

MP-IDSA *Issue Brief*

The Evolution of the Israel-Bahrain Relationship

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Summary

While Bahrain has historically supported Palestinian statehood, normalising of relations with Israel under Abraham Accords in 2020 reflected a security-driven approach. Bahrain's approach towards Israel and Palestine is a microcosm of the larger Gulf dilemma: balancing Arab solidarity with changing geopolitical realities in a volatile region.

In September 2020, Bahrain together with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) established diplomatic relations with Israel as part of the US-brokered Abraham Accords. In the same month itself, Bahrain permitted Israel, access to its airspace.¹ Following the signing of the Abraham Accords, Palestine Authority temporarily withdrew its ambassadors from Bahrain and the UAE.² By signing the Abraham Accords, Bahrain adapted to the changing geopolitical dynamics of the region. The Brief places in perspective key factors behind Bahrain’s signing of the Abraham Accords as well as key aspects of the Israel–Bahrain bilateral ties.

Bahrain and Abraham Accords

The Iran Factor

Bahrain is ruled by a Sunni royal family while the majority of the population is Shi’ite. This has posed repeated challenges as well as bred mistrust of neighbouring Iran. The ruling family has suspected Iranian involvement and radicalisation of its Shi’i population. The Al Khalifa dynasty’s threat perception of Iran predates the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. On 12 November 1957, Iran designated Bahrain its 14th province, giving it two seats in the Iranian parliament.

However, in a 1969 interview, Iran’s Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, signalled willingness to give up Iran’s claim to Bahrain, stating that Iran would not use force to annex the territory and would respect the preferences of the Bahraini people. Shah was quoted as saying that Bahrain’s pearl reserves were depleting and was hence of no importance to Iran. By 1971, Iran had formally accepted Bahrain as a sovereign nation. Despite this, occasional references by some Iranian authorities to Bahrain as Iran’s ‘14th province’ have added to the ongoing distrust between the two countries.³

Following the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Al-Khalifa dynasty which is Bahrain’s ruling family felt threatened by Iran’s religious and ideological sway over its Shi’i population. In the aftermath of the popular uprisings in 2011, Manama’s threat perception of Iran became further entrenched. In 2016, when demonstrators in Iran protesting against Saudi execution of a prominent Shi’i cleric Nimr-al-Nimr stormed Saudi Embassy in Tehran, Bahrain joined Riyadh in severing ties with Iran. While Saudi Arabia and Iran restored diplomatic ties in an agreement brokered by Beijing, Bahrain and Iran have made only gradual progress due to deep-rooted mistrust towards each other.

¹ “[Kushner: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain Open Airspace to All Flights from Israel](#)”, *Middle East Monitor*, 10 September 2020.

² “[Palestine Says Ambassadors Going Back to UAE, Bahrain After Abraham Accords Spat](#)”, *Al Arabiya News*, 18 November 2020.

³ Faramarz Kouhpayeh, “[How Iran lost Bahrain](#)”, *Tehran Times*, 3 January 2025.

Shi'i militia group, Al-Ashtar Brigades emerged in 2013 as an offshoot of the 14 February Youth Coalition, which was Bahrain's oldest Shia coalition.⁴ Bahraini authorities have asserted that the terror group posing security threats is being funded, trained and equipped by Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Lebanese Hezbollah.⁵ They also saw 2011 anti-government protests as an Iranian conspiracy. With the escalation of rivalry between Israel and Iran, especially in the wake of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's public opposition to the Iran nuclear deal, Bahrain together with Saudi Arabia and the UAE found convergence with Israel.

Another complicating factor in Bahrain–Iran ties is Manama's approach towards Yemeni Houthis, a key ally of Iran. There has been a deep running feud between the Bahrainis and Houthis with Bahrain having joined the Saudi-led coalition, launched in 2015 after Houthis took over Sana'a. Bahrain also has the distinction of being the only Gulf State participating in the US-led multinational security initiative Operation Prosperity Guardian to counter the Houthis's blockading of international shipping in the Red Sea.

The US Factor

Bahrain's burgeoning security partnership with the US has translated into a security-driven logic in Manama's gradual outreach to Israel.⁶ Bahrain has hosted the US Navy's Fifth Fleet and US Naval Forces Central Command since 1995. Only three out of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have been conferred non-NATO ally status by the US. These are Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar.⁷ Bahrain became the earliest one to receive the status in 2002 mainly due to its 'base politics'. The US Navy's Fifth Fleet in Juffair has been a major naval base for America's air operations against Iraq in the 1990s Gulf War.⁸

Bahrain has a small army of 6,000 personnel and the paramilitary accounts to 11,000 comprising of 9,000 police, 2,000 National Guard and 260 coast guard.⁹ Hence, it heavily relies on the US security guarantees and has routinely participated in the US-led operations in the region. During the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the US Coast Guard's Patrol Forces Southwest Asia (PATFORSWA) established in the Kingdom served as a shore support and maintenance organisation for the patrol boats, etc.¹⁰

⁴ [“Al-Ashtar Brigades \(AAB\)”](#), Counter Terrorism Guide.

⁵ [“Foreign Minister Attends Follow-up Meeting”](#), *Bahrain News Agency*, 11 September 2018.

⁶ [“Israel, Bahrain Sign Security Cooperation Agreement in Manama”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 3 February 2022.

⁷ David Ottaway, [“America's Key Gulf Arab Partners Embrace Non-Alignment, With a Tilt Toward China”](#), *Wilson Centre*, 31 May 2023.

⁸ Adam Ereli, [“Bahrain's New Strategic Pact with the US is Just the Beginning for the Gulf”](#), *Atlantic Council*, 13 September 2023.

⁹ Anthony H. Cordesman, [“The Changing Trends in Gulf Military and Security Forces: A Net Assessment”](#), *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 21 November 2023, p. 24.

¹⁰ Basil Tripsas, Patrick Roth and Renee Fye, [“Coast Guard Operations During Operation Iraqi Freedom”](#), *Center for Naval Analyses*, October 2004.

In September 2023, Manama and Washington signed Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement (C-SIPA), which has further strengthened their cooperation across a range of areas, from defence and security to science, technology and trade.¹¹ Article 4.5 of the agreement posits that in the event of an external aggression towards either party, the states are bound to have a meeting at the most senior levels to implement adequate response in the economic, military and/or political realms.¹²

Bahrain has also been part of US-led coalition to counter the ISIS and also the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.¹³ The US CENTCOM Task Force 58 based at Bahrain's Naval Support Activity, coordinated safe evacuations from Afghanistan in August 2021. It handled the movement of evacuees and US citizens through Bahrain with the assistance of Bahraini counterparts, providing housing, meals and medical services.¹⁴ Bahrain's overt participation in Operation Prosperity Guardian, including its support for US and UK airstrikes on the Houthis, aligns with Israel's security objectives.¹⁵

Israel–Bahrain Ties

When Bahrain joined the Arab League in 1971 after gaining independence from the British, it also agreed to the Khartoum Resolution¹⁶ which was adopted by the League following the 1967 Arab–Israeli War. The Arab world stringently restrained official ties with Israel. While Bahrain did not take part in the 1973 war militarily, it joined the Arab oil embargo and shut down the operations of the US Naval Base in Juffair.

There was a shift in its approach to Israel in the 90s with the Oslo Accords in 1993. Manama sent its representative to the Madrid Conference in 1991 and supported the peace process between Israel and Palestine. In 1994, Manama hosted Israel's environmental affairs minister, Yossi Sarid for a meeting of the multinational working group on water and environment. This was the first visit of an Israeli minister to a Gulf state. Sarid met Shaikh Mohamed bin Mubarak Al Khalifa, the Foreign Minister of Bahrain and other officials.¹⁷ Reportedly, Bahrain made its reservations on not wanting any media coverage on the same or making the meeting public.

¹¹ [“Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement”](#), U.S. Department of State, 13 September 2023.

¹² Elizabeth Dent, [“One Year of the U.S.-Bahrain C-SIPA: Signs of Progress, Regional Potential”](#), Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 21 August 2024.

¹³ [“The United States and Bahrain Sign Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement”](#), *American Journal of International Law*, 29 January 2024.

¹⁴ [“NAVCENT Stands Up Task Force Supporting Afghanistan Evacuation”](#), United States Navy.

¹⁵ [“Joint Statement From Australia, Bahrain, Denmark, Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and United States on Additional Strikes Against the Houthis in Yemen”](#), U.S. Department of Defense, 24 February 2024.

¹⁶ Three Noes—No peace with Israel, No recognition and No negotiations.

¹⁷ Nimrod Goren, “When Bahrain Once Welcomed Israelis”, *Haaretz*, 22 December 2015.

In 1994, Bahrain, alongside its GCC counterparts, eliminated the secondary and tertiary boycotts which refers to businesses that operate and manufacture in Israel and businesses that have relationships with other businesses trading in Israel, respectively. In 2005, Bahrain lifted its primary boycott of Israel, namely allowing products originating in Israel into Bahrain.¹⁸ The decision was taken because this was one of the conditions for the United States–Bahrain Free Trade Agreement (FTA) which entered into force on 11 January 2006.¹⁹ By this time, Bahrain also had its secret contacts with Mossad which was exposed by Wikileaks. The cable also revealed that King had given orders to the Ministry of Information that Israel would not be referred to as ‘enemy’.²⁰

Since the 2010s, Bahraini leaders have also emphasised on the state’s multicultural identity and religious tolerance to deal with internal divisions and also support outreach to Israel.²¹ Notably, Bahrain has also acknowledged its Jewish population and has implemented steps to preserve its Jewish history and also has Jews in its Shura Council.²² The Kingdom of Bahrain Declaration was presented in Los Angeles, California, in September 2017 during an interfaith event co-hosted by the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a Jewish human rights organisation. This served as a global stage to advance Bahrain’s message of religious acceptance and co-existence, underscoring its dedication to interfaith dialogue and global peace efforts.²³ Through the declaration, King Hamad highlighted his ‘personal priority to build a more tolerant Middle East, free of antisemitism and extremism’.²⁴ Analysts note that Bahrain as a small state with ‘limited hard power capabilities’ has embraced a ‘discourse of tolerance’ to maintain stability within the kingdom and seek a broader role at regional level.²⁵ In 2019, Foreign Minister Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa became the first Gulf foreign minister to speak to the Israeli media.²⁶

In February 2022, Bahrain and Israel signed a Security Cooperation marking a first between Israel and a Gulf state. The MoU supports cooperation in areas such as intelligence, military to military and industrial collaboration.²⁷ At the Munich Security Conference held in February 2022, Bahrain’s Undersecretary for the

¹⁸ [“Bahrain - Israel Relations”](#), *GlobalSecurity.org*.

¹⁹ [“Bahrain Ends Boycott of Israeli Goods”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 23 September 2005.

²⁰ Ben Birnbaum, [“Cable Reveals Bahrain’s Secret Contact with Israel”](#), *The Washington Times*, 11 April 2011.

²¹ [“Religious Tolerance and Inclusion”](#), Bahrain USA.

²² Haitham el-Tabei, [“Bahrain Jews Worship in Public for 1st Time in Decades Thanks to Abraham Accords”](#), *The Times of Israel*, 14 September 2021.

²³ [“Bahraini King’s Declaration of Worldwide Religious Tolerance Unveiled at Historic Simon Wiesenthal Center Interfaith Event”](#), Simon Wiesenthal Center, 14 September 2017.

²⁴ [“Religious Tolerance and Inclusion”](#), no. 21.

²⁵ Elizabeth Monier, [“Religious Tolerance in the Arab Gulf States: Christian Organizations, Soft Power, and the Politics of Sustaining the “Family-State” Beyond the Rentier Model”](#), *Politics and Religion*, 24 April 2023.

²⁶ Barak Ravid, [“Bahrain Foreign Minister: Palestinians Made a Mistake by Boycotting Peace Conference”](#), *Axios*, 26 June 2019.

²⁷ [“Israel, Bahrain Sign Security Cooperation Sgreement in Manama”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 3 February 2022.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs also confirmed intelligence cooperation between Mossad and Bahrain.²⁸ Bahraini activists have alleged that Pegasus, which was developed by an Israeli firm, was also used by the state as part of its intelligence to identify critics. Bahrain and Israel have also been taking part in naval exercises including a drill conducted in the Red Sea in November 2021 with the UAE and the US. Various MoUs have also been signed between the two states.²⁹

Trade between Bahrain and Israel amounted to US\$ 11.5 million in 2023, experiencing a minor decline, i.e., 9 per cent decline from US\$ 12.7 million in 2022. This is primarily attributed to the ongoing escalation between Israel and Palestine.³⁰ Bahrain's top export to Israel is aluminium while the former imports electrical machinery from Israel.³¹ As of January 2025, both states have reiterated on their hopes to seal a Free Trade Agreement before the end of the year.³²

In 2021, Manama appointed its first ambassador to Israel³³ and the latter opened its Embassy in Bahrain.³⁴ On 2 November 2023, Bahrain's parliament announced the recall of its ambassador to Israel and the suspension of commercial ties, confirming the country's support for Palestine. However, Bahrain's Foreign Ministry did not issue any statement. A senior official and Israel's Foreign Ministry stated that no formal decision had been made to recall the ambassador. Instead, Israel asserts that it proactively removed its diplomats from Bahrain and other surrounding countries, including Egypt, Jordan and Morocco, due to safety concerns as regional tensions rose.³⁵

On 18 November 2023, while addressing the 19th annual ‘Manama Dialogue’ conference, Bahrain's Crown Prince became the first Arab leader to publicly condemn Hamas' actions on 7 October 2023 and demanded that all the hostages be released from the Hamas custody.³⁶ Since Hamas is an affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood, it can garner sympathy from the Islamist forces in Bahrain.³⁷ Bahraini government has permitted small demonstrations in support of Palestine, allowing display of only

²⁸ [**“Senior Bahraini Diplomat Says Mossad Active in His Country, Boosting Security”**](#), *The Times of Israel*, 21 February 2022.

²⁹ [**“Bilateral Agreements”**](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bahrain, 2024.

³⁰ [**“Annual Report 2023”**](#), Abraham Accords Peace Institute, 2023, p. 37.

³¹ [**The Observatory of Economic Complexity \(OEC\)**](#), 2024.

³² [**“Israel, Bahrain Hope to Seal Free Trade Agreement by End of Year”**](#), *Arab Press*, 16 January 2025.

³³ Nadda Osman, [**“Bahrain Formally Appoints its First Ambassador to Israel”**](#), *Middle East Eye*, 29 June 2021.

³⁴ Mohammed Hamad, [**“Israel Opens Bahrain Embassy, Three Years After Normalising Ties”**](#), *Reuters*, 4 September 2023.

³⁵ Lazar Berman and Jacob Magid, [**“Bahrain Lawmakers Vote to Recall Envoy from Tel Aviv, But Israel Says Ties Stable”**](#), *The Times of Israel*, 2 November 2023.

³⁶ Joel C. Rosenberg, [**“Bahrain Crown Prince Becomes 1st Arab Leader to Personally, Unequivocally ‘Condemn’ Hamas, Call Oct. 7 Slaughter ‘Barbaric and Horrific’”**](#), *All Arab News*, 19 November 2023.

³⁷ Ali Nouredine, [**“Bahrain's Foreign Policy: Distinct from Other Arab Nations”**](#), *Fanack Chronicle of the Middle East & North Africa*, 23 January 2024.

Bahraini and Palestinian flags and prohibiting Hamas, Israel or American flags. Many Bahrainis have turned to social media to protest against the Operation Prosperity Guardian. However, the leadership believes that the security it gets from the US, UK and Israel outweigh these factors.³⁸ The escalation of Israel–Palestine conflict, therefore, has domestic implications of widening the rift between the population and the ruling family. As a result, it has made statements favouring two-state solution.

At the 33rd Arab Summit held in Bahrain in May 2024, the 22 Arab countries collectively put forth a joint plan which advocated for the withdrawal of the Israelis from the Gaza Strip, release of all hostages and detainees, right to self-determination for the Palestinians and for the implementation of ‘the two-state solution in accordance with the Arab Peace Initiative and resolutions of international legitimacy to establish an independent and sovereign Palestinian state on the lines of 4 June 1967 with East Jerusalem as its capital’.³⁹ Speaking at the 20th edition of the IISS Manama Dialogue in December 2024, Dr Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani, Minister of Foreign Affairs stated that the Kingdom has been pressing for an immediate ceasefire, release of hostages and detainees and unhindered flow of humanitarian aid to Gaza.⁴⁰

Following the ceasefire deal in January 2025, Bahrain’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs appreciated the mediation efforts of Egypt, Qatar and the United States. Bahrain iterated on the importance of all the parties’ adherence to the terms of the ceasefire agreement which includes the withdrawal of IDF troops from the Gaza strip, civilian protection and an obstacle-free passage for the flow of relief, food, medical aid and fuel. The Ministry noted that the agreement marked significant progress in alleviating the ongoing conflict.⁴¹

Conclusion

Bahrain’s reliance on US security guarantees and strategic relations with Israel show a pragmatic approach based on preserving Bahrain’s sovereignty and political stability, even as it advocates for a two-state solution and Palestinian self-determination. The kingdom has navigated complicated dynamics related to military partnerships, regional integration, as well as issues related to domestic stability, while dealing with the Israel–Palestine issue. Bahrain's approach towards Israel and Palestine is a microcosm of the larger Gulf dilemma: balancing Arab solidarity with changing geopolitical realities in a volatile region.

³⁸ Giorgio Cafiero, [“Gaza War Creates Dilemmas for Bahrain’s Leadership”](#), Middle East Council on Global Affairs, 5 September 2024.

³⁹ [“Bahrain Declaration Underpins Centrality of Palestinian Cause”](#), *Gulf Times*, 16 May 2024.

⁴⁰ [“Foreign Minister Delivers Opening Address at Manama Dialogue 2024”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bahrain, 6 December 2024.

⁴¹ [“Bahrain Stresses Importance of Ceasefire Agreement in Gaza Strip”](#), *Bahrain News Agency*, 16 January 2025.

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