

Research Briefing
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Bahrain: Introductory country profile

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Summary

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paper were
accessed in April
2022

The UK has strong diplomatic, military, and economic ties with Bahrain. In 2022, it plans to negotiate a trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council, whose six members include the country. However, Bahrain's human rights record is of significant concern to the UK Government, being one of its 31 human rights priority countries.

This briefing introduces Bahrain's politics, human rights, trade, and international relations. It also signposts further reading. Please visit the Library's [Middle East pages](#) for further analysis on the region's politics.

Bahrain's Gulf neighbours



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Headline statistics

- **2020 population:** 1.7 million (UK: 67.2 million).
- **2020 Gross domestic product (GDP):** US\$35 billion (UK: US\$2,760 billion).
- **2020 GDP per capita** (GDP divided by population): US\$20,400 (UK: US\$41,000).
- **2021 GDP growth:** 2.2% (UK: 7.4%). **2022 GDP growth:** 3.3% (UK: 3.7%).¹

¹ Data from [World Bank](#) and International Monetary Fund, [World economic outlook](#), April 2022, pp138, 142. All sources accessed 19 April 2022 unless stated.

1

Economy

Bahrain is a high-income economy, heavily reliant on migrant labour.

It operates a sponsorship system of labour (the “kafala” system) whereby migrants must seek permission to change jobs and leave the country (see page 7, below).

While oil is important to its economy, constituting 18% of its GDP, the service sector, particularly financial services, now accounts for the majority (58%) of economic output. Manufacturing, driven by the production of aluminium and petrochemicals, forms 14% of its economy (data for 2020).

Non-oil sectors were worst hit during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, seeing a contraction of 6.2%, compared to 0.1% in the oil sector.²

Oil and gas are major sources of government revenue, given the absence of personal income taxes. This means changes in oil prices have a significant impact on the Government’s programmes and revenues. Falls in oil prices since 2014 led the Bahraini Government in 2019 to introduce a value-added tax on most goods to strengthen revenue.³

As a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (formed of Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)), Bahrain applies low external tariffs with its neighbours and is working towards a common market. This is still in progress. It will provide for freedom of movement, residence and access to social services for GCC citizens.

The GCC has also entered negotiations for free trade agreements with the EU, India, Japan, and the UK (see page 8, below, for the UK).⁴

Bahrain’s Economic vision 2030

Launched in 2008, Bahrain’s [Economic vision 2030](#) sets out the Government’s plan to strengthen the Kingdom’s private sector, competitiveness, and to increase “fairness” under the law and in access to services.

Plans include supporting gender equality, reducing reliance on oil, and to invest oil revenues in future growth rather than subsidising current spending.⁵

² World Trade Organization (WTO), [Trade policy review: Kingdom of Bahrain, full report](#), November 2021, paras 1.6-1.7

³ Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, [VAT hike in Bahrain points to fiscal challenges, unattractive choices government faced](#), December 2021, pp1, 7

⁴ WTO, [Trade policy review: Kingdom of Bahrain, full report](#), November 2021, section 2.3.2.1

⁵ Government of Bahrain, [Bahrain Economic Vision 2030](#)

2

Leadership and politics

From 1975 to 2002 the Kingdom was an absolute monarchy. In 2002, a constitutional monarchy and two-chamber parliament were established.

Monarch and ministers

King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa (born 1950) has been in power since 1999, succeeding his father. The King is the supreme commander of the armed forces and appoints the Prime Minister and Cabinet (though the legislature approves the Cabinet). The King's eldest son, Crown Prince Sheikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, is Prime Minister.

National Assembly and the 2018 elections

The National Assembly consists of an upper house: The 40-member Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council), appointed by the King, and a lower house: The 40-member Majlis al-Nuwab (Council of Representatives), which is elected. The upper house can veto the lower. Only the Cabinet can initiate laws.

Members are appointed for four-year terms. The most recent elections took place in 2018. Only three of the 24 outgoing deputies who stood for re-election to the Majlis al-Nuwab were re-elected. Analysts suggest this was related to the Kingdom's austerity programme (involving, for example, a freeze on public sector pay), implemented because of lower oil and gas revenues.⁶

In 2018, six women were elected to the Majlis al-Nuwab and eight were appointed to the Majlis al-Shura.⁷

Political participation

Tensions have long been present between Bahrain's majority Shia Muslim population and Sunni Muslim minority, which includes the monarchy.

Some political societies are allowed, but independents hold 34 of the 40 seats following 2018 elections. Al-Wefaq, a Shia Muslim political group which had taken nearly half of the seats in the 2006 and 2010 polls, was outlawed in 2016 and did not take part in the 2018 elections.⁸

⁶ Europa World Plus, [Bahrain: Constitution and contemporary political history](#). Accessible via a Commons Library log-in

⁷ Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, [Bahraini women make gains amid tightening political freedom](#), 25 July 2019

⁸ Europa World Plus, [Bahrain: Constitution and contemporary political history](#)

The Shia cleric described as the “spiritual inspiration” for Al-Wefaq, Sheikh Isa Qassim, had been stripped of his citizenship in 2016. He is now in Iran.⁹

The next elections are due in November 2022. These are unlikely to be free and fair, according to one Bahraini American group, because of continuing restrictions against opposition groups.¹⁰

Most people in Bahrain cannot vote, with non-citizens making up most of the population. In 2018, the registered electorate was 365,000 (26% of the then-1.4 million population).¹¹

3 Political rights

The 2011 protests and their legacy

Bahrain is the only Gulf state to have a Shia Muslim majority population. This has resulted in a long history of tension between the population and the Sunni monarchy.

Repression has been heightened since 2011, when an uprising of mostly Shia opponents was suppressed with the support of Saudi and UAE forces. The protests were not solely driven by sectarian demands, but also for greater openness in the country’s politics.

An independent inquiry into the protests, commissioned by the King, found at least 19 protesters were killed by the authorities due to torture or excessive force. Few prosecutions of the security forces implicated in the excessive use of force have occurred. Since 2011, many opposition activists remain in prison and opposition groups have been subject to bans.¹²

Limited reforms have been introduced. For example, in 2012 Bahrain’s Assembly was awarded more scrutiny power over the Cabinet. However, recommendations of the independent commission to relax censorship laws and allow opposition voices onto Bahraini media remain unimplemented.¹³

⁹ Radio Farda, [Bahrain’s Shiite leader announces move to Iran after losing citizenship](#), 3 February 2019

¹⁰ Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB), [US congress calls for report from State Department on political prisoners in Bahrain](#), 30 March 2022

¹¹ AP News, [Bahrain votes for new parliament but opposition is absent](#), 24 November 2018

¹² Human Rights Watch, [Nine years after Bahrain’s uprising, its human rights record has only worsened](#), 25 February 2020

¹³ Amnesty International, [Bahrain: Dreams of reform crushed ten years after rising](#), 11 February 2021; Europa World Plus, [Bahrain: Constitution and contemporary political history](#) (for cabinet powers).

The US State Department's 2021 report on human rights in Bahrain cited ongoing restrictions on political participation:

- **Free expression:** Constitutional protections for freedom of speech do not extend to social media or matters considered to be sectarian in nature, threatening of unity, or challenging of central Islamic belief.
- **Free media:** The Government owns all domestic TV and radio, and exercises “considerable control” over privately owned domestic print media. Books and publications are subject to censorship, and some websites are blocked. This includes access to the sites of international human rights groups and opposition groups.
- **Freedom of assembly/association:** A ban on public demonstrations has been in place since 2015. Some “political societies” have been allowed to develop platforms. Two leading opposition societies, Al-Wefaq and Wa’ad, were dissolved in 2016 and 2017 through legal action. All civil society organisations must first register with the Government.¹⁴
- **Imprisoned dissidents:** Many opposition figures have been detained since the 2011 protests. These include two leaders of opposition Shia group Al Haq and Sheikh Ali Salman, the leader of Al-Wefaq (on charges of spying for Qatar in 2018).¹⁵

4 Human rights

Bahrain's National Institute for Human Rights was established in 2014 to promote and protect human rights. Since 2020, the Kingdom has also been drafting a national action plan for human rights. While the UK Government argues there is “increasingly transparent” reporting by oversight bodies, it has urged the country to conduct investigations that meet international standards.¹⁶

Ongoing concerns include the below.

- **Death sentences continue to be imposed.** At least 51 people were executed between 2011 and July 2021, according to the rights groups Reprieve and the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy. This compared to eight in the previous decade.¹⁷

¹⁴ US State Department, [2021 country reports on human rights practices: Bahrain](#), April 2022, sections A & B

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, [Universal periodic review submission on Bahrain](#), 5 April 2022

¹⁶ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), [Human rights and democracy: 2020 report](#), July 2021, ‘Bahrain’

¹⁷ Al-Jazeera, [Death sentences in Bahrain “dramatically escalated” since 2011](#), 13 July 2021

- The Bahraini constitution provides for **gender equality** in social, economic, and political spheres. Women can vote in local and national elections. However, family laws continue to discriminate against women transmitting Bahraini nationality to their children on an equal basis to men (children take citizenship from their fathers). Protections on gender-based violence are considered lacking.¹⁸
- **Prison conditions:** International rights groups have accused Bahrain of holding many political prisoners, mostly on terrorism charges. They cite issues of overcrowding and poor health care in Bahrain’s prisons.¹⁹
- **Worker rights:** There have been consistent complaints that migrant workers, who numbered around 600,000 in 2019, are exploited and lack protections. A minimum wage and collective bargaining are absent.

Bahrain’s Government has introduced reforms to the kafala (“sponsorship”) system, under which migrant workers must obtain visas, exit permits and permission to change jobs from a sponsor. Flexi-permits allow migrant workers to apply to the Government rather than employers, but rights groups say it is too costly for many to afford.²⁰

- The country **decriminalised same-sex relationships in 1976**. The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) state LGBT+ persons continue to lack other protections in law.²¹

What’s the UK Government assessment?

The UK Government is particularly concerned about human rights in Bahrain, having classified it as one of its 31 human rights priority countries.

The UK has raised its concerns about Bahrain’s use of the death penalty, restrictions to freedom of expression, challenges in international journalists accessing the country, and allegations of torture and mistreatment of prisoners. It welcomed the drafting of a National Human Rights Action Plan in 2020 and the release of over 900 prisoners from custodial sentences.²²

The issue of Bahraini political prisoners was debated in the Commons in January 2022. The Government argues its relationship with Bahrain allows it to “positively influence” human rights, and believes Bahrain is taking “important and effective steps” to address allegations of torture and

¹⁸ ADHRB, [Women’s rights in Bahrain...Postponed dreams](#), 24 January 2022

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch and 17 others, [Bahrain: Free imprisoned rights offenders and opposition activists](#), 6 April 2020

²⁰ European Centre for Democracy and Human Rights, [Migrant workers’ rights](#), June 2019

²¹ ILGA, [State-sponsored homophobia, 2020](#), December 2020, pp100, 327

²² FCDO, [Human rights and democracy: 2020 report](#), July 2021, ‘Bahrain’

mistreatment. It also cited its work to support independent oversight bodies of prisons and security forces like the National Institute for Human Rights.²³

5 UK-Bahrain relations

Bahrain gained independence from the UK in 1971.

Plans for a trade agreement

Trade between the UK and Bahrain takes place on [World Trade Organisation \(WTO\) terms](#), meaning the countries must treat each other's goods and services the same as those from other WTO members.²⁴ A preferential agreement would allow for more favourable terms.

Following a consultation, in June 2022 the Government [launched free trade negotiations with the Gulf Cooperation Council \(GCC\)](#). The issue of human rights in the region is likely to be an area of scrutiny. Total trade in goods and services between the GCC and the United Kingdom reached £41.4 billion in 2019. This would make the bloc, as a whole, the UK's tenth largest trading partner. However, trade fell to £30.4 billion in 2020.²⁵

UK-Bahrain trade in 2021

- **Trade with the UK:** Was the UK's 85th largest trading partner in 2021.
- **Total UK-Bahrain trade (exports and imports):** £779 million in 2021, down £30 million compared to 2020 (when it was £809 million).
- **Top five UK goods exported to Bahrain:** Jewellery, cars, miscellaneous electrical goods, aircraft, and power generators.
- **Top five UK goods imported from Bahrain:** Power generators, non-ferrous metals (eg copper, aluminium), iron and steel, electric motors, and miscellaneous metal manufactures.²⁶

Notes: Data on the top five services traded are not available. During this period, trade was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and related health measures.

²³ HC Deb, [13 January 2022](#), cc721-2

²⁴ Department for International Development (DIT), [Trading under WTO terms](#), updated 31 December 2020

²⁵ DIT, [Information note on consultation relating to future trade negotiations between the UK and GCC](#), October 2021, p9

²⁶ DIT, [Trade and investment factsheet: Bahrain](#) (updated monthly, accessed 30 May 2022), pp1, 5

Gulf Strategy Fund (GSF)

The UK's GSF works in several Gulf countries, including Bahrain. Through it, the UK supports police reform, counter-terrorism capabilities, and strengthening of human rights oversight bodies. UK regional programmes also support tax reform and environmental management with the aim of increasing investment opportunities for UK companies.²⁷

In 2021, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Democracy and Human Rights in the Gulf argued the fund should be suspended as it failed to contribute to progress on human rights in the region. The Government disagreed, arguing all funding is subject to checks to ensure it does not impact negatively on human rights and said it will continue to raise human rights concerns with Gulf countries.²⁸

Other UK-Bahrain engagement

- **UK military forces** are based in the Gulf to protect shipping and conduct operations against groups such as Islamic State/Daesh. The UK Naval Support Facility in Bahrain is the main facility in the Gulf for UK vessels.²⁹
- **UK universities** allowing Bahrain institutions to issue their degrees include Salford and the University of London.³⁰
- **Travel:** From June 2022, Bahraini citizens can apply to travel to the UK for tourism, study, medical treatment, or business for up to six months with an electronic visa waiver. This is intended to be quicker than applying for a visa.³¹

6 Foreign relations

The Sunni-Shia Muslim divide is a significant one in the Middle East, with Shia and Sunni states often seeking to support sectarian groups beyond their borders. Bahrain is rare in having a Shia-majority population but a Sunni Muslim Monarchy. Iran is the largest Shia-majority state in the region.³²

²⁷ FCDO, [GSF programme summary](#) [for 2020-21], 24 June 2021

²⁸ Commons Library, [The Gulf in 2021](#), CBP9284, section 2

²⁹ Commons Library, [UK forces in the Middle East region](#), CBP8794, p3

³⁰ University of Salford, [Study in Bahrain](#); University of London, [Study in Bahrain](#)

³¹ Home Office, [Bahrain and Saudi Arabia get UK electronic visa waiver status](#), 11 May 2022, accessed 30 May 2022

³² BBC News, [Sunnis and Shias: Islam's ancient schism](#), 4 January 2016

The US

Like the UK, the US has significant links with Bahrain. The country hosts around 7,000 US forces and is a significant importer of US arms. The US Fifth Fleet is based in Bahrain and conducts security operations in the Gulf.

In 2002, Bahrain was designated a “major non-NATO ally.” This status is also held by Japan and Australia and allows preferential access to US equipment and technology.³³

Other Gulf states

Bahrain is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), whose members include Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and the UAE. The GCC aims to build political and economic ties between its members.³⁴

Bahrain is particularly close to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The two countries sent forces to Bahrain to help suppress the 2011 protests (see page 5, above).

Bahrain backed the Saudi military offensive in Yemen in support of the internationally recognised Government against the Houthi rebels (aligned with Iran) and backed the GCC’s decision to isolate Qatar from 2017 to 2021.³⁵

What was the “Qatar crisis”?

In June 2017, some GCC states and others cut diplomatic relations with Qatar and imposed limits on trade and movement. The countries alleged the country supported terrorism, including through being too close to Iran and supporting political Islam organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

In contrast to other Gulf states, for example, Qatar had supported the Egyptian Presidency of Mohamed Morsi, a member of the Brotherhood, while Gulf states backed his overthrow in 2013. The Brotherhood has ties with groups across the Middle East, but Saudi Arabia and the UAE have worked to suppress it, seeing it as a threat to their regimes.

An agreement ending the dispute was signed in January 2021. It detailed no actions for Qatar to take.³⁶

³³ Congressional Research Service, [Bahrain: Unrest, security, and US policy](#), updated 10 March 2022

³⁴ Al-Jazeera, [What is the GCC?](#), 4 December 2017

³⁵ Commons Library, [The Gulf in 2021](#), CBP9284, section 5.2

³⁶ Commons Library, [The Gulf in 2021](#), CBP9284, section 5.1

Iran

While regional tensions with Iran are high, due to its nuclear programme and support for groups hostile to Gulf states such as the Houthis in Yemen and Shia Muslim militias in Iraq, relations between Bahrain's monarchy and Iran are particularly poor.³⁷

Shia Iran has been accused by Bahrain of involvement in the 2011 protests, shipping weapons to the opposition, and providing support to dissident groups.³⁸

Bahrain has criticised the 2015 agreement reached between Iran and global powers such as the US and China, which lifted sanctions on Iran in exchange for the country adhering to limits on its nuclear programme. Bahrain's Government has argued for a wider deal that curtails Iran's ballistic missile programme and support for armed groups abroad.³⁹

Israel

In September 2020, Bahrain became the fourth Arab country to establish diplomatic relations with Israel, after Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE, under the US-led Abraham Accords.

Both Israel and Bahrain share concerns for Iran's nuclear programme, its support for non-state groups in the Middle East, and maritime attacks in the Gulf. Cooperation has since increased: In 2021 they held joint naval exercises in the Gulf and in 2022 signed a security cooperation agreement.⁴⁰

Russia

Russia sold arms to Bahrain for the first time in 2011, though it remains a less significant source than the UK and US. In February 2022, Bahrain voted in favour of the UN General Assembly Resolution calling for Russian withdrawal from Ukraine and has called for negotiation.⁴¹

³⁷ Commons Library, [Iran's influence in the Middle East](#), CBP9504

³⁸ International Crisis Group, [Flashpoint: Bahrain](#), 13 April 2022

³⁹ Times of Israel, [In Israel, top Bahrain diplomat says Iran nuke deal fuelled violence, chaos](#), 8 August 2021

⁴⁰ ABC News, [Israel PM meets Bahrain's king in push to strengthen ties](#), 15 February 2022

⁴¹ Al-Monitor, [Can Bahrain count on Moscow to fill Washington's shoes?](#), 8 July 2016; Washington Institute, [The UN Resolution on Ukraine: How did the Middle East vote?](#), 2 March 2022

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Further resources

General background/profiles

- Europa World Plus, [Bahrain profile](#). Provides economic and political data and describes key events. Accessible via a Commons Library log-in.
- CIA, [Middle East: Bahrain](#). Headline statistical information on population, economy, and energy.
- BBC News, [Bahrain profile—Timeline](#), November 2018. Events to 2018.
- Congressional Research Service, [Bahrain: Issues for US policy](#), 95-1013. 25-page briefing on politics, foreign policy, and economic issues from the perspective of US-Bahrain relations.

Recent UK Parliament proceedings

- HC Deb, [Bahraini political prisoners](#), 13 January 2022, cc703-22
- HL Deb, [Bahrain: Human rights abuses](#), 15 July 2021, cc1947-50
- HL Deb, [Bahrain: Human rights](#), 13 March 2019, cc1093-1107
- HC Deb, [Royal Navy base: Bahrain](#), 20 November 2018, cc263WH-269WH

Human rights: General issues

- Amnesty International, [Everything you need to know: Human rights Bahrain 2021/22](#). Summary of seven key issues.
- Human Rights Watch, [Bahrain: Events of 2021](#). Overview of political opposition, prisoners, migrant workers, LGBT+ people and women.
- Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Human rights and democracy reports: 2020](#), July 2021. Bahrain is one of the UK's 31 human rights priority countries. The report provides a general assessment.
- US State Department, [2021 country reports on human rights practices: Bahrain](#), April 2022. Wide ranging report on political and other rights.
- UN Human Rights Council, [Universal periodic reviews: Bahrain](#). The Council conducts regular reviews of human rights in every country. Bahrain's most recent was 2017. The next is due in November 2022.
- SALAM for Democracy and Human Rights, [Decade of oppression](#), 2021. A mainly UK-based NGO summarises ten years of developments.

- Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain, [Homepage](#). Based in the US but monitors Bahrain's human rights.
- Gulf Centre for Human Rights, [Homepage](#). Based in Lebanon but documents human rights issues in Bahrain.

Human rights: Specific issues

- Commons Library, [The ongoing detention of Bahraini political prisoners](#), CDP 2022-6. Three-page summary of the issue with parliamentary material. Includes links to reports by civil society organisations.
- Reporters without Borders, [Bahrain](#). Work on media freedom.
- Borgen Project, [The two sides of women's rights in Bahrain](#), March 2021. Short summary focusing on education and continuing discrimination.
- Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain, [Women's rights in Bahrain...Postponed dreams](#), January 2022. Discusses gaps in Bahraini laws and implementation of international conventions.
- Human Rights Watch, [Continuing torture and mistreatment of detainees in Bahrain](#), November 2015. Argues for a lack of progress on the treatment of detainees since 2011.
- International Labour Organization (ILO), [The ILO in Bahrain](#). Summary of the ILO's work in the country and efforts on worker rights.
- US State Department, [2020 report on international religious freedom: Bahrain](#), May 2021. Describes legal and social practices on religion.

Trade and economic profiles

- Department for International Trade, [Trade and investment factsheet: Bahrain](#), updated monthly. Provides a 15-page overview of the UK's trade with Bahrain.
- Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Economic factsheet: Bahrain](#), December 2021. Two-page summary with key economic indicators.
- Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, [Submission to the International Trade Committee on UK trade negotiations: Agreement with Gulf Cooperation Council](#), January 2022. Describes human rights issues raised by the potential trade agreement with the UK.
- International Monetary Fund, [Economic prospects and policy challenges for the Gulf Cooperation Council](#), December 2021. Discusses the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, changes in oil prices, and outlook for 2022.

Bahrain's foreign relations

- Council on Foreign Relations, [Bahrain](#). Publishes analysis of Bahrain's foreign policy, including Gulf relations.
- Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, [The UK's relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain](#), HC 88, 2012-13, November 2013. Section 4 describes the UK's ties and recommended greater UK support for Bahraini opposition groups.
- Commons Library, [Iran's influence in the Middle East](#), CBP9504. Describes Iran's influence abroad, why it is controversial, and outlook for regional relations.

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