations, partially implemented about half of them, and not implemented at all at least six.¹⁶ The group characterized a June 2016 State Department assessment of government implementation of the recommendations as "a real effort to pull punches and avoid clear evaluations of progress, in order to avoid antagonizing the Bahraini government."¹⁷ A November 2015 report by another group, Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain, asserted that the government had only fully implemented two of the BICI recommendations and that those fully or partially implemented did not address the issues that caused the uprising.¹⁸

2017 Empowerment of Military Tribunals. In April 2017, the government took a step that appeared, at least indirectly, to conflict with its commitments to implement the BICI recommendations. The King signed a National Assembly-enacted bill amending the constitution to allow military courts the right to try civilians accused of terrorism. Human rights organizations

¹⁵ The first State Department report, released in August 2013, can be found at <http://adhrb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/State-Report-on-Implementation-of-BICI-3-2.pdf>. The State Department's June 2016 report on BICI implementation can be found at <http://pomed.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/State-BICI-Report.pdf>.

¹⁶ POMED. "One Year Later: Assessing Bahrain's Implementation of the BICI Report." November 2012.

¹⁷ Statement of Cole Bockenfeld, Deputy Director for Policy, POMED, before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. September 9, 2016.

¹⁸ The report can be found at http://www.adhrb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Shattering_the_Facade_Web.pdf.

called the move an attempt to deny due process to the many oppositionists whose activities are routinely described by the government in charging documents as “terrorism.”

BICI-Related Legislation. In the 114th Congress, S. 2009 and H.R. 3445, would have prohibited specific U.S. weapons and crowd control equipment sales to Bahrain (tear gas, small arms, light weapons and ammunitions for same, Humvees, and “other” crowd control items) until the State Department certified that Bahrain has fully implemented all BICI recommendations. Section 139 of a Senate-passed State Department operations authorization bill, S. 1635, would have required, 60 days after enactment, another State Department assessment of Bahrain’s implementation of the BICI recommendations, and the effect of such State Department findings on the U.S. defense posture in the Gulf. The provision was not included in P.L. 114-323.

The “National Dialogue” Process

The BICI process has been widely credited for creating conditions for a government-opposition “National Dialogue” process, which was inaugurated on July 2, 2011, under the chairmanship of COR speaker Dhahrani. About 300 delegates participated, of which 40-50 were member of the Shiite opposition, including five members of *Wifaq*.¹⁹ The several-week dialogue broadly addressed political, economic, social, and human rights issues, but the detention of senior oppositionists clouded the meetings and *Wifaq* exited the talks on July 18, 2011. In the course of the dialogue, King Hamad pardoned some protesters. The dialogue concluded in late July 2011 after reaching consensus on the following recommendations, which were endorsed by the government on July 29, 2011:

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

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

- imposed limitations on the power of the king to appoint the members of the Shura Council, and a requirement that he consult the heads of the two chambers of the National Assembly before dissolving the COR;
- gave either chamber of the National Assembly the ability to draft legislation or constitutional amendments;
- changed the overall chair of the National Assembly to the speaker of the elected COR instead of the chairman of the appointed Shura Council; and

¹⁹ Mohamed Hasni. “Bahrain Opens Dialogue Buoyed by Shiite Attendance.” Agence France Presse, July 2, 2011.

- gave the COR the ability to veto the government’s four-year work plan—essentially an ability to veto the nomination of the entire cabinet—without the concurrence of the Shura Council. This was an expansion of previous powers to vote no confidence against individual ministers.

Second National Dialogue. In January 2013, the King called for a restart of political dialogue; *Wifaq* and five allied parties accepted that proposal. The second dialogue began on February 10, 2013, consisting of twice per week meetings attended by the Minister of Justice (an Al Khalifa family member) and two other ministers, eight opposition representatives (*Wifaq* and allied parties), eight representatives of pro-government organizations, and five members of the National Assembly (both the upper and lower house). To facilitate progress, on March 11, 2013, the King increased the authority of Crown Prince Salman by naming him first deputy Prime Minister. The dialogue quickly bogged down over opposition insistence that consensus recommendations be put to a public referendum, while the government insisted that agreements be enacted by the parliament. The opposition also demanded that the dialogue include representatives of the King rather than various ministers. In September 2013, the opposition began boycotting the talks because of lack of progress and the arrest of Khalil al-Marzuq, the deputy chief of *Wifaq* and *Wifaq*’s representative to the dialogue. The dialogue was suspended on January 8, 2014.

The Crown Prince sought to revive negotiations by meeting with Marzuq and *Wifaq* leader Shaykh Ali al-Salman on January 15, 2014, despite the fact that both were charged for their roles in the uprising. The meeting addressed *Wifaq*’s demand that political dialogue be conducted with senior Al Khalifa members. In September 2014, the Crown Prince issued a five-point “framework” for a new dialogue that would center on (1) redefining electoral districts; (2) a revised process for appointing the Shura Council; (3) giving the elected COR new powers to approve or reject the formation of a new cabinet; (4) having international organizations work Bahrain’s judiciary; and (5) introducing new codes of conduct for security forces. Opposition political societies rejected the proposals as not satisfying a core demand that an elected COR select the Prime Minister. No further national dialogue has convened to date.

COR Elections in November 2014

In an effort to achieve “normalization,” the government urged the opposition to participate in the November 22, 2014, COR election. However, it reduced the number of electoral districts to four, from five, further reducing the chances that Shiites would win a majority of COR seats. *Wifaq* and its allies boycotted, reducing the turnout to 51% (according to the government, but 30%, according to the opposition). There was little violence during the vote or a November 29 runoff.

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

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

Table I. Comparative Composition of the National Assembly

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

Unrest Status and Prospects

Unrest continues, although at far lower levels of intensity than during 2011-2012, giving the government increasing confidence but also perhaps convincing officials that they can repress the opposition at little cost. The government and the opposition have, at times, discussed confidence-building measures such as appointments of oppositionists to the cabinet, although the King appears to have ruled out another interim step—replacing the Prime Minister. And, hardline Sunnis within and outside the government, some with support of Saudi officials, continue to urge the ruling family to refuse compromise. In late May 2017, Interior Ministry forces raided opposition activists gathering outside Shaykh Isa Qasim’s home, killing five and detaining hundreds. The opposition is unlikely to resume a dialogue with the government while opposition leaders remain incarcerated or lose their citizenship. Still, each year, including 2017, relatively large demonstrations—and clashes with security forces—have taken place on the February 14 anniversary of the uprising.

As noted above, the government has succeeded in disbanding *Wifaq* and *Waad* entirely. The State Department criticized the disbandments as unhelpful to political reconciliation.²⁰ The government also has stepped up citizenship revocations and expulsions of Bahrain’s Shiites who are of Persian

²⁰ <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-05-31/court-orders-last-main-opposition-group-in-bahrain-dissolved>

origin, accusing them of loyalty to Iran.²¹ As noted above, in March 2017, the government empowered military courts to prosecute civilians, a decision that further inflamed oppositionists.

Emergence of Violent Underground Groups Clouds Outlook

Reducing the potential for a political settlement is the activity of violent, underground groups that, among their tactics, detonate bombs and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) against security forces. These groups have not targeted civilians, although on at least one occasion civilians have been killed or injured in these attacks. Mainstream opposition factions deny any connection to these groups and assert that their attacks often fail, suggesting a low level of organization by or support for these groups. There has been debate over the extent to which these factions are backed by Iran, and oppositionists accuse the government of exaggerating Iran's involvement in order to build support for its positions. The most well-known violent groups include the following:²²

- The “*14 February Coalition*” (named for the anniversary of the Bahrain uprising) claims to be inspired by the “Tamarod” protests in Egypt that prompted the Egyptian military to remove Muslim Brotherhood president Mohammad Morsi. The group claimed responsibility for an April 14, 2013, explosion in the Financial Harbour district. In September 2013, 50 Shiites were sentenced to up to 15 years in prison for alleged involvement in the group.
- *Ashtar Brigades*. It issued its first public statement in April 2013 and has since claimed responsibility for about 20 bombings against security personnel, including one in March 2014 that killed three police officers. One of them was a UAE police officer, part of the GCC contingent discussed above. In January 2017, the government executed three Shiite men for the March 2014 attack—the first executions since the 2011 uprising began. On March 17, 2017, the Trump Administration designated two Ashtar Brigades members, one of which is Iran-based, as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs) under Executive Order 13324, which blocks U.S.-based property of designated entities that support acts of terrorism.
- *Mukhtar Brigades and others*. A group called the Mukhtar Brigades has claimed responsibility for several attacks on security forces, including use of IEDs. Lesser-known Shiite militant groups including the Bahrain Liberation Movement, the Resistance Brigades, the Basta organization, and the Imam Army, the latter of which are said by the State Department's international terrorism report for 2016 to be working with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Qods Force (IRGC-QF)

Among other notable Shiite militant attacks, in April 2015, the government arrested 29 persons for a December 2014, bombing that wounded several police officers; they were sentenced to prison in December 2015 and two of them had their citizenship revoked. A July 28, 2015, bomb attack killed two policemen, days after the government announced it had disrupted an alleged attempt by Iran to arm opposition groups. An April 16, 2016, bomb attack killed one policeman

²¹ CRS conversation with Shiite opposition activist Matar al Matar in Washington, DC, March 2016; and <http://www.amnestyusa.org/news/press-releases/bahrain-alarming-spike-in-expulsion-of-citizens-arbitrarily-stripped-of-their-nationality>.

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

and critically injured two others. A bomb detonated in Manama in early February 2017, but there were no casualties.²³

In late 2016, Bahraini authorities uncovered a large warehouse containing equipment, apparently supplied by Iran, that is tailored for constructing “explosively-forced projectiles” (EFPs) such as those Iran-backed Shiite militias used against U.S. armor in Iraq during 2004-2011. No EFPs have actually been used in Bahrain, to date.²⁴ On January 1, 2017, 10 detainees who had been convicted of militant activities such as those discussed above broke out of Bahrain’s Jaw prison with the help of attackers outside the jail. In late March 2017, security forces arrested a group of persons that authorities claimed were plotting to assassinate senior government officials and “community figures,” asserting that the cell received military training by IRGC-QF. In June 2017, Bahrain justified its joining a Saudi-led boycott of Qatar in part by accusing Qatar of supporting the above-mentioned violent groups, although Qatar has not previously been accused by Bahrain or any outside organization of doing so.

Table 2. Status of Prominent Dissidents/Other Metrics

Wifaq Leaders	Secretary General Ali al-Salman was arrested in 2013 for “insulting authorities” and “incitement to religious hatred.” He was rearrested and, in June 2015, convicted and sentenced to four years in prison. In May 2016, a court increased his sentence to nine years, but in late October 2016 he was granted a retrial. Deputy leader Khalil al-Marzuq was arrested in September 2013, for “inciting terrorism,” but was acquitted in June 2014. Isa Qasim’s home was raided by the regime in May 2013 and again in late November 2014. In June 2016, his citizenship was revoked, but he remains in Bahrain pending appeals. Supporters surround his home continuously to prevent his arrest, sometimes resulting in clashes with security forces.
Bahrain Center for Human Rights Leaders and “Bahrain 13”	Abdul Hadi al-Khawaja, founder of BHCR, Arrested April 9, 2011, was one of 13 prominent dissidents (“Bahrain 13”) tried by state security court May 8, 2011, and sentenced to life in prison for conspiring to overthrow the government and for espionage on June 22, 2011. Daughters Zainab and Maryam also repeatedly arrested for opposition activities; Zainab released in May 2016 and left Bahrain. Khawaja’s successor as head of BCHR, Nabeel Rajab has been arrested and his travel banned several times for allegedly orchestrating antigovernment activity. He was arrested most recently in June 2016 and he has been tried repeatedly, the latest trial of which began on August 7, 2017. In February 2017. Among the other members of the “Bahrain 13,” four are sentenced to life in prison.
Ibrahim Sharif	Waad leader, imprisoned in 2011 and released on June 19, 2015, but rearrested in July 2015 for “incitement” against the government. In February 2016, he was sentenced to one year in jail, but was released in July 2016. He was detained for several days in November 2016 for asserting that a visit to Bahrain by Britain’s Prince Charles could lead to a “whitewash” of government abuses.
Mohammad al Tajer	Prominent human rights lawyer. Arrested and released in 2011. Rearrested in December 2016 for “insulting government institutions.”
Salmaniya Medical Complex personnel	Twenty-one medical personnel were arrested in April 2011 and tried for inciting sectarian hatred, possession of illegal weapons, and forcibly occupying a public building. All were eventually acquitted, most recently in late March 2013, but have not regained their jobs.
Protesters Killed	About 100 since the uprising began in 2011
Citizenship Revocations	Over 350, including 92 revocations in 2016, and several expulsions, mostly Bahraini Shiites of Persian origin.
Number Arrested	Approximately 3,000 total detentions since 2011.

Sources: Various press and interest group reports.

²³ <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/bomb-blast-in-bahrain-no-casualties>.

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

U.S. Posture on the Uprising

The Obama Administration opposed the 2011 GCC intervention, it repeatedly urged Bahraini authorities not to use force against protesters and release jailed opposition leaders, and it called on all parties to engage in sustained dialogue.²⁵ In September 21, 2011, speech to the U.N. General Assembly, President Obama said:

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

In June 2015, State Department officials, referring to the conviction of *Wifaq* leader Shaykh Ali Salman, said that opposition parties play a vital role in “inclusive, pluralistic states and societies.” Then-Secretary of State Kerry stated upon the July 17, 2016, dissolution of *Wifaq* that

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

The Obama Administration did not at any time call for the Al Khalifa regime to step down, asserting that Bahrain's use of force against demonstrators was limited and that the government tried to address opposition grievances. It maintained high level engagement with Bahrain's leaders and did not sanction any Bahraini officials. The Obama Administration withheld or conditioned some arms sales to Bahrain, but U.S. military cooperation with Bahrain continued without interruption. The Crown Prince represented Bahrain at the May 13-14, 2015, U.S.-GCC summit at Camp David, organized in large part to reassure the Gulf states about a potential nuclear deal with Iran, and King Hamad attended the April 21, 2016 U.S.-GCC summit.

Critics of Obama Administration policy toward Bahrain, primarily human rights-oriented groups such as Human Rights Watch and the Project on Middle East Democracy, said that the Administration was insufficiently critical of Bahrain's handling of the unrest.²⁶ Bahraini officials asserted that Administration criticism was too harsh. On July 7, 2014, the government ordered then-Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) Tom Malinowski out of Bahrain for meeting separately with *Wifaq* leader Shaykh Salman, asserting that he breached a requirement that all foreign official meetings with oppositionists be attended by a Bahraini official. Then-Secretary Kerry, in a phone call to Bahrain's Foreign Minister, called that requirement “unacceptable” and contrary to international diplomatic protocol. A July 18, 2014, letter to King Hamad, signed by 18 Members of the House of Representatives, called on the king to invite Assistant Secretary Malinowski back.²⁷ Suggesting that differences over the Malinowski visit were resolved, Malinowski and Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East Anne Patterson visited Bahrain in December 2014, holding meetings with the government as well as members of civil society. The Malinowski expulsion went well beyond the established Bahrain government pattern of criticizing U.S. official meetings with opposition figures.

²⁵ Secretary of State Clinton Comments on the Situation in the Middle East. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbuMZUg3Gc>.

²⁶ Stephen McNerny. “Silence on Bahrain.” *Washington Post* op-ed. November 5, 2012.

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

Trump Administration Policy

In concert with the Trump Administration's emphasis on countering Iran, the new Administration has downplayed U.S. concerns about Bahrain's human rights record. The Trump Administration has dropped Obama Administration human rights conditions on the approval of new combat aircraft to Bahrain,²⁸ and the Administration has imposed U.S. sanctions on members of underground violent opposition groups, in part for receiving backing from Iran. In late May 2017, during his visit to Saudi Arabia, President Trump met with King Hamad and assured him that U.S.-Bahrain relations would be free of the "strain" that characterized U.S.-Bahrain relations on the human rights issue during the Obama Administration.²⁹ The Bahrain opposition has expressed concerns about the apparent U.S. policy shift, and some oppositionists argue that increased U.S. support for the government could cause the mainstream opposition to draw closer to Iran than it has been to date.

Pre-2011 U.S. Posture on Bahraini Democracy and Human Rights

Well before the 2011 unrest, human rights groups and Bahraini oppositionists had accused successive U.S. Administrations of downplaying government abuses. Critics point to then-Secretary of State Clinton's comments in Bahrain on December 3, 2010, referring to the October 2010 elections, saying: "I am impressed by the commitment that the government has to the democratic path that Bahrain is walking on ..."³⁰

The Obama Administration countered the criticism with assertions that, for many years prior to the 2011 unrest, the United States sought to accelerate political reform in Bahrain and to empower its political societies through several programs. The primary vehicle has been the "Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)," which began funding programs in Bahrain in 2003.³¹ MEPI funds have been used for an American Bar Association (ABA) program to support the Ministry of Justice's Judicial and Legal Studies Institute (JLSI), which conducts specialized training for judges, lawyers, law schools, and Bahrain's bar association. The ABA also provided technical assistance to help Bahrain implement the BICI recommendations, including legislation on fair trial standards. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) had received some U.S. funds for its programs to enhance the capabilities of Bahrain's National Assembly, but Bahrain expelled the group in May 2006 for allegedly interfering in Bahrain's internal affairs.

Other Human Rights Issues³²

The bulk of recent criticism of Bahrain's human rights practices has focused on the government response to the unrest, including relative lack of accountability of security forces, suppression of free expression, and treatment of prisoners. The government, as have several of the other Gulf states, has increasingly used laws allowing jail sentences for "insulting the king" to silence opponents. However, the State Department human rights reports, and outside assessments, note

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

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

³⁰ Department of State. "Remarks With Foreign Minister Al Khalifa After Their Meeting." December 3, 2010.

³¹ Statement from the U.S. Embassy in Bahrain Concerning MEPI. June 17, 2014.

³² Much of this section is from the State Department's country report on human rights practices for 2016 and from reports by Human Rights Watch and other outside groups. The text of the State Department report is at <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/265704.pdf>.

additional problems in Bahrain for non-Muslims and for non-Shiite opponents of the government, as well as other issues that predated and might be unrelated to the unrest.

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

In 2013, in line with the BICI report, the king issued a decree reestablishing the “National Institution for Human Rights” (NIHR) to investigate human rights violations. It issues annual reports.³³ In October 2016, King Hamad issued a decree enhancing the NIHR’s powers, including the ability to make unannounced visits to detention centers and to request formal responses by the various ministries to NIHR recommendations.

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

Women’s Rights

Experts and other observers have long perceived Bahrain as advancing women’s rights, particularly relative to Saudi Arabia. The Council of Ministers (cabinet) regularly has at least one, and often several, female ministers. The number of women in the National Assembly is provided in **Table 1**. Huda Azar Nonoo, an attorney and formerly the only Jew in the Shura Council, was ambassador to the United States during 2008-2013.

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

³³ The full text of the National Commission’s March 20, 2012, report is at <http://www.biciactions.bh/wps/portal/BICI/>.

Religious Freedom³⁴

The State Department's recent reports on international religious freedom focus extensively on Sunni-Shiite differences and the unrest. The reports assert that the government discriminates against the Shiite majority and Shiite clergy. In 2014, the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs, which regulates the affairs of Muslim organizations in Bahrain, dissolved the Islamic Ulema Council, the main assembly of Shiite clerics in Bahrain, asserting that it engaged in illegal political activity. A Court of Cassation upheld that dissolution in April 2015. In June 2016, the king signed an amendment to a 2005 law regulating political societies, banning persons who are active in religious positions from engaging in political activities. The amendment appeared to represent an effort to further weaken *Wifaq*.³⁵

According to the State Department report, the government allows freedom of worship for Christians, Jews, and Hindus although the constitution declares Islam the official religion. Non-Muslim groups must register with the Ministry of Social Development to operate and Muslim groups must register with the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs. There are 19 registered religious groups and institutions, including Christian churches and a Hindu temple. The government donated land for the Roman Catholic Vicariate of Northern Arabia to relocate from Kuwait to Bahrain. A small Jewish community of about 36-40 persons remains in Bahrain, and apparently does not face any harassment or other difficulty.

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

Human Trafficking³⁶ and Labor Rights

Bahrain remains a destination country for migrant workers from South and East Asia, as well as some countries in Africa. Domestic workers are highly vulnerable to forced labor and sexual exploitation because they are largely unprotected under the labor law. The State Department's "Trafficking in Persons Report" for 2017, for the third year in a row, placed Bahrain in "Tier 2" on the grounds that while it does not meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking in persons, it continues to make efforts to do so.³⁷ During the year, the government developed a national referral mechanism and disseminated the strategy to relevant government and civil society stakeholders.

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

Regarding the related issue of labor rights, U.S. government reports credit Bahrain with significant labor reforms, particularly a 2002 law granting workers, including noncitizens, the

³⁴ This section is based on the State Department report on International Religious Freedom for 2015. The report can be accessed at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256473.pdf>.

³⁵ "Bahrain King 'Bans Mixing Religion and Politics.'" <http://www.alaraby.co.uk>. June 12, 2016.

³⁶ Much of this section is derived from the State Department report on Trafficking in Person: 2016. The report can be accessed at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/258878.pdf>.

³⁷ The text of the State Department report can be accessed at: <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/271341.pdf>

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

The architect of some recent labor reforms is the Labor Market Regulatory Authority (LMRA), which is separate from and considered more forward looking than the Ministry of Labor and Social Development. The LMRA has made strides to dismantle the "sponsorship system" that prohibited workers from changing jobs, and has helped institute requirements that every expatriate worker must be provided with health insurance. The LMRA has also instituted public awareness campaigns against trafficking in persons and has established a publicly funded "labor fund" to upgrade worker skill levels.³⁸

Executions and Torture

Well before the 2011 uprising, Human Rights Watch and other groups asserted that Bahrain was running counter to the international trend of ending executions. From 1977 until 2006, there were no executions in Bahrain, but, in November 2009, Bahrain's Court of Cassation approved the execution of an expatriate (citizen of Bangladesh). In February 2010, Human Rights Watch issued a study alleging systematic use by Bahraini security forces of torture.³⁹ A May 13, 2011, hearing of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission asserted that torture was being used regularly on those (mostly Shiites) arrested in the unrest. The State Department human rights report for 2011 said there were numerous reports of torture and other cruel punishments during the state of emergency (March-June 2011). In 2013, the government cancelled planned visits by the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.⁴⁰

U.S.-Bahrain Security Relations⁴¹

The U.S.-Bahrain security relationship dates to the end of World War II, well before Bahrain's independence, and remains central to the U.S. ability to address regional threats such as those posed by Iran and by terrorist movements in the region.⁴² There are over 7,000 U.S. military personnel deployed in Bahrain, mostly Navy, implementing various missions and defense

³⁸ Author conversations with Bahrain LMRA top officials, 2015-2016.

³⁹ Human Rights Watch. "Bahrain: Torture Redux." February 2010.

⁴⁰ <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/HRF-King-Al-Khalifa-Letter.pdf>.

⁴¹ Information in this section obtained from a variety of press reports, and the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA).

⁴² A very small number of Bahrain nationals have joined the Islamic State organization.

cooperation initiatives. This is an increase from about 6,500 in 2013⁴³ and reflects an addition of U.S. personnel for operations against the Islamic State.

In addition to hosting the U.S. naval headquarters presence in Bahrain, Bahrain signed a formal Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with the United States in 1991. 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.

In September 2014, Bahrain joined the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition and flew airstrikes on Islamic State positions in Syria. Since 2015, it has not been identified by the U.S.-led headquarters of the anti-Islamic State military campaign as conducting strikes there. As a GCC member, Bahrain also engages in substantial defense cooperation with other GCC states, for example in Yemen, as discussed further below. Bahrain also has formal relations with NATO under a 2004 NATO-GCC “Istanbul Cooperation Initiative” (ICI). As do the other GCC members in that forum (Kuwait, UAE, and Qatar), Bahrain has opened a diplomatic mission at NATO headquarters in Brussels.

U.S. Naval Headquarters

The cornerstone of U.S.-Bahrain defense relations is U.S. access to Bahrain’s naval facilities; the United States has had a U.S. naval command presence in Bahrain since 1948. MIDEASTFOR (U.S. Middle East Force) and its successor, NAVCENT (naval component of U.S. Central Command), as well as the Fifth Fleet (reconstituted in June 1995), have been headquartered in Bahrain, at a sprawling facility called “Naval Support Activity (NSA)-Bahrain.” It is also home to U.S. Marine Forces Central Command, Destroyer Squadron Fifty, and three Combined Maritime Forces.⁴⁴ The “on-shore” U.S. command presence in Bahrain was established after the 1991 U.S.-led war against Iraq; prior to that, the U.S. naval headquarters in Bahrain was on a command ship docked and technically “off shore.”

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

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

⁴³ Hendrick Simoes. “Bahrain Expansion Latest Sign of Continued Presence.” *Stars and Stripes*, December 16, 2013; Hendrick Simoes. “More Accompanied Tours Possible for Military in Bahrain.” *Stars and Stripes*, June 8, 2015.

⁴⁴ For an extended discussion of the U.S. military presence in Bahrain, see Brookings Institution, Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence, Policy Paper “No ‘Plan B’: U.S. Strategic Access in the Middle East and the Question of Bahrain. June 2013, by Commander Richard McDaniel, U.S.N.

To further develop the NSA-Bahrain, the U.S. military is implementing a planned \$580 million military construction program that began in May 2010 and is to be completed by the end of 2017.⁴⁵ The latest round of construction will double the size of the facility from 80 acres to over 150 acres by integrating the decommissioned Mina (port) Al Salman Pier, leased by the Navy under a January 2008 agreement, and adding an administration building and space for maintenance, barracks, warehousing, and dining facilities. The expansion supports the deployment of additional U.S. coastal patrol ships and the Navy's new littoral combat ship, and the docking of larger U.S. ships.⁴⁶ The expansion has also allowed for infrastructure for families of U.S. military personnel, including schools for young children. The U.S. military reportedly is allowing increasing numbers of families to accompany U.S. personnel serving in Bahrain, even though the facility is located at the edge of the major Manama neighborhood of Juffair. With the latest phase, the United States will have spent about \$2 billion total to improve the facility.

The NSA-Bahrain took on additional significance in December 2014 when Britain announced a deal with Bahrain to establish a fixed naval base in part of the Mina Al Salman pier. Under the reported agreement, facilities at Mina Al Salman are being improved to allow Britain's royal Navy to plan, store equipment, and house military personnel there.⁴⁷ And, also in December 2014, the GCC announced it would establish a joint naval force based in Bahrain to cooperate with the U.S. and other navies.

Among other facilities, a separate deep water port in Bahrain, Khalifa bin Salman Port, is one of the few facilities in the Gulf that can accommodate U.S. aircraft carriers and amphibious ships.⁴⁸ Shaykh Isa Air Base, improved with about \$45 million in U.S. funds, hosts a variety of U.S. aircraft, including F-16s, F-18s, and P-3 surveillance aircraft are stationed. About \$19 million was used for a U.S. Special Operations Forces facility. The FY2016 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA, P.L. 114-92) authorized \$90 million for additional military construction in Bahrain.

Exploration of Alternatives? Some say that the United States should examine alternatives to NSA-Bahrain on the grounds that the unrest in Bahrain poses threats to U.S. personnel deployed there. Some express concerns that the Al Khalifa government could fall to a regime that demands a U.S. departure, although most Bahraini Shiite opposition leaders publicly support the U.S. military presence in Bahrain. The U.S. military has, through social media and other directives, instructed its personnel in Bahrain to avoid any areas of Bahrain where demonstrations are taking place.⁴⁹ In 2013, then-Defense Secretary Hagel answered a Senator's inquiry about contingency planning in the event U.S. personnel at the facility come under threat. The enacted FY2016 National Defense Authorization Act, referenced above, did not contain a provision of an earlier version (H.R. 1735) to mandate a Defense Department report on alternative locations for the NSA-Bahrain. The Department reportedly has done an assessment of the security situation in Bahrain and contingency planning to move the NSA, but the assessment has not been released publicly.⁵⁰ Still, continued funding for and performance of military construction to enhance the NSA would indicate that the Administration has no plans to relocate the facility in the near future.

⁴⁵ Among the recent appropriations to fund the expansion are: \$54 million for FY2008 (Division 1 of P.L. 110-161); \$41.5 million for FY2010 (P.L. 111-117); \$258 million for FY2011 (P.L. 112-10). \$100 million was requested for FY2012 for two projects, but was not funded in the FY2012 Consolidated Appropriation (P.L. 112-74).

⁴⁶ Hendrick Simoes. "Bahrain Expansion Latest Sign of Continued Presence." *Stars and Stripes*, December 16, 2013.

⁴⁷ "U.K. to Boost Military Presence in the Persian Gulf." Associated Press, December 7, 2014.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Facebook posts of NSA-Bahrain from 2013. Accessed June 2016. <https://www.facebook.com/NSABahrain/?fref=nf>.

⁵⁰ Bockenfeld statement to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, September 9, 2016. op.cit.

Should there be a decision to relocate the NSA, potential alternatives would include Qatar's New Doha Port, Kuwait's Shuaiba port, and the UAE's Jebel Ali.⁵¹ All three are close U.S. allies, but none has stated a position on whether it would be willing to host such a facility. U.S. officials say that the potential alternatives do not provide large U.S. ships with the ease of docking access that Bahrain does, and that many of the alternatives share facilities with commercial operations.

Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA)

Bahrain was part of the U.S.-led allied coalition that ousted Iraq from Kuwait in 1991. It allowed the stationing of 17,500 U.S. troops and 250 U.S. combat aircraft at Shaykh Isa Air Base that participated in the 1991 "Desert Storm" offensive against Iraqi forces. Bahraini pilots flew strikes during the war, and Iraq fired nine Scud missiles at Bahrain, of which three hit facilities there. Bahrain and the United States subsequently agreed to further institutionalize the defense relationship by signing a Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) on October 28, 1991, for an initial period of 10 years. It remains in effect.⁵² The pact reportedly gives the United States access to Bahrain's air bases and to preposition strategic materiel (mostly U.S. Air Force munitions), requires consultations with Bahrain if its security is threatened, and provides for joint exercises and U.S. training of Bahraini forces.⁵³ It reportedly includes a "Status of Forces Agreement" (SOFA) under which U.S. military personnel serving in Bahrain operate under U.S. law.

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

U.S. pilots flew combat missions from Shaykh Isa Air Base in both Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan (after the September 11, 2001, attacks) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) to oust Saddam Hussein (March 2003). During both operations, Bahrain deployed its U.S.-supplied frigate warship (the *Subha*) to help protect U.S. ships, and it sent ground and air assets to Kuwait in support of OIF. Bahrain and UAE have been the only GCC states to deploy forces to Afghanistan; Bahrain deployed 100 police officers to Afghanistan during 2009-2014.

U.S. Security Assistance and Arms Transfers

Bahrain's total government budget is relatively small (under \$9 billion in 2016), allowing only modest amounts of national funds to be used for purchases of major combat systems. Bahrain uses mostly national funds to buy U.S. weaponry, but the United States provides some military assistance as well, in order to support Bahrain's ability to participate in regional security missions. The government's response to the political unrest caused the Obama Administration to put on hold sales to Bahrain of arms that could easily be used against protesters, primarily those used by the Interior Ministry, while generally continuing to provide equipment suited to external defense. The Trump Administration has lifted human rights conditionality on some defense articles while maintaining restrictions on sales of equipment that could be used against protesters.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² "U.S.-Bahrain Defense Pact Renewed." Agence France Presse, August 5, 2011.

⁵³ Details of the U.S.-Bahrain defense agreement are classified. Some provisions are discussed in Sami Hajjar, *U.S. Military Presence in the Gulf: Challenges and Prospects* (U.S. Army War College: Strategic Studies Institute), March 2002, p. 27. The State and Defense Departments have not provided CRS with requested information on the duration of the pact, or whether its terms had been modified in recent years.

Assistance to the Bahrain Defense Forces/Ministry of Defense

The main recipient of U.S. military assistance is the Bahrain Defense Force (BDF)—Bahrain’s regular military force. Bahrain’s total force is about 10,000 active duty personnel, which includes 2,000 National Guard personnel, a unit that is separate from both the BDF and the Ministry of Interior. The BDF, as well as Bahrain’s police forces, are run by Sunni Bahrainis, but supplement their ranks with unknown percentages of paid recruits from Sunni Muslim neighboring countries, including Pakistan, Yemen, Jordan, and elsewhere. Some human rights groups say that BDF equipment, such as Cobra helicopters, has been used against protesters.

Most U.S. military assistance to Bahrain is in the form of Foreign Military Financing (FMF), used to help Bahrain buy and maintain U.S.-origin weapons, to enhance interoperability with U.S. forces as well as with other GCC forces, to augment Bahrain’s air defenses, and to improve counterterrorism capabilities. In recent years, some FMF funds have been used to build up Bahrain’s Special Operations forces and to help the BDF use its U.S.-made Blackhawk helicopters.⁵⁴ The Defense Department estimates that about 50% of Bahrain’s forces are fully capable of integrating into a U.S.-led coalition.

The United States has reduced FMF to Bahrain since the unrest began, in part to try to compel the government to undertake political reforms. The Obama Administration’s FY2012 aid request, made at the start of the unrest, included \$25 million in FMF for Bahrain, but only \$10 million was provided. FMF was slightly increased for FY2013, but dropped back to \$10 million for FY2014. The Obama Administration provided \$7.5 million for Bahrain FMF for FY2015 and a similar amount in FY2016. The FMF request for FY2017 was reduced again, to \$5 million, to be used to support Bahrain’s maritime security capacity by assisting the Bahrain Coast Guard and upgrading the Coast Surveillance System, mentioned above. The United States has supplied Bahrain with a coastal radar system that reportedly provides Bahrain and the U.S. Navy a 360-degree field of vision.⁵⁵

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

Excess Defense Articles (EDA)

The BDF is eligible to receive grant “excess defense articles” (EDA), and it has received over \$400 million worth of EDA since the program began for Bahrain in 1993. In June 1995, the United States provided 50 M-60A3 tanks to Bahrain as a “no cost” five-year lease. Bahrain later received title to the equipment. In July 1997, the United States transferred the FFG-7 “Perry class” frigate *Subha* (see above) as EDA. In the State Department’s FY2012 budget request, the Administration supported providing another frigate (an “extended deck frigate”) to Bahrain as EDA because the *Subha* is approaching the end of its service life. The Administration said on May 11, 2012, that it continued to support that transfer, but the FY2014 foreign aid budget justification said that the BDF had put acquisition of a new frigate on hold, and would put U.S. military aid toward maintaining the *Subha* instead.

⁵⁴ “Revealed: America’s Arms Sales to Bahrain Amid Bloody Crackdown,” op. cit.

⁵⁵ “Bahrain Government’s Ties With the United States Run Deep,” op. cit.

International Military Education and Training Funds (IMET)

As noted in **Table 4**, small amounts of International Military Education and Training funds (IMET) are provided to Bahrain to inculcate principles of civilian control of the military, democracy, and interoperability with U.S. forces. Approximately 100 BDF students attend U.S. military schools each year through the IMET program. A roughly equal number train in the United States under the U.S. Foreign Military Sales program (using FMF). For FY2017, the Obama Administration requested \$800,000 for the IMET program for Bahrain.

Major Foreign Military Sales (FMS)

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

- *F-16s and other U.S.-made Aircraft.* In 1998, Bahrain purchased 10 U.S.-made F-16Cs from new production, worth about \$390 million. It later purchased 12 more of the system, bringing its F-16 fleet to 22. In 1999 and 2009, the United States sold Bahrain Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAMs) to arm the F-16s. In 2016, Bahrain submitted a request for 17-19 new production F-16Vs to replacing its aging F-5s.⁵⁶ The potential sale, including associated equipment and support, has an estimated value of nearly \$4 billion. The Obama Administration sent a draft approval of the sale to Congress with the condition that it would not finalize approval until Bahrain improves its human rights record.⁵⁷ Trump Administration officials have said they are dropping that condition, asserting that maintaining the conditionality is not the optimum way to influence Bahrain policy on its domestic unrest.⁵⁸ No formal notification of the potential sale has been transmitted, to date. And, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker said in July 2017 that he would withhold concurrence with informal arms sales notifications to the GCC states in connection with the dispute between Qatar and its neighbors that is discussed below. In 2012, the Obama Administration approved a sale of upgraded engines for Bahrain's F-16s and additional AMRAAMs.
- *Anti-Armor Missiles/Rockets.* An August 2000 sale of 30 Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMs, a system of short-range ballistic missiles fired from a multiple rocket launcher), valued at about \$70 million, included an agreement for joint U.S.-Bahraini control of the weapon. That arrangement sought to allay U.S. congressional concerns about possible U.S. promotion of regional missile proliferation. In 2007, the United States sold Bahrain several hundred "Javelin" anti-armor missiles worth up to \$42 million; nine UH-60M Blackhawk helicopters worth up to \$252 million; and six Bell search and recovery helicopters, valued at about \$160 million.
- *Stingers.* Section 581 of the FY1990 foreign operations appropriation act (P.L. 101-167) made Bahrain the only Gulf state eligible to receive the Stinger shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missile, and the United States has sold Bahrain about 70 Stingers since 1990. (This authorization has been repeated subsequently.)

⁵⁶ Craig Hoyle. "Bahrain Considering F-16V Order, Fleet Upgrade." *Flight Global*, January 26, 2016.

⁵⁷ Anthony Capaccio, Bloomberg News, September 30, 2016. <http://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2016-09-30/bahrain-s-lockheed-f-16-purchase-said-to-come-with-u-s-strings>.

⁵⁸ <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/feb/7/trump-ready-to-approve-weapons-packages-to-saudi-a/>.

- *Humvees and TOWs*. In September 2011, the Administration announced a sale to the BDF and National Guard of 44 “Humvee” (M115A1B2) armored vehicles and several hundred TOW missiles of various models, of which 50 are “bunker busters.” The proposed sale had an estimated value of \$53 million. State Department officials said the sale would not violate the intent of the “Leahy amendment,” a provision of foreign aid and defense appropriations law that forbids U.S. sales of equipment to security units that have committed human rights abuses.⁵⁹ But, two joint resolutions introduced in the 112th Congress (S.J.Res. 28 and H.J.Res. 80) would have prohibited the sale unless the Administration certified that Bahrain is rectifying alleged abuses.⁶⁰ In October 2011, even though Congress did not formally block the sale, the Obama Administration told Congress it would delay the sale until it could assess the BICI report and, in January 2012, it put the sale on hold indefinitely. On June 20, 2015, the State Department announced that the sale would proceed because the government had “made some meaningful progress on human rights reforms and reconciliation.”⁶¹
- *Maritime Defense Equipment and Spare Parts*. The Obama Administration did approve sales to Bahrain of equipment mostly, but not exclusively, for maritime security. In May 2012, in conjunction with a visit to Washington, D.C. by Bahrain’s Crown Prince, the Administration announced the release of additional U.S. arms for the BDF, Bahrain’s Coast Guard (a Ministry of Interior-controlled force) and Bahrain’s National Guard. The Administration stated that the weaponry was not suited for use against protesters and supported Bahrain’s increased focus on maritime defense. The Administration did not release a complete list of weapons to be sold, but it gave a few examples as follows: (1) the Perry-class frigate, as EDA, discussed above, but later mooted; and (2) harbor security boats for the Bahrain Coast Guard, as EDA;⁶² no legislation to block the sale was enacted.
- *Missile Defense*. Bahrain’s limited budget largely precludes it from any major role in the U.S. effort to forge a coordinated missile defense for the Gulf.

Counterterrorism Cooperation/Ministry of Interior⁶³

The United States cooperates with Bahrain’s Interior Ministry on counterterrorism issues, but U.S. cooperation with that ministry has been subject to restrictions since 2011 because of the ministry’s lead role in internal security. The ministry has retained a reputation among the Shiite population for brutality, although it had reformed somewhat since the departure in the late 1990s of internal security services chief Ian Henderson, a former British colonial police commander.

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

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

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

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

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

The February 2014 expulsion of Malinowski, mentioned above, led the Obama Administration to suspend most cooperation with the Ministry of Interior.⁶⁴ But cooperation with the ministry returned to nearly prior levels later in 2014 after Bahrain joined the effort against the Islamic State. No Islamic State terrorist attacks have occurred in Bahrain, to date, and Bahrain has arrested, charged, and in some cases stripped the citizenship of some Bahrainis accused of supporting the Islamic State. On June 23, 2016, Bahraini courts sentenced 24 supporters of the Islamic State for plots in Bahrain, including attacks on Shiites.

U.S. assistance to MOI personnel has fluctuated since the uprising began, as discussed below.

- *Arms Sales to the MOI.* Sales of U.S.-made small arms such as those sold to the Interior Ministry are generally commercial sales, licensed by State Department, with Defense Department concurrence. After May 2012, the State Department put “on hold” license requests for sales to Bahrain of small arms, light weapons, and ammunition⁶⁵—all of which could potentially be used against protesters. Appearing to refer to Bahrain, a provision of the FY2014 Consolidated Appropriation Act (P.L. 113-76) prohibited use of U.S. funds for “tear gas, small arms, light weapons, ammunition, or other items for crowd control purposes for foreign security forces that use excessive force to repress peaceful expression, association, or assembly in countries undergoing democratic transition.” The Trump Administration is maintaining the Obama Administration’s hold on new sales of arms and equipment to MOI led forces.
- *U.S. Training/NADR Funding.* The United States provides assistance to the MOI primarily through programs funded by Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining and Related Programs (NADR) funds, which have been provided to Bahrain since 1987, to help the MOI confront violent extremists and terrorist groups. U.S. officials assert that a general lack of training and antiquated investigative methods had slowed the MOI Police Force’s progress on counterterrorism and criminal investigations. The ministry’s role in putting down unrest prompted an Obama Administration “review” of the use of NADR-ATA (Antiterrorism Assistance) funding for the ministry to ensure that none of the funding was used against protestors. The State Department report on international terrorism for 2014 stated that the “Leahy Law” requirement to vet Bahrain personnel participating in ATA programs prompted the cancellation of planned ATA courses for Bahrain in 2015. However, that report for 2015 stated that one ATA-related course took place that year; the report for 2016 did not mention any. The Trump Administration has requested \$400,000 in NADR funds for FY2018 to train MOI personnel in investigative techniques, with a human rights focus, and to help MOI personnel respond to violent factions’ use of explosives. Some NADR-ATA funds have previously been used to augment the ability of Bahraini forces to protect U.S. diplomatic and military facilities in Bahrain.
- *Bahrain’s Coast Guard.* This force, which is under the Ministry of Interior, polices Bahrain’s waterways and contributes to the multilateral mission to monitor and interdict the seaborne movement of terrorists and weapons. U.S. restrictions on support for the Ministry of Interior forces have generally not applied to the Bahrain Coast Guard, as noted above.

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

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

Countering Terrorism Financing

Bahrain has been a regional leader in countering terrorism financing since well before the Islamic State organization became a perceived regional threat. Bahrain has hosted the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force (MENA/FATF) secretariat, and its Central Bank, Financial Information Unit (within the Central Bank), and local banks cooperate with U.S. efforts against terrorism financing and money laundering. In 2013, the government amended the Charity Fundraising Law of 1956 to tighten terrorism financing monitoring and penalties. In April 2015, Bahrain hosted the 8th European Union-GCC Workshop on Combating Terrorist Financing, and Bahrain is a member of the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition's "Counter-ISIS Finance Group." In November 2015, Bahrain hosted a workshop focused on preventing the abuse of the charitable sector to fund terrorism. It hosted a U.S.-GCC Counter-Hezbollah workshop in 2016

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

Foreign Policy Issues

Bahrain has been closely aligned with the other members of the GCC, which have political structures similar to that of Bahrain, although none of the others has a majority Shiite population. Bahrain is politically closest to Saudi Arabia, as demonstrated by the Saudi-led GCC intervention to help the government suppress the uprising in 2011, and Bahrain's joining of the June 2017 Saudi-led move to isolate Qatar. That dispute remains unresolved. Many Saudis visit Bahrain to enjoy the relatively more liberal social atmosphere there, using a causeway constructed in 1986 that links Bahrain to the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia, where most of the kingdom's Shiites (about 10% of the population) live. King Hamad's fifth son, Khalid bin Hamad, married a daughter of the late Saudi King Abdullah in 2011. In May 2012, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain announced a proposal to form a close political and military union among the GCC states ("Riyadh Declaration"), but the other four GCC states opposed it and the idea has not advanced. Bahrain hosted the annual GCC summit held during December 2016, which largely restated many of the GCC's commitment to greater GCC defense integration.

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

Perhaps in part explaining why Bahrain joined the June 2017 Saudi-led move against Qatar, Bahrain's relations with Qatar have frequently been fraught with disputes. The two had a long-standing territorial dispute over the Hawar Islands and other lands, which had roots in the 18th century, when the ruling families of both countries controlled parts of the Arabian peninsula. In 1991, five years after clashes in which Qatar landed military personnel on a Bahrain-constructed man-made reef (Fasht al-Dibal) and took some Bahrainis prisoner, Bahrain and Qatar agreed to abandon fruitless Saudi mediation efforts and refer the issue to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The ICJ ruled on March 16, 2001, in favor of Bahrain on the central dispute over the Hawar Islands but awarded to Qatar the Fasht al-Dibal reef and the town of Zubara on the Qatari mainland, where some members of the Al Khalifa family were long buried. Two smaller islands,

Janan and Hadd Janan, were ruled not part of the Hawar Islands group and were also awarded to Qatar. Qatar expressed disappointment over the ruling but accepted it as binding.

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

Iran

Bahrain focuses intently on Iran, asserting that it is arming and advising the Shiite opposition. Reports that Iran has supplied the violent opposition in Bahrain with machinery to manufacture antitank weaponry was discussed above. Since 2015, U.S. officials have generally corroborated that Iran is arming, at the very least, radical underground oppositionists by stating that

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

The Trump Administration has tilted even more directly toward the government view that Iran is attempting to promote antigovernment violence. The U.S. designation as terrorists of the two Ashtar Brigades figures, noted above, stated that the designations “follow a recent increase in militant attacks in Bahrain, where Iran has provided weapons, funding, and training to militants.” Bahrain officials also say they have seen an increase in the number of Bahrainis traveling to Iran and Iraq for training by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), the force that directly supports Iran's regional allies and proxies.⁶⁶ And, as noted above, the State Department report on terrorism for 2016 notes that several violent Shiite groups have been accused of working with the IRGC-QF to launch domestic attacks.

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

Bahrain sided decisively with Saudi Arabia in the Saudi-Iran dispute of January 2016 in which Iranian protesters attacked two Saudi diplomatic facilities in Iran in response to the Saudi execution of dissident Shiite cleric Nimr al-Baqr Al Nimr. As did Saudi Arabia, Bahrain broke diplomatic relations with Iran, going beyond a 2011-2012 cycle of tensions in which Iran and

⁶⁶ <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iranian-backed-terrorism-in-bahrain-finding-a-sustainable-solution>.

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

Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors. In March 2016, all the GCC states declared Lebanese Hezbollah, a key Iran ally, a terrorist organization and encouraged or banned their citizens from visiting Lebanon. Bahrain simultaneously closed Future Bank, a Bahrain bank formed and owned by two major Iranian banks (Bank Saderat and Bank Melli). Earlier, in 2013, Bahrain declared Hezbollah a terrorist organization, accusing it of helping a Shiite-led “insurgency” in Bahrain.⁶⁸

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

As did the other GCC states, Bahrain expressed initial concern about the U.S. diplomatic approach to Iran that produced the July 14, 2015, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear agreement. Perhaps out of concern that the United States might accept an enhanced regional role for Iran after a JCPOA was reached, King Hamad announced, a few days in advance, that he would not attend the U.S.-GCC summit at Camp David during May 13-14, 2015. Bahrain was represented by the Crown Prince. At the summit, the Administration attempted to assuage GCC concerns about the Iran agreement by offering new sales to the GCC states of sophisticated weaponry and establishing expanded cooperation on maritime security, cybersecurity, missile defense, and other issues. The Obama Administration’s lifting of the hold on the Humvee and TOW sale, discussed above, came several weeks after that summit. King Hamad did attend the second U.S.-GCC summit in April 2016, which restated all the Camp David commitments and announced some new initiatives including U.S. training for GCC special forces, and a program of U.S.-GCC military exercises.⁷⁰ Bahrain later joined the GCC in publicly supporting the JCPOA’s nuclear curbs on Iran while at the same time calling for increased vigilance against Iran’s “destabilizing regional activities.”

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

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

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

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

⁷¹ See: CRS Report RS20871, *Iran Sanctions*, by Kenneth Katzman.

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

Iraq/Syria/Islamic State Organization

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

Similarly, Bahrain and the other GCC states have blamed Syrian President Bashar Al Assad for authoritarian policies that have alienated Syria's Sunni Arab majority and fueled support for the Islamic State. In 2011, Bahrain and the other GCC countries withdrew their ambassadors from Syria and voted to suspend Syria's membership in the Arab League. Bahrain's government has not, by all accounts, been providing funding or weaponry to any Syrian rebel groups.

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

Yemen

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

Israeli-Palestinian Dispute

On the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, Bahraini leaders have on occasion taken positions outside a GCC consensus. In a July 2009, op-ed, Crown Prince Salman called on the Arab states to do more to communicate to the Israeli people ideas for peaceful resolution of the dispute.⁷² In October 2009, Bahrain's then-foreign minister called for direct talks with Israel. Still, Bahrain supports the efforts of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to obtain U.N. recognition for a State of Palestine. Earlier, Bahrain participated in the 1990-1996 multilateral Arab-Israeli talks, and it hosted a session on the environment (October 1994). In September 1994, all GCC states ceased enforcing secondary and tertiary boycotts of Israel, but Bahrain did not join Oman and Qatar in exchanging trade offices with Israel. In conjunction with the U.S.-Bahrain FTA, Bahrain dropped the primary boycott and closed boycott-related offices in Bahrain.

The Israeli-Palestinian dispute has sometimes become a political issue within Bahrain. In 2009, the COR passed a bill making it a crime for Bahrainis to travel to Israel or hold talks with Israelis—a response to a visit by Bahraini officials to Israel in July 2009 to urge the release of five Bahrainis that were imprisoned when Israel seized a ship bound for the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip. In June 2010, Sunni and Shiite Islamists in Bahrain demonstrated against the Israeli seizure of a ship attempting to run Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip. During a visit to Manama by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in July 2014, King Hamad called for the international community to halt the Hamas-Israel conflict taking place at that time.⁷³

Economic Issues

Bahrain's economy has been affected by the domestic unrest and by the sharp fall in oil prices since mid-2014. Hydrocarbons still account for about 80% of government revenues, and most of that hydrocarbons revenue consists of oil exports from a field that Saudi Arabia shares equally with Bahrain, the Abu Safa field, which produces 300,000 barrels per day. Bahrain's oil and gas reserves are the lowest of the GCC states, estimated respectively at 210 million barrels of oil and 5.3 trillion cubic feet of gas. The fall in oil prices since 2014 has caused Bahrain to cut subsidies of some fuels and some foodstuffs. The financial difficulties have also contributed to a lack of implementation of government promises to provide more low-income housing (presumably for Shiites, who tend to be among the poorer Bahrainis). To try to diversify, Bahrain is investing in its banking and financial services sectors (about 25.5% of GDP combined). A comprehensive assessment of Bahrain's economy is provided in the Economist Intelligence Unit country report.⁷⁴

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

To encourage reform and signal U.S. appreciation, the United States and Bahrain signed an FTA on September 14, 2004. Implementing legislation was signed January 11, 2006 (P.L. 109-169). However, in light of the unrest, the AFL-CIO has urged the United States to void the FTA on the grounds that Bahrain is preventing free association of workers and abridging their rights. In 2005,

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

⁷³ "Fresh Challenge to U.S.-Bahrain Relations." op. cit.

⁷⁴ http://country.eiu.com/FileHandler.ashx?issue_id=1644685748&mode=pdf.

total bilateral trade was about \$780 million, and, as depicted in the table below, U.S.-Bahrain trade has more than doubled since the U.S.-Bahrain FTA.

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

Table 3. Some Basic Facts About Bahrain

Population	About 1.3 million, of which slightly less than half are citizens. Expatriates are mainly from South Asia and other parts of the Middle East.
Religions	Nearly all the citizenry is Muslim, while Christians, Hindus, Bahais, and Jews constitute about 1% of the citizenry. Of the total population, 70% is Muslim, 9% is Christian, 10% are of other religions.
GDP (purchasing power parity basis, PPP)	\$67 billion (2016). Would be \$32 billion at official exchange rate.
GDP per capita (PPP basis)	\$50,300 (2016)
GDP Real Growth Rate	2% (2016)—about 1% slower than 2015 and 2.4% lower than 2014
Budget	\$4.5 billion revenues, \$8.8 billion expenditures (2016)
Inflation Rate	2.0% (2015)
Unemployment Rate	4% (2014)
U.S. Exports to Bahrain	\$902 million (2016), down from \$1.275 billion in 2015
U.S. Imports from Bahrain	\$768 million (2016), down from \$900 million in 2015

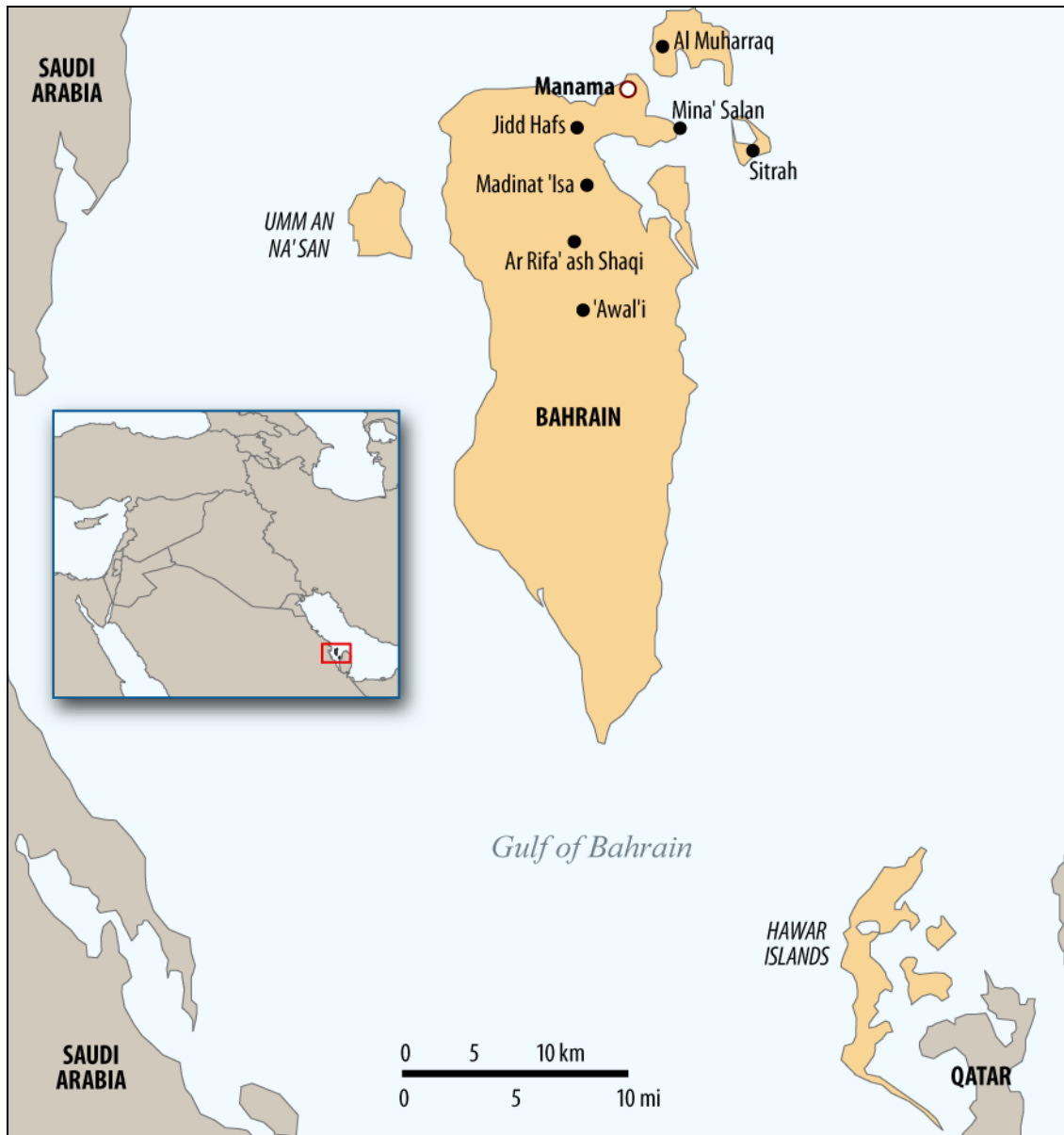
Source: CIA, *The World Factbook*.

Table 4. U.S. Assistance to Bahrain
(\$ in millions)

	FY2003	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
FMF	90.0	24.6	18.9	15.6	15	3.968	8.0	19.0	15.46	10	12.575	10	7.5	5.0	5.0	0
IMET	0.448	0.60	0.65	0.65	0.616	0.622	.661	.670	.435	.554	.487	.522	.577	.416	.800	.400
NADR			1.49	2.76	.776	0.744	.500	1.10	1.5	.500	.450	.450	.450	.400	.800	.400
“Section 1206”				5.3	24.54	4.3	16.2									
ESF/Dem. and Gov.												3.0				

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

Figure I. Bahrain



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

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