



Ethical Dilemmas in Diplomacy: The Biden Administration and Bahrain's Human Rights

I. Introduction

The United States has been increasing its focus on the Middle East since World War II. In order to maintain a consistent U.S. Navy presence in the region, the Middle East Force was established in 1949. This allowed for [broader engagement](#), leading to a significant military partnership. In 1971, after Bahrain gained independence from the United Kingdom, an [enduring relationship](#) was established between the United States and Bahrain. Through a bilateral agreement with the Bahraini government, the U.S. Navy took control of a former British naval base. Initially, it was named Administrative Support Unit Bahrain, but in 1999, it was transformed into a [Naval Support Activity](#). The establishment of the U.S. Embassy in Manama in 1971, the Bahraini Embassy in Washington, D.C. in 1977, and the military presence in Bahrain are just a few examples of the historic milestones that reflect the strong and dynamic partnership between the two countries.

As of early 2020, the U.S. military presence in Bahrain has exceeded 7,000 personnel, predominantly from the Navy, engaged in diverse missions critical to addressing regional threats. This underscores the [bilateral security relationship](#), which predates Bahrain's independence and remains central to the United States' capacity to respond to evolving challenges in the region. Notably, the American Mission Hospital, founded in 1903, is a testament to the enduring humanitarian dimension of the U.S.-Bahrain ties. Bahrain's formal relations with NATO under the 2004 NATO-GCC "Istanbul Cooperation Initiative" ([ICI](#)) further solidify its strategic positioning.



The two nations have recently signed the Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement ([C-SIPA](#)), marking a revival in their diplomatic relations. This agreement signifies an elevated level of security and technological collaboration, responding to the shifting dynamics of global geopolitics. As emerging alliances reshape the global power structure, the U.S. and Bahrain find themselves at a crucial juncture, navigating the intricacies of their renewed collaboration.

However, amidst this strategic renaissance, the alliance faces challenges from President Joe Biden's explicit emphasis on human rights. Bahrain's human rights practices have been a subject of [both U.S. and global criticism](#), particularly concerning the government's response to unrest and political opposition. The lack of accountability of security forces, suppression of free expression, and treatment of prisoners are some key concerns. Despite consistent calls from the United States, spanning multiple administrations since the 2011 uprising, for Bahrain to exercise restraint and release jailed opposition leaders, engagement and defense cooperation have continued with minimal changes.

The partnership between Bahrain and the United States involves a complex balance between upholding human rights principles and recognizing Bahrain's strategic importance. However, the [Biden administration's strategy](#) in aligning with evolving international alliances while safeguarding fundamental human rights values must be thoroughly examined. This analysis delves into the details of the U.S.-Bahrain relationship and explores how promoting human rights intersects with the imperatives of U.S. foreign policy. By doing so, it aims to reveal the challenges and opportunities that shape the current state of U.S.-Bahrain ties. Against the backdrop of changing international alliances and ongoing human rights concerns, this analysis seeks to provide insights into the intricacies of the landscape and the delicate [balance](#) required for effective navigation.



2. Historical Context: Bahrain-US Relations

Bahrain and the United States established diplomatic relations in the early 1970s after Bahrain gained independence from the United Kingdom. Since then, U.S.-Bahrain ties have [deepened significantly](#) over the past four decades, coinciding with the Gulf region facing increased threats. The diplomatic alliance between the two nations has been strengthened through several milestones.

Dating back to 1948, Bahrain has been hosting the U.S. naval command headquarters for the Gulf region, highlighting the strategic importance of the relationship between Bahrain and the United States. The Defense Cooperation Agreement ([DCA](#)) was established in 1991, further solidifying their security alliance. The renewal of this agreement in 2017 for 15 years emphasizes Bahrain's provision of access, basing, and overflight privileges to facilitate U.S. regional military operations. Additionally, in 2004, the U.S. designated Bahrain as a "[major non-NATO ally](#)," underscoring the nation's pivotal role in regional stability. Excess Defense Articles ([EDA](#)), including military equipment, have been provided to Bahrain. Despite concerns about Bahrain's human rights record, U.S. sales to Bahrain persist, with approximately 85% of the country's military equipment originating from the United States. With ongoing end-use monitoring, the Foreign Military Sales ([FMS](#)) system oversees active government-to-government sales cases totaling \$5.8 billion as of January 2021.

Bahrain's collaboration with the United States goes beyond defense as the two nations signed a free trade agreement ([FTA](#)) in 2004, which marked a significant economic milestone in their relationship. It is worth noting that Bahrain closely aligns itself with Saudi Arabia, the *de facto* leader of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which provides Bahrain with substantial [financial](#)



[support](#). The country's oil revenues, mainly sourced from a Saudi oil field, contribute significantly to its economic well-being.

The establishment of the [U.S. embassy in Manama](#) in 1971 and the [Bahraini embassy in Washington, DC](#), in 1977 established a framework for communication, understanding, and cooperation between the two nations. These embassies have played pivotal roles in facilitating diplomatic relations in times of stability and challenge. Bahrain's strategic location has been instrumental in hosting the [U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet](#) for several decades, critical in regional security operations and countering regional threats.

The International Military Education and Training ([IMET](#)) is a significant initiative in advancing U.S. national security and foreign policy objectives. As an integral part of U.S. security assistance, IMET provides [grant-based training](#) and education to students from allied and friendly nations. Bahrain has been a recipient of IMET funds since 2014, emphasizing professional military education and training and fostering lasting relationships with future leaders. The signing of the C-SIPA represents a landmark in the Bahrain-U.S. relationship, expanding collaboration beyond security frameworks to encompass economic and technological cooperation.

The historical context highlights significant changes in U.S. policy that occurred during both the Trump and Biden administrations. Specifically, during his regional visit in May 2017, President [Trump](#) assured King Hamad that U.S.-Bahrain relations would improve, marking a departure from the strains experienced during the Obama Administration. This assurance from the Trump administration preceded the initiation of an unprecedented government crackdown in Bahrain, leading to a surge in human rights violations that persist to the present day.



Furthermore, despite commitments from the Biden Administration to focus on human rights during his political campaign, the reality reflects a continued prioritization of security cooperation and regional issues in high-level meetings and dialogues between the U.S. and Bahrain. Despite promises and the latter's declared commitment, critics contend that human rights concerns [have been downplayed](#), driven by geopolitical and economic considerations, highlighting the complexities in balancing strategic imperatives and human rights considerations in the U.S.-Bahrain relationship.

3. C-SIPA Agreement: Overview and Latest Draft

The [Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement](#) was a significant milestone in the strategic partnership between the United States and the Kingdom of Bahrain. The agreement was formally established during the visit of Bahrain's Crown Prince and Prime Minister Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa to Washington. This bilateral accord represents a comprehensive framework to enhance cooperation across crucial domains, including defense, security, technology, trade, and economic integration. The agreement aims to strengthen the long-standing alliance between the two nations, reflecting a shared commitment to deterrence, regional stability, economic growth, and conflict de-escalation within the Middle East.

The origins of [C-SIPA](#) can be traced back to almost a year of diplomatic engagements between U.S. officials and Bahrain's leadership. These negotiations were [concluded](#) in September 2023, leading to the formalization of this strategic agreement. However, the basis of this collaboration is built on the longstanding relationship between the United States and Bahrain, which was established in 1971 and has evolved over the years into a strong and enduring partnership.



C-SIPA has recently drafted a comprehensive approach to strengthen bilateral cooperation across various vital domains. The agreement primarily focuses on [Defense and Security Cooperation](#), prioritizing expanded collaboration, interoperability, and intelligence sharing. It aims to integrate regional air defense systems, enhance maritime domain awareness, and bolster security initiatives. Through this agreement, both countries have committed to [detering conflicts, enhancing regional stability, and strengthening their security cooperation](#). Furthermore, the C-SIPA further strengthens Bahrain's longstanding status as a Major Non-NATO Ally and Major Security Partner, building on a legacy of historic defense and security cooperation.

In [Trade and Economic Ties](#), C-SIPA seeks to build upon the existing U.S.-Bahrain Free Trade Agreement, aiming to stimulate investments in global supply chain resilience and critical infrastructure and promote technological advancements. It emphasizes fostering trade and investment between the two nations. With the initiation of C-SIPA, the economic ties between the United States and Bahrain are set to strengthen. This agreement consolidates the existing U.S.-Bahrain Free Trade Agreement, [promoting increased trade and investment cooperation](#). The recent opening of a U.S. Trade Zone in Bahrain offers access to untapped markets. Additionally, investing in strategic investment opportunities in global supply chain resilience and critical infrastructure can increase economic stability. The planned launch of direct flights between the two countries and Bahrain's acquisition of Boeing 787 Dreamliner aircraft for long-haul routes signals an imminent boost in connectivity and economic collaboration. Additionally, exploring small modular reactors (SMRs) for Bahrain's clean energy transition aligns with both nations' [climate crisis](#) mitigation efforts, reflecting a commitment to innovative, zero-carbon technologies. Bahrain's Global Entry partnership with the U.S. Customs and Border Control demonstrates a shared commitment to secure and expedited travel, emphasizing the enduring partnership built on trust.



Trusted Technologies and Innovation constitute a crucial aspect, with C-SIPA highlighting the importance of developing and deploying trusted technologies, particularly in digital infrastructure and ICT supply chains. The agreement also emphasizes Bahrain's pivotal role in advocating [Regional Integration and Cooperation](#). It highlights Bahrain's participation in initiatives like the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor and its commitment to fostering ties with Israel. This comprehensive agreement represents a significant step in consolidating the enduring partnership between the [U.S. and Bahrain](#). It encapsulates a joint dedication to regional stability, economic development, technological progress, and shared prosperity. More importantly, it underscores common strategic interests and a shared vision for a more secure and integrated Middle East region.

4. Biden's Campaign Promises on Human Rights

President Joe Biden's electoral campaign strongly emphasized promoting [human rights as a foundational element of U.S. foreign policy](#). This campaign highlighted the prioritization of human rights concerns in the realm of international relations and represented a departure from the approaches taken by previous administrations. Biden's explicit promises and campaign commitments regarding human rights established clear standards for a foreign policy framework that aligns international partnerships and alliances with nations that uphold fundamental human rights principles. This emphasis marked a reorientation in U.S. foreign policy, placing human rights considerations at the forefront of diplomatic engagements and global interactions. However, this moral stance encounters a complex challenge when juxtaposed with Bahrain's pivotal role in advancing U.S. strategic interests, particularly its indispensable contributions to regional security operations.

The signing of the C-SIPA agreement with Bahrain potentially places the Biden administration's human rights commitments in a challenging position. Particularly, Bahrain's recent actions,



especially regarding human rights, appear to contradict the explicit commitment of the Biden administration to prioritize human rights in foreign policy. This necessitates an in-depth comparative analysis to examine the differences. The principles and ideals advocated by the [Biden administration are not aligned](#) with Bahrain's actions, creating ethical considerations for the Biden administration's strategic decisions in solidifying partnerships that potentially conflict with human rights advocacy. Maintaining alliances amidst well-documented reports of human rights violations poses significant challenges to the Biden administration's foreign policy stance.

Since the uprising in Bahrain in February 2011, the human rights crisis in the country has [significantly deteriorated](#). The authorities have adopted a zero-tolerance policy towards any expression of free and independent political thought, resorting to imprisoning, exiling, or intimidating individuals into silence if they criticize the government. Bahraini authorities implemented a systematic campaign of retribution, utilizing lethal force to disperse protests, arresting thousands, and terminating the employment of hundreds of public sector workers suspected of supporting the protesters' calls for democracy. Nevertheless, notwithstanding these alarming human rights violations, the U.S. proceeded with the reinforcement of its relationship with Bahrain.

Various human rights organizations [have urged the Biden Administration](#) to re-emphasize the place of human rights at the center of the U.S.-Bahrain Foreign Policy. In March 2021, Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB), the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD), the International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), and 12 other organizations wrote a joint letter urging the President to act on its campaign promises by reinstating human rights as a critical feature of American diplomacy in Bahrain and the wider Arab Gulf. They emphasized that the situation has become particularly critical since the transition to the Trump administration in 2017, highlighting that President Trump abandoned human rights conditions on arms sales to Bahrain. This decision sent a clear message that his



administration prioritized profit over people. [Husain Abdulla](#), Executive Director at the ADHRB, remarked, “The Trump era will be remembered as the bloodiest period since Bahrain’s 2011 uprising, demonstrating what happens when Bahrain’s Western allies indulge dictators and turn a blind eye to abuses. If the human rights situation in Bahrain is to improve, the Biden administration must hold the Bahrainis to account and make it clear that human rights are back on the agenda.”

5. Impact of the Ukraine-Russia Conflict

On February 24, Russian military forces launched [a full-scale invasion](#) of Ukraine using land, air, and sea attacks. This was the most significant military action taken by one nation against another in Europe since 1945. While the Gulf states had been reserved in expressing their stance on the matter, they adopted a [policy of neutrality](#) toward Russia’s actions, and this cautious approach can be linked to the Middle East’s regional transformations and security frameworks in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Nevertheless, the conflict in Ukraine has enabled Middle Eastern powers to have more autonomy. As a result, the region has started to assert its position in the global geopolitical landscape.

The world is currently facing a significant [energy crisis](#) that has caused high and fluctuating prices, especially for fossil fuels. This crisis has become a testing ground for recent trends in the energy market. Over the past two years, the market has witnessed [extreme price volatility](#) due to factors such as the pandemic-induced reduction in demand and supply contraction. The war in Ukraine has further [disrupted fossil fuel supplies](#) since Russia is a major natural gas and oil exporter. Europe’s heavy reliance on oil supplies has prompted the reevaluation of strategic concerns and resource dependencies. This shift in priorities has impacted various aspects of foreign policy, potentially influencing the emphasis on issues such as human rights in international relations. The increased demand for oil resources in Europe prompted a



reconsideration of diplomatic agendas, reflecting a discernible change in global interests that could indirectly affect the U.S. administration's emphasis on human rights in its international alliances, including its association with Bahrain.

In July of 2022, President Biden went on a diplomatic trip included Saudi Arabia, where he attended the [Security and Development Summit](#) along with leaders from six GCC member countries and other nations. The main objective of the summit was to gain regional support for sanctions and to seek solidarity in addressing the broader geopolitical challenges posed by Russia's actions. The administration aimed to rally support from Middle Eastern countries, highlighting the importance of a collective response in addressing the multifaceted issues stemming from the conflict.

The [outcomes](#) of Biden's Middle East trip proved limited, highlighting the challenges posed by the geopolitical tensions between the U.S. and Russia. While ostensibly addressing international law violations and human rights concerns, the Biden administration sought alliances with countries known for their poor human rights records. This suggests that human rights considerations may have been employed more as a diplomatic strategy than a genuine concern, serving as a means to garner support against Russia. The repercussions of the Ukraine-Russia conflict extend beyond regional boundaries, prompting [geopolitical shifts](#) and altering nations' strategic interests. This transformed landscape underscores the need for a nuanced assessment of how global dependencies and resource demands intersect with diplomatic priorities, potentially impacting the balance between strategic exigencies and human rights advocacy in international engagements.

6. Bahrain's Response: Human Rights vs. Oil



Throughout history, nations with access to the prevailing energy source have significantly enhanced their absolute and relative wealth and influence, thereby shaping the geopolitical landscape. The ability to export energy generates economic returns and establishes considerable [geopolitical influence](#). As the energy sources have evolved, so too have the beneficiaries of this wealth and power. Bahrain, in particular, mirrors this historical trend, as its reliance on oil and gas revenues has played a pivotal role in its economic and geopolitical standing. [Bahrain](#), much like other major state-controlled oil and gas exporters, has utilized its energy resources for strategic influence. As the owner of its oil and gas industry, the Kingdom has a similar approach to these nations. [They strategically](#) use their abundant energy resources, like oil, to gain global influence.

Bahrain's economy faced challenges due to domestic unrest, [declining oil prices](#) from 2014 to 2021, and the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a 5% contraction in 2020. To address these issues, Bahrain's leaders implemented measures such as cutting government spending, issuing sovereign debt, and delaying new investments in the energy sector. The majority of Bahrain's daily oil production, around 200,000 barrels, comes from the Saudi field Abu Safa, with revenue shared equally between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Bahrain's oil and gas reserves are the lowest among [GCC states](#), estimated at 125 million barrels of oil and 5.3 trillion cubic feet of gas.

The ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine has significantly increased [international oil and gas prices](#). This escalation has been advantageous for Gulf countries such as Bahrain. The country has also shown support for Saudi Arabia's Middle East Green Initiative and has actively participated in various regional strategic initiatives. However, Bahrain's stance on human rights concerns during this increased global oil demand period is crucial in determining the balance between human rights and strategic priorities.



Recent observations reveal a disconcerting regression in Bahrain's human rights landscape, with reports of political incarcerations, restricted free expression, and systemic discrimination. This decline is particularly concerning as the country has deepened its partnership with the United States. This goes against the commitments made by the Biden administration to prioritize human rights in its foreign policy. According to international law, the U.S. government must protect human rights from business abuse and ensure that corporations follow human rights standards. Therefore, while C-SIPA lays out the groundwork for a multifaceted partnership, including regional stability, economic development, and technological progress, the increased collaboration raises doubts about the administration's adherence to human rights principles. Moreover, it is worth noting that in September 2023, the Biden administration decided to [strengthen](#) its partnership with Bahrain, which increases the potential tension between economic and security interests outlined in C-SIPA and the imperative to address human rights concerns. This raises concerns about the administration's commitment to prioritizing human rights.

The United States and Bahrain have [cultivated a strategic partnership that continues to grow](#) despite concerns surrounding documented human rights violations. This paradox, extensively discussed in diplomatic circles, poses a significant challenge. On one hand, the imperative of forging strategic cooperation is evident, especially amid rising regional tensions. On the other hand, the Biden administration's explicit commitment to prioritizing human rights in foreign policy adds complexity. Navigating this delicate balance requires careful consideration, raising ethical concerns and diplomatic challenges.

7. Recommendations

The relationship between Bahrain and the United States is deeply rooted in longstanding strategic cooperation, recently solidified through the Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement (C-SIPA). However, this partnership encounters challenges from



documented human rights violations within Bahrain. It is crucial to recognize that reinforcing this partnership holds significant strategic implications requiring careful consideration by the Biden administration.

As the Biden administration engages in global diplomacy, the Bahrain partnership becomes a critical case study, emphasizing the complexity of maintaining alliances while advocating for human rights globally. This case underscores the delicate balance between geopolitical interests and ethical responsibilities in shaping foreign policy, reflecting the nuanced landscape of contemporary international relations.

Bahrain strategically leverages its economic growth to enhance its reputation and public image, attempting to divert attention from a poor human rights record. Despite U.S. declarations of support for global human rights, geopolitical concerns often outweigh ideals in its policy towards Bahrain. Almost 15 years after Bahrain's Arab Spring uprising, leaders remain in exile or behind bars.

In light of these considerations, we recommend considering the following for U.S. foreign policy toward Bahrain:

1. Condemn the ongoing human rights violations by the Bahraini authorities and security forces, including the use of violence, the ban on all forms of protest, and the arrest and detention of peaceful protesters exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.
2. Call on the Bahraini authorities to consider accountability for past violations as a key element on the path towards justice and genuine reconciliation, which are deemed necessary for social stability.



3. Advocate for releasing all individuals imprisoned in Bahrain solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association.
4. Exert pressure on Bahrain to cease the use of torture and other ill-treatment, fostering a culture of accountability by establishing effective mechanisms for victims of abuses to obtain justice and remedies.
5. Urge Bahrain's government to take genuine steps towards justice reform and restoring human rights and the rule of law within the country.
6. Urge the U.S. to ensure that human rights are mainstreamed across all areas of cooperation with Bahrain. This emphasizes incorporating human rights considerations into various facets of the bilateral relationship between the two nations.