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An Introduction to Bahrain's Geopolitics and Diplomatic Strategies

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On the international scene, the Kingdom of Bahrain has historically maintained good relations with the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK) and European Union (EU). Since 1991, its partnership with the US has become more prevalent as the nation was a military base of significance in the matter of defence cooperation agreements in the Gulf.¹ Furthermore, Bahrain's relationship with the UK and EU has maintained cooperation agreements regarding Bahrain's economic diversification efforts providing an opportunity for further exchange.² These diplomatic ties contribute to a range of expectations on both sides regarding matters outside the military and economic fields.

Another significant factor in Bahrain's international position is sporting events. Consequently, the country has been utilizing sporting events as a national soft power strategy.³ The hosting of major sporting events serves the role of public diplomacy, given that sporting events are modern, state-centric conceptions that can provide a global audience with a controlled introduction of a nation.⁴ In fact, Bahrain used this

¹ Mohammed El-Katiri, "United States-Gulf Cooperation Council Security Cooperation in a Multipolar World" (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2014), JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11893>.

² Anis Khayati and Jaffar Al-Sayegh, "The Journey of Bahrain to Economic Diversification," in *Economic Development in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries: From Rentier States to Diversified Economies*, ed. Héla Miniaoui (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2020), 141–56, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-6058-3_8.

³ Jonathan Grix, Paul Michael Brannagan, and Donna Lee, "Sports Mega-Events and the Concept of Soft Power," in *Entering the Global Arena*, by Jonathan Grix, Paul Michael Brannagan, and Donna Lee (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2019), 23–36, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-7952-9_3.

⁴ Jonathan Grix and Donna Lee, "Soft Power, Sports Mega-Events and Emerging States: The Lure of the Politics of Attraction," *Global Society* 27, no. 4 (October 1, 2013): 521–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2013.827632>.



strategy for the 2012 Formula 1 international motor race event.⁵ After cancelling the event due to the Arab Spring, initially set in 2011, the Formula 1 motor race was reinstated in 2012, with its organizing body citing the event as an opportunity ameliorate the difficulties Bahrain was experiencing. Indeed, countries want to use the 425 million viewers of Formula 1 races to increase their countries' visibility for tourism and to improve their international image.⁶

In Bahrain's case, this event fulfilled a crucial role in rebuilding an international image in line with modernizing efforts by making the Kingdom a centre for racing and, more importantly, for investment and commerce in the Gulf. Moreover, becoming a global center for corporate entertainment, sports, and business tourism is key to the image the Government of Bahrain (GoB) seeks to emulate. The attention given to the sporting teams and events that the GoB manages through investments distracts international attention from ongoing human rights violations.⁷ For this reason, it has also been accused of image laundering, looking to produce a perfectly catered image of its governance and civil society.⁸ Notably, the European Parliament Resolution of March 2021 highlights the systemic unrestrained human rights violations despite Bahraini efforts to overshadow this issue with other political mechanisms.⁹

As with other Gulf nations, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, projecting a modernized identity to a global audience is a significant priority for facilitating

⁵ Hans Erik Næss, "Global Sport Governing Bodies and Human Rights: Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA), the Bahrain Grand Prix and Corporate Social Responsibility," *European Journal for Sport and Society* 14, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 226–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2017.1349301>.

⁶ Næss.

⁷ Stephen Zunes, "Bahrain's Arrested Revolution," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2013): 149–64, <https://doi.org/10.13169/arabstudquar.35.2.0149>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Raffaele FITTO European Parliament Adam BIELAN, Anna FOTYGA, Valdemar TOMAŠEVSKI, Ryszard Antoni LEGUTKO, Angel DZHAMBАЗКИ, Jadwiga WIŚNIEWSKA, Karol KARSKI, Assita KANKO, Joanna KOPCIŃSKA, Elżbieta KRUK, Elżbieta RAFALSKA, Bogdan RZOŃCA, Veronika VRECIONOVÁ, Witold Jan, "Motion for a Resolution on the Human Rights Situation in Bahrain, in Particular the Cases of Death Row Inmates and Human Rights Defenders | B9-0195/2021 | European Parliament," European Parliament, March 2021, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2021-0195_EN.html.



political stability. This is due to modernization becoming a mechanism in support of the diversification efforts in economic dimensions.¹⁰

Regional Partnerships and Capacities

Bahrain's geopolitical position is not to be underestimated in a regional capacity, as it is an important strategic location for understanding regional dynamics.¹¹ Bahrain has been a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) since its inception in 1981.¹² The GCC and its membership serves as an additional analytical explanation behind the regional networks involving the GoB and its interests, including whom they align with on regional and international matters.

Furthermore, Bahrain has close ties with Saudi Arabia, as it positions itself in a protective position. Historically, Bahrain has sought the protection of larger powers by acting as a suzerain, having done so with the British and the Portuguese in previous centuries.¹³ Moreover, they are headed by Sunni royalty and share similar governmental strategic planning to address national issues; although other regional powers are also headed by Sunni royalty, Bahrain represents a special relationship with Saudi Arabia.¹⁴

This partnership was paramount when the Arab Spring started in 2011.¹⁵ The Saudi Arabian military, supported by Kuwait and Qatar, came to the aid of the Al Khalifa family when civil

¹⁰ Richard Common, "Administrative Change in the Gulf: Modernization in Bahrain and Oman," *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 74, no. 2 (June 1, 2008): 177–93, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852308089902>.

¹¹ Justin Gengler, *Group Conflict and Political Mobilization in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf: Rethinking the Rentier State* (Indiana University Press, 2015), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt16gz6qn>.

¹² Khayati and Al-Sayegh, "The Journey of Bahrain to Economic Diversification."

¹³ Omar Hesham AlShehabi, "Contested Modernity: Divided Rule and the Birth of Sectarianism, Nationalism, and Absolutism in Bahrain," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 333–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2016.1185937>.

¹⁴ Zunes, "Bahrain's Arrested Revolution."

¹⁵ Mohammed Nuruzzaman, "Politics, Economics and Saudi Military Intervention in Bahrain," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 2 (May 1, 2013): 363–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2012.759406>.



unrest took over Bahrain in 2011.¹⁶ Saudi Arabian military support was essential for the subsequent stabilization of the Kingdom. Without a close network in place, the management of political turmoil would have been more difficult to de-escalate.

Bahrain's other regional partnerships include Kuwait and the UAE. Although it is no coincidence that regionalism has both strengthened the economic stability of the Gulf's economies and the primary source of financing, oil, it has also contributed to strengthening political bodies of governance.¹⁷ In Bahrain's case, regional cooperation serves as a stabilizing force for authoritarian rule. Security and stability are high priorities, and regional dynamics have created a sustainable environment for their political interests.¹⁸

¹⁶ Steffen Hertog, "The Costs of Counter-Revolution in the GCC," 2011, 6.

¹⁷ Maria J. Debre, "The Dark Side of Regionalism: How Regional Organizations Help Authoritarian Regimes to Boost Survival," *Democratization* 28, no. 2 (February 17, 2021): 394–413, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1823970>.

¹⁸ Ibid.