



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Bahrain consists of 33 islands, only three of which are inhabited: Manama (the largest island), Sitra, and Muharraq. A causeway links the island of Manama to Muharraq, where the international airport is located. Many of the country's smaller islands are actually under water during high tides. Bahrain's total land area is 286 square miles (741 square kilometers), an area three and a half times larger than Washington, D.C. The coastal waters are home to oyster beds, myriad fish, and coral species. The dugong (a large marine mammal related to the manatee) feeds on coastal grasses in the winter. These biologically rich coastal waters are affected by oil spills and discharges from oil tankers and refineries.

Bahrain is nestled on the western side of the Arabian Gulf, between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. It is connected to Saudi Arabia by a causeway. The country is generally flat with desert terrain dominating in the south. Natural springs have fostered the growth of vegetation and abundant date palm trees in the north for years; however, these springs are nearly exhausted. Most vegetation now depends on ground water and the use of pumps. The climate is hot and humid. Summer months often see temperatures above 100°F (38°C). The country is cooler between late December and February, when temperatures fall to 54°F (12°C). Trace amounts of rain may fall in this cooler season. The arid climate, drought, and dust storms have led to the loss of productive land to the desert; only about 1 percent of Bahrain is arable.

History

Owing to its strategic location in the Gulf and its natural springs, Bahrain has been the object of invaders' and traders' attention for thousands of years. The Romans, Greeks, Portuguese, British, and others ventured to the area to conquer the main island or trade with its inhabitants. For many years, people in the Gulf region buried their dead on the islands, and there are some 175,000 burial mounds still visible. Many mounds have been excavated, and some are approximately three thousand years old. The Portuguese captured Bahrain in 1521 and ruled until 1602. After the Portuguese were forced from the region, the islands were controlled by different Arab and Persian groups until the Arab Utub tribe expelled the Persians (ancestors of present-day Iranians) in 1783. At that time, the current ruling al-Khalifa family (part of the Utub tribe) took control of Bahrain.

British influence and military domination in Bahrain began in the early 1800s, when Britain used force to establish a trading outpost that remained until 1971. At that time, Bahrain became a fully independent state, headed by Emir Shaikh Issa bin Salman al-Khalifa. The emir had been the Bahraini monarch since 1961, but he became the sovereign leader at full independence.

Parliament was dissolved shortly thereafter, in 1975. In 1993, a *Shura* Council was formed by the emir and the prime minister, who appointed its citizen members in response to demands for greater democracy. However, many people insisted that parliament be reinstated. Protests against the Sunni-led government in 1994 ended in violence, while more unrest in 1995 was answered with a crackdown on militant Shi'i Muslim clerics and activists. The bombings, civil unrest,

and other forms of protest grew less frequent.

Shaikh Issa ruled Bahrain for 37 years, until his death in March 1999. He is remembered for having led his country through independence, economic prosperity, and regional and local instability. Shaikh Issa was succeeded by his eldest son, Shaikh Hamad bin Issa al-Khalifa, who pledged to continue his father's pro-Western policies. In 2002, he introduced reforms that allowed Bahrain to become a constitutional monarchy with elected representatives in parliament. For the first time in nearly 30 years, parliamentary elections took place in October 2002. Voter turnout was more than 50 percent despite a call for a boycott from some Shi'i political leaders, who objected to the decision that the elected Chamber of Deputies must share power with the appointed *Shura* Council. In the next parliamentary elections in 2006, Shi'i parties participated but failed to win a majority, securing 18 of the 40 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. In 2009, the King pardoned more than 170 prisoners, including 35 Shi'i Muslims held on charges of trying to overthrow the state.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Bahrain's population of 738,000 is growing at an annual rate of 1.24 percent. Most people (89 percent) live in urban areas. Bahraini citizens comprise only 62 percent of the total population. The remainder consists almost entirely of non-citizen expatriate workers. These expatriates come from Asia (19 percent), Iran (8 percent), and other Arab nations (10 percent), with small numbers coming from Europe, Africa, and North America. Non-Bahraini residents can become naturalized citizens by petitioning the king, prime minister, or crown prince.

Language

The official language of Bahrain is Arabic. English is also widely used, especially in business and banking. Farsi, a Persian dialect, is spoken by many Shi'i Muslims, but it is not officially recognized. Expatriate groups speak many other languages. It is common for people living in Bahrain to be bilingual or multilingual.

Religion

More than 80 percent of those living in Bahrain are Muslims. The majority of the Arab population is Shi'i Muslim. The rest are Sunni Muslim, including the royal family. Bahrain, Iraq, and Iran are the only countries in the Gulf region that have Shi'i majorities. *Islam* literally means "submission to the will of *Allah* (God)." A devout Muslim obeys the laws of Muslim's holy book, the *Qur'an*, and prays five times daily. Prayer times shift by season according to the sun's position. The laws include avoiding alcohol, pork, and gambling. A Muslim fasts from sunrise to sunset during the month of *Ramadan* and must make a pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to the city of Makkah (Mecca) in Saudi Arabia at least once in a lifetime. Sunni and Shi'i Muslims have different traditions, especially with regard to the succession of the prophet Muhammad; they also differ in their approach to certain teachings.

Religion is a central part of Bahraini culture. Workers take turns stopping during prayer times. Religion and government are deeply interwoven; *shari'ah* (the law of Islam) establishes social order in connection with the civil law code. Religious freedom is the policy of Bahrain, and a number of Christian organizations hold services. Due to social pressure, very few local Arabs would attend these services or convert to Christianity, but it is legal to do so.

General Attitudes

Bahrainis are proud of their country and its image as a nation of warm and friendly inhabitants. Bahrain's citizens are among the best educated in the Gulf. Most view their country as a key trading and banking center. As such, Bahrain is exposed to many foreign cultures and depends upon this interaction for its economic success. Bahrainis are also proud of their country's relatively low crime rate.

Although the population as a whole is familiar with the material ways of the West, Bahrainis remain dedicated to traditional values. The extended family remains the most important social institution. People fiercely defend their family's name and honor. After a death, relatives are close at hand to help with the grieving process. They also come to the aid of one another in other times of need or financial hardship.

Personal Appearance

In villages, people dress in traditional styles. Men wear a long, light robe (*thobe*) that reaches to the ankles. The head is covered by a light cloth headdress (*gutra*) clamped down by a heavy cloth ring (*aqal*). During warmer months, the *thobe* is white. As temperatures get cooler, men wear the *thobe* in various colors. The *gutra* is usually white but may also be white-and-red checked. The royal family and some of the very wealthy often adorn their attire with gold trim and wear an outer robe (*bisht*) over the *thobe*. Women wear a full-length black robe (*abaya*) year-round. They wear colorful dresses underneath, but the dresses cannot be seen in public. Some women also cover their hair with a scarf (*hijab*). The most conservative wear a *booshiyya*, a black veil that covers the whole face, or a *burqa*, a veil that covers the bridge of the nose and cheeks. Both genders wear sandals. Urban attire is generally a combination of traditional and Western dress. For example, a man may wear a sport coat over the *thobe* and choose shoes instead of sandals. Bahrainis tend to dress neatly; modesty is the norm. Both men and women use perfume.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Al-salām 'alaykum (Peace be upon you) is the most common way to say "Hello." The usual reply is *Wa 'alaykum al-salām*, which means nearly the same thing. Bahrainis say *Sabah al-khayr* (Good morning) and respond with *Sabah al-nūr*; the reply to *Masa' al-khayr* (Good evening) is *Masa' al-nūr*. People respond to "How are you?" (*Shlonak* used to address a man, *Shlonich* for a woman) with *Zayn, al-ḥamdu lillah*

(Good, thanks be to *Allah*). “Good-bye” is *Ma‘ al-salāmah*.

Handshakes are common and may last the length of the conversation. A handshake or a hand lightly grasping the person's arm shows friendliness. Good friends of the same sex sometimes kiss a number of times on the right and left cheeks. It is socially unacceptable for a man to greet a woman, unless the greeting is part of business protocol. Bahraini women, especially those from traditional rural families, look down in the presence of men.

When conducting business or shopping in Bahrain, people customarily exchange greetings and converse politely before getting down to details. Many messages important to the transaction are conveyed in the context of this conversation.

Nicknames, formal and informal, are common. *Abu* means “father of” when it is used before the given name of the oldest son. For example, *Abu Mohummad* is the father of Muhammad. *Bin* and *ibn* both mean “son of.” So, *Ibn Khaldūn* is the son of Khaldūn. Informal nicknames used among friends are often adapted forms of a person's given name: *Aboud* for Abdulla, *Hamoud* for Muhammad, *Fatoum* for Fatima, *Abbasi* for Abbas, *Salmano* for Salman, and so on.

One customarily greets the clergy or a member of the royal family with the title *Shaykh* (for a man) or *Shaykha* (for a woman). For instance, Mohammed bin Rashid al-Khalifa would be addressed as *Shaykh Mohammed* or *Shaykh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Khalifa*.

Gestures

Most Bahrainis have become Westernized to the extent that using one's left hand to pass items or using fingers or hands to point is no longer considered rude. People beckon one another with four fingers and the palm facing up. Waving with the palm down is used to assert authority over someone. Shaking a finger means “no.” Bringing the tips of all fingers together facing up can mean “wait,” “let me finish,” impatience, or exasperation. The more the hand moves vertically, the more intense the message. It is considered disrespectful to show others the soles of one's feet. Smoking is seen as a sign of maturity and many Bahrainis smoke, but it is rude to do so in the presence of elders. Many Bahrainis also chew gum or cardamom seeds.

Visiting

Bahrainis often invite relatives, friends, and even foreigners into their homes. They visit immediate family almost daily and visit cousins and other relatives usually every week. For more formal visits, guests customarily phone ahead and state the expected time of arrival. Visitors often bring a small gift for the host, such as sweets or flowers. Close friends and relatives might bring gifts such as perfume or clothing. Usually an invitation includes the offering of a large meal. If not, guests are given at least a light snack. Depending on the host's lifestyle, men and women might eat together at one table. But if the host is more traditional, men do not socialize with unmarried women who are not their daughters or sisters.

In traditional homes, guests stay until the host brings out incense (*bakhour*) and perfume for them. The incense is burned over a hot coal on a special stand (*mabkhara*). The perfume and the smoke from the incense are waved inward

toward one's body and hair. After this ritual, a guest is expected to leave. Staying longer is impolite.

Eating

People eat while seated on an Arabic sofa. Using the hands, everyone eats out of communal dishes. The names of the daily meals are *iftar* or *foutour* (breakfast), *ghada‘* (lunch), and *‘asha‘* (supper). Devout Muslims do not eat or drink with the left hand, but others will eat with either hand. Guests are fed well during a meal. Bahraini hosts are pleased when guests enjoy the food and try all the dishes. Guests who are full must act quickly with polite firmness to refuse more food. If they hesitate, more food is served. It is polite in traditional settings to leave a small amount of food on one's plate. Typically a sweet tea is served with meals. Tea is also offered as the social drink for any occasion.

Bahrain has many fine restaurants and fast-food establishments that are geared primarily toward expatriates. The majority of Bahrainis usually do not eat in restaurants. The eldest man in a group customarily pays the restaurant bill and tip, especially on a family outing.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Extended family ties are a strong part of Bahraini culture. The father is considered the ultimate authority in the home. Women are less likely than men to earn an income or make independent decisions. Children, especially daughters, do not lightly disobey their father's wishes. The closeness of the family is evident in the respectful and loving treatment given the elderly. Though traditionally large, families are growing smaller due to greater family planning, more women staying longer in school, and concerns for economic welfare.

Housing

An average urban, middle-class Bahraini family lives in a freestanding concrete dwelling. The home surrounds an open-air courtyard and has few windows, which protects the family's privacy. A typical home has three to five bedrooms. A room for entertaining guests is separate from the living room, where the family spends most of their time. In traditional families, men and women socialize separately in these two rooms. They may be furnished with traditional floor cushions or Western-style couches, depending on the family's taste. Floors are tiled, though carpets cover the main walkways and living areas. Most homes now use air conditioners and ceiling fans for air circulation and ventilation rather than the traditional wind towers. Housing in villages is similar in style to urban housing, but construction is usually of lesser quality. Many Western expatriates live in gated compounds, while expatriate laborers live in cramped dormitories.

Dating and Marriage

Dating is a controversial subject. Some young people are beginning to date with or without parental permission, but they do so mostly in secret to avoid embarrassing their

families. Traditionally, a girl is looked down upon if she goes out in the company of men other than family members. Society considers these women to be of lesser virtue, so parents worry that they will not be able to marry. Any woman who becomes pregnant out of wedlock faces difficult choices and often must bear the child in secret. Such children may be left to the care of the state, since single motherhood is not socially acceptable.

Some marriages are still arranged, while most marriages that are not arranged in the strict sense still have parental approval; few people marry without family authorization. In the past, women married in their early teens. This is increasingly rare; most marry in their late teens or early twenties.

Marriage celebrations usually last for three days, with separate festivities for men and women. On one night, the bride's hands and feet are decorated with henna, a brown plant dye that stays on the skin for days. The bride is also adorned with gold jewelry, including a *qobqob* (headpiece). The bride's family pays for the henna day and the groom's family pays for the other two days.

A man is allowed to have four wives if he provides equally for each wife. However, polygamy now is practiced almost exclusively among the older generations. Few young persons, even in the royal family, consider it a desirable lifestyle.

Life Cycle

Married daughters often return to their parents' home before they give birth and stay for 40 days after the birth to receive care from their mothers and female relatives. At large family gatherings, relatives welcome the baby and present gifts to the parents and child.

Following a death in the family, a woman may not be seen by any male except her husband. In accordance with Islamic custom, the body is washed, wrapped in white linen, and buried within 24 hours of death. Sometimes family members will not be immediately told to save them from grief and distress.

Diet

Breakfast often consists of fresh *kobouz* (unleavened bread), scrambled eggs mixed with thin noodles and sprinkled with sugar, and cooked beans. Lunch usually consists of some type of spicy rice dish like *beryani* (rice with meat) or *machbous* (rice, meat, tomatoes, and lentils). Other popular dishes include *saloneh* (mixed vegetables) and *harees*, a traditional dish served during the month of *Ramadan*. *Harees* is a blend of wheat and meat cooked until mushy, with butter melted over the top. *Halwa*, a starch pudding mixed with crushed cardamom seeds, saffron, sugar, and fat, traditionally is served before *qahwa* (unsweetened coffee) to conclude the noon meal. The evening meal consists mainly of *bajella* (boiled beans), *kobouz*, an assortment of cheeses, and sweet tea and milk. *Rottab* (fresh dates) are served with all meals in the summer; *tamr* (half-dried dates) are eaten the rest of the year. Fish and seafood are also staples of the typical diet. Western influence on the diet is evident, especially in urban homes. Some Bahrainis now eat packaged breakfast cereals and fast food.

Recreation

The most popular sport is soccer, followed by basketball and volleyball. Expatriates also enjoy field hockey and cricket. There are organized leagues for men, but women's leagues were dissolved in 1979 after the Iranian revolution. Currently, girls and women play sports only in connection with school. Bahrainis and expatriates participate in a variety of recreational activities, including sailing, waterskiing, fishing, falconry, horse racing, desert camping, ice-skating, softball, horseback riding, tennis, rugby, and more. Renting videos is another favorite activity.

The Arts

The Bahrain National Museum, which hosts an annual exhibition, displays contemporary as well as ancient art and archaeological artifacts. Bahrainis love art, particularly Islamic art; the museum Bayt al-Qur'an is devoted to the *Qur'an*. The al-Khamis Mosque is the oldest Islamic structure in the Gulf region and has unique architectural features.

Handicrafts have developed differently in various parts of Bahrain: cloth weaving is common in Bani Jamrah, pottery in Awali, and basket weaving in Karabad. Popular music has been heavily influenced by the ancient pearl-diving trade. Pearl divers would hire a singer to lead the crew in songs that corresponded to the movement of the waves. Before motorized boats became the norm, the building and decorating of *dhow*s used for fishing and pearl diving was considered an art form.

Holidays

Religious holidays are celebrated according to the lunar *Hijri* calendar, which is shorter than the Western (Gregorian) year by about 11 days. The most important holidays include *Eid al-Fitr*, a three-day feast at the end of the month of *Ramadan*; *Eid al-Adha*, which commemorates the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son and also marks the time for the *Hajj*; and the prophet Muhammad's birthday. Shi'i Muslims celebrate *'Ashura*, a two-day holiday during which they express their beliefs by parading in the streets and reenacting the suffering of the martyr Hussain, the grandson of Muhammad. Bahrain's National Day is celebrated on 16 December. Many people celebrate New Year's on 1 January. The Christmas season is celebrated as the "festive season"; the religious significance of the holiday is minimal.

SOCIETY

Government

Bahrain's chief of state is the king (currently Shaikh Hamad bin Issa al-Khalifa). When Bahrain changed from an emirate to a constitutional monarchy in 2002, Shaikh Hamad's title changed from emir to king. The king appoints a prime minister (currently Shaikh Hamad's uncle, Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa) as head of government. Many key government positions are held by members of the al-Khalifa family. The National Assembly consists of the Chamber of Deputies (with 40 members elected to four-year terms) and

the *Shura* Council (whose 40 members are appointed by the king).

Bahrain employs the traditional Islamic administrative system of the *majlis*, which allows people to petition the king directly. In practice, the few times available for citizens to meet with the king reduces the interaction to greetings and other pleasantries, but the practice still gives people direct contact with the monarch.

Economy

As an island nation with limited natural resources, Bahrain relies heavily on foreign trade. It has one of the world's largest oil refineries as well as the world's largest aluminum smelter. Oil reserves are increasingly limited, so the government has sought to diversify the economy through industries such as tourism and banking. Bahrain seeks to be a regional banking center, despite heavy competition from the United Arab Emirates and other nations. Bahrain's high gross domestic product reflects the country's oil wealth but not necessarily personal prosperity. Pearl diving was once a prominent and honored occupation, but the industry has been in serious decline since the introduction of cultured pearls from other countries. Fishing, another traditional occupation, continues to be important to the domestic economy but makes up only a small portion of Bahrain's export economy. The currency is the Bahraini *dinar* (BHD).

Transportation and Communications

Bahrain's transportation network is modern, and most people own cars. Mobile phones and cars are important status symbols. Buses are used mostly by poor expatriates. Bahrainis prefer taxis for public transportation. A causeway links Bahrain to Saudi Arabia. Construction is underway on a causeway from southern Manama Island to the Hawar Islands and eventually on to Qatar. Most homes have telephones. Mobile phones and pagers have become status symbols for men. Three local newspapers, which are subject to government control, have a wide readership. Foreign newspapers are also available. International programming is available through radio and television broadcasts. Internet access is growing in availability and use.

Education

Bahrain is respected in the Gulf for its strong education system. Compulsory schooling exists for boys and girls through the secondary level. Primary education has three *cycles* (phases). In the first, one teacher teaches most subjects. In the second, students have a different teacher for each subject. Students must pass an exam to move from the third *cycle*, or intermediate school, to secondary school, which lasts three years and uses a credit-hour system like those in universities. Public schools are separated by gender through grade 12, but most private schools are coeducational. Bahrain University admits both men and women. The literacy rate among the youth approaches 100 percent.

Health

Health care is provided through a system of local clinics and a few major hospitals. Most services are available for free or at

low cost to all residents. Private practices and facilities also exist. Nearly all children receive immunizations, and all women have access to prenatal care.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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POPULATION & AREA

Population	738,004 (rank=162)
Area, sq. mi.	286 (rank=184)
Area, sq. km.	741

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	39 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	55 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$38,800
Adult literacy rate	89% (male); 84% (female)
Infant mortality rate	15 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	73 (male); 78 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).