

Desert island defence: Bahraini defence procurement

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Bahrain's complex security landscape means that the country has to deal with domestic tensions while also participating in coalition operations that help secure the Gulf's interests against Iranian influence and the threat posed by the Islamic State. As a result, the country's equipment capabilities and needs are varied, writes *Charles Forrester*

The Kingdom of Bahrain faces a number of security challenges alongside its Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) neighbours, as well as the need to modernise outdated and outmoded equipment still used by its armed forces.

In addition to defending its own territorial integrity and working to ensure the stability of the state, Bahraini forces have been contributing to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen and multinational coalition operations in Syria against the Islamic State. As a result a number of procurement requirements have emerged, especially as its allies improve their own capabilities and the country does not wish to be seen as lagging behind its neighbours.

In part due to its small size and long history of extraction, Bahrain's hydrocarbon reserves are smaller than those of its neighbours, making procurement through traditional budgeted pathways more difficult.

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A complex threat landscape

Bahrain faces a threat environment that is somewhat more complex than those of its GCC neighbours. An archipelago of 33 man-made and natural islands nestled between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the country is linked by a causeway to the Saudi cities of Al Khobar, Dammam, and Dhahran.

In common with its neighbours, the country shares concerns over Iranian nuclear and ballistic missile ambitions, particularly given that it is within easy reach of a number of Tehran's advanced systems. However, Bahrain also has to contend with the potential for Iran to provoke unrest in its local population, which is a Shi'ite majority ruled by a Sunni royal family. This has led to tensions in the country welling up, particularly during the Arab Spring of 2011. There was a crackdown on protests against the authorities, with international condemnation leading to arms embargoes being put in place by international partners including the United Kingdom and the United States. While these have since been lifted, Bahrain's human rights record and progress on improving its policies still remains a sticking point for some transfers.

Despite this there are ongoing low-level attacks within the country that have seen petrol bombings and improvised explosive device strikes against police and security forces, with small-scale protests also a regular occurrence.

Bahrain is also part of the multinational coalition operations against the Islamic State and rebels in Yemen. The joint operations in Yemen are a particularly major turning point for military forces in

the region because they are being undertaken without overall command and political co-ordination by Western countries, which has been the case in other major operations to which the country has contributed.

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International assistance

The primary aim of the Bahraini military is to deter aggression and protect the sovereignty of the state, with operational planning geared towards holding off an aggressor for 48 hours until treaty-obligated reinforcements arrive.

Additionally, Bahrain also serves as a focal point for Western countries seeking to provide security to protect their own interests in the region.

The US Navy (USN) has a significant presence in the country, which is the base for the US Fifth Fleet. The US Naval Forces Central Command's headquarters in Manama act as the naval component command of US Central Command, with responsibility for the Fifth Fleet as well as the international forces serving under the Combined Maritime Forces. The command's area of responsibility includes the Arabian/Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, Red Sea, and parts of the Indian Ocean. The USN has 10 patrol craft and four mine countermeasure vessels (MCMVs) based at Manama.



US Navy personnel on an exercise in Bahrain in 2013. International naval forces based in Bahrain are largely focused on mine countermeasures. (US Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Gary Keen)

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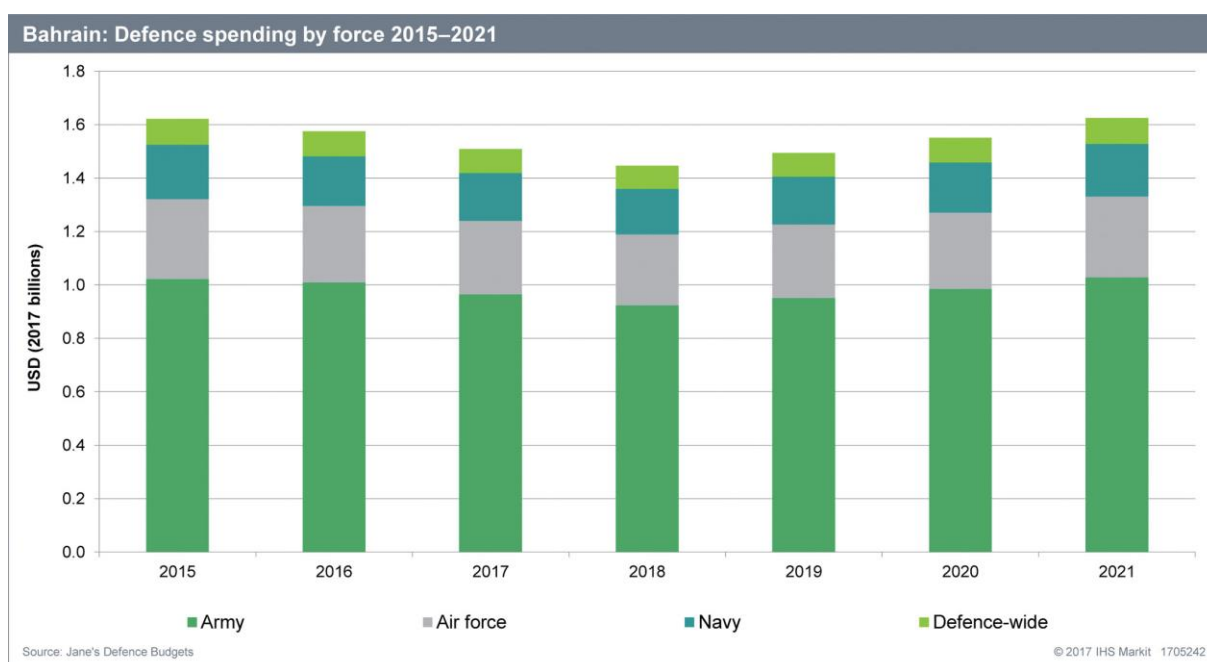
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Budgetary constraints

Military spending in Bahrain is opaque at best. Bahrain provides budget figures every two years, with spending outlined for that 24-month period. However, this is restricted to 'recurrent spending' (mostly salaries, benefits, and maintenance costs). Capital project and military procurement spending is not published, with the exception of 2008 and 2009 when a line for "Expenditure on Arming and Development Projects" was included in the budget statement.

As a result, while government figures provide a useful indication of general defence budget trends, they do not accurately portray the full extent of related expenditure. Spending on research, development, test, and evaluation (RDT&E), procurement, and construction are met by off-budget funding as and when required by the Ministry of Defence (MoD).

Bahrain is one of the lowest-spending nations in the GCC and this is reflected in its reliance on its Saudi and US allies as the ultimate guarantors of its security. However, available data shows that Bahrain's military spending on recurring items grew steadily in 2013 and 2014 before the collapse in world energy prices.



Bahrain: defence spending by force 2015-2021 ()

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As a result of the decline in oil prices the country's defence budget for 2015 shrank by more than 10% to USD1.62 billion, with a corresponding 0.67% cut as a proportion of GDP. Its defence budget has continued to decline to approximately USD1.5 billion and is expected to remain stable at this level through to the end of the decade.

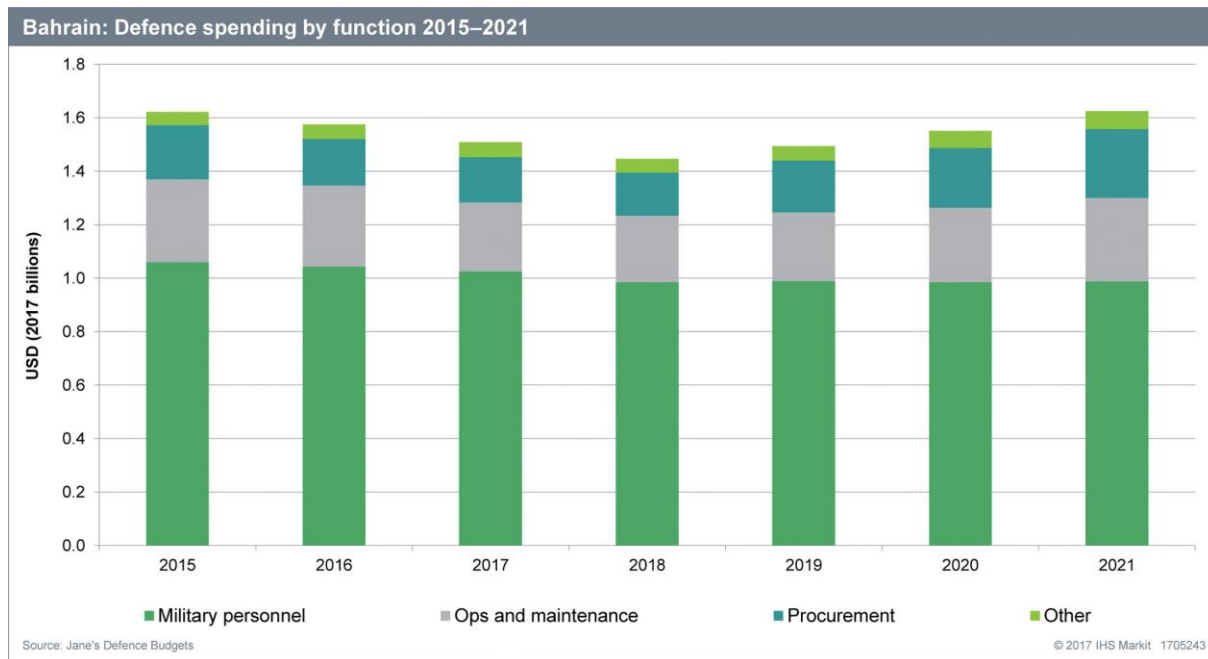
The MoD also receives in-year budget increases when finances allow. In 2011, for example, the published defence budget was increased by USD54 million and in 2012 by USD135 million.

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Procurement

The budget line for "Expenditure on Arming and Development Projects", was published at about USD190 million for 2008 and 2009. In subsequent years it was replaced by a note stating only that "these expenditures are for arming and development projects related to defence force and [have] been charged into the Government Consolidated Final Account".

With procurement spending mostly 'off-budget', the ability of the Bahraini military to finance new equipment is reliant on excess oil revenue being allocated to defence programmes or military aid from allies such as Saudi Arabia and the United States. As a result the pattern of defence acquisition bears little resemblance to the published defence budget and there appear to be procurement 'spikes' as and when funding or aid is made available.



Bahrain: defence spending by function 2015-2021 ()

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In 2001 officially declared spending was USD320 million, however, defence equipment deliveries from Western countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union (EU)) for that year came to USD347 million: USD27 million more than the official total budget.

Although the United States is Bahrain's biggest supplier of defence equipment, the United Kingdom has also made substantial sales to the country. In 2005 Bahrain ordered six Hawk 129 aircraft from BAE Systems that were delivered in 2006 and accounted for the jump in UK exports in those two years.

Saudi Arabia has also provided financial support, although exact funding levels are not known. Meanwhile, Russia sold the Kornet-EM anti-tank guided missile system with 100 9M133M-2 missiles to Bahrain in 2015. Turkey has also undertaken modernisation and upgrade work on Bahraini helicopters and armoured personnel carriers (APCs).

Official military export figures supplied by the United Kingdom, the United States, and the EU show that Bahrain spent on average about USD100 million annually with these countries on imported military equipment during 2001–10, although annual spending appears to have increased since 2009. The tempo of defence sales slowed in 2011 as Bahrain navigated its way through a period of civil unrest and faced restrictions from Western countries.

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Requirements and acquisitions

Land

Bahrain's army is well trained and suitably equipped with a range of light equipment for mobile warfare, as well as heavier platforms such as main battle tanks (MBTs). Current inventories include some dated equipment – such as M60A3 MBTs and Saxon APCs – as well as newly delivered systems such as Cobra and Arma APCs from Turkey's Otokar.

At least 193 Arma 6x6 APCs have been delivered since 2013, with some of these platforms deployed to Yemen.

Additionally, Bahrain's special forces were identified in December 2016 as being the launch customer for the Expal EIMOS mortar system, with an estimated six systems being delivered to the country. The truck-mounted system is suited to highly mobile deployed operations, making it most likely to be deployed in support of both conventional formations and special forces.

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Bahrain was recently identified as the first customer for the Expal EIMOS, seen here at a company demonstration in 2016. (IHS Markit/Charles Forrester)

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Sea

The Royal Bahrain Naval Force (RBNF) is small but efficient, capable of defending national interests against piracy, illegal entry, and smuggling, as well as carrying out fishery protection.

Bahraini naval procurement has been from a number of sources in the past, ranging from ex-USN ships to new-build vessels of a variety of sizes from Germany, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States. However, the force has limited capabilities to defend the kingdom against a determined seaborne attack from Iran, relying instead upon defence guarantees from regional and international allies.

The RBNF fleet comprises RBNS *Sabha*, an ex-USN Oliver Hazard Perry-class frigate that was commissioned in 1981 and transferred to the country in 1996, as well as two corvettes, eight fast attack craft, and a number of smaller patrol and landing craft. With much of the fleet being built in the 1980s, there is a requirement to update a number of these vessels to meet immediate coastal defence and surveillance requirements, as well as to enable Bahrain to participate in deployed regional operations.



RBNS Sabha is an ex-USN Oliver Hazard Perry class frigate that was transferred to Bahrain in 1996 along with a number of other vessels of various types. (US Navy)

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In April it was revealed that the RBNF would acquire five 25 m-long Mk V craft – referred to as Special Operations Craft in USN service – from the US military through an Excess Defense Articles (EDA) procurement. Equipped in US service with heavy machine guns and automatic grenade launchers, at least one RBNF vessel has been seen fitted with an unstabilised 20 mm Oerlikon Type A41A gun on its foredeck.

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Air

Two of Bahrain's key air procurements revolve around the renewal of its rotary-wing attack helicopter fleet and the upgrading of its combat air capabilities.

The RBAF has a long-standing requirement to procure attack helicopters to replace the ageing Airbus Helicopters BO 105 fleet that was first delivered in 1978 and to augment Bahrain's upgraded Bell AH-1E/F Cobra fleet.

In 2014 *Jane's* reported that contenders for the programme could include the Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI) T129 Atak, Boeing AH-64 Apache, Airbus Helicopters Tiger, or Denel Rooivalk aircraft. TAI's T129 had been well positioned for this, according to media reports from the region, particularly following upgrades made to Bahrain's Cobra fleet by Aselsan. However, in 2016 it was revealed by Bell officials that the country had sent a letter of request for Bell AH-1Z Vipers to the US government. Furthermore, the recent breakdown in relations with Qatar could hamper Turkish access to other GCC markets.

The RBAF's prime modernisation and upgrade programme, meanwhile, revolves around its current fleet of fixed-wing combat aircraft. The RBAF currently operates 20 Lockheed Martin F-16C/D Fighting Falcon multirole fighters, alongside eight Northrop Grumman F-5E Tiger II fighters.



Bahrain operates a fleet of 20 F-16C/Ds; the sale of 19 F-16Vs to Bahrain has only just been approved. (Lockheed Martin)

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To enhance the capabilities of the F-16 fleet the RBAF signed a contract for Lockheed Martin Sniper advanced targeting pods in July. Further upgrades for the fleet are expected as wider modernisation programmes continue.

In September the US government's Defense Security Co-operation Agency (DSCA) announced that it had approved the sale of 19 F-16V aircraft to Bahrain in a deal valued at USD2.785 billion. It also approved upgrades to the RBAF's F-16C/D fleet to F-16V standard for USD1.082 billion.

The F-16V features a new avionics suite, alongside a Northrop Grumman AN/APG-83 Scalable Agile Beam Radar (SABR: an active electronically scanned array radar), an upgraded Raytheon modular mission computer and associated architecture, and cockpit improvements such as a new centre pedestal display.

The upgrade and new aircraft procurement deal had faced headwinds over concerns relating to the country's human rights record: an issue that played a major role in preventing US exports in the earlier half of the decade. A US government official said at the announcement of the DSCA approvals that the two countries "continue to have regular discussions on a variety of issues, including human rights and political reform. [The US government] continues to urge the government of Bahrain to pursue reconciliation and advance reform efforts for the benefit of Bahrain's long-term security and our mutual interest in regional stability".

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