

# BAHRAIN

## Snapshot

### History

Part of ancient trade routes between Mesopotamia and India, Bahrain is located on islands off the east coast of Saudi Arabia. Once part of major empires, ancestors of the present ruling family captured the islands from Persia in 1783. The ruling family signed agreements establishing Bahrain as a British Protectorate, giving it protection from military attacks by the Ottoman Turks. Shortly after the discovery of Gulf oil, the British moved their main naval base to Bahrain in 1935. Bahrain became independent from Britain in 1971. Today, the US has a major naval base in Bahrain.

### People

Bahrain is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Although about 2/3 of Bahrain's native population is Shi'a Muslim, the ruling family and the majority of government, military, and corporate leaders are Sunni Muslims. Bahrain has a large foreign resident population.  
**Population:** 1.2 million (est. 2011)  
**Major city:** MANAMA (163,000)  
**Languages:** Arabic (official), English, Farsi, Urdu  
**Religion:** 98% Muslim (approx. 70% Shi'a, 30% Sunni), with small Christian, Jewish, Baha'i, and Hindu communities.  
**Ethnic groups:** Bahraini 63%, Asian 19%, other Arab 10%, Iranian 8%.

### Government

Bahrain is a kingdom. Members of the ruling family (who are Sunni Muslims) hold the major political and military posts. When **King Hamad** became Bahrain's ruler in 1999, he said he wanted to improve relations with Bahrain's Shi'a majority. He released many political prisoners and lifted a 25-year State Security Law put in place by his father that allowed the government to detain individuals for up to three years without a trial. King Hamad also promised to transition Bahrain from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy (a model in which the king shares power with the parliament). In 2001, however, the new constitution did not allow for elections of both houses (or chambers) of parliament. Instead, the king appoints all members of the upper house. Voters only choose representatives for the the lower house of parliament. Each chamber has equal voting rights, giving the king considerable influence in government.

Sources: "Bahrain." *U.S. Department of State*. 8 July 2011. Web.

"Bahrain." *CIA World Factbook*. 5 July 2011. Web.

"BBC News - Bahrain Country Profile." *BBC News - Home*. 4 June 2011. Web.