

EU's Economic Soft Power Can Advance Human Rights in Bahrain

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Introduction

Bahrain's record on meeting its population's economic needs has been mixed. The European Union, however, can play a role in Bahrain better meeting these needs, and that this can allow the EU to put pressure more successfully on Bahrain to temper its repressive policies on other human rights areas. Moreover, a greater degree of economic prosperity in Bahrain may limit the Government of Bahrain (GoB)'s ability to curb behaviours common to a 'free' society such as regular internet access by pricing poorer citizens out of them, a tactic they have used in the past.¹

Apart from climate policy, another key sustainable development goal is 'decent work and economic growth', again based on the report by the Bahrain Transparency Association.² The most pressing obstacles to this are unemployment, particularly amongst graduates, an overreliance on migrant labour, and a need to economically diversify away from its small core of key industries, with over 60% of Bahrain's exports coming from aluminium and mineral fuels alone.³ There are three possible solutions which EU actors could potentially facilitate.

The first is to facilitate greater, more short-term travel in Bahrain for EU citizens, providing opportunities to Bahrain's tourist industry. This could have a twofold effect of both creating jobs and of asserting Bahrain's international reputation, making it a more inviting candidate

¹ Söderqvist, E. (2021) Human Rights and the Digital Sphere in Bahrain.

² Social Watch (2020) Implementation of the 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development and Sustainable Development Goals. Available at [Implementation of the 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development and Sustainable Development Goals | Social Watch](#) [Accessed July 7th 2022].

³ World's Top Exports (2020) Bahrain's Top 10 Exports. Available at [Bahrain's Top Exports 2021 Plus Major Trading Partners \(worldstopexports.com\)](#) [Accessed 17th September 2022].

for foreign investment which may serve to diversify its economy further. Bahrain already facilitates short-term travel for many countries in a streamlined manner, with all EU members amongst over a hundred states whose citizens can apply for an eVisa,⁴ and so this objective is unlikely to be controversial.

The second is to facilitate links between further education institutions in the EU and in Bahrain. For example, EU universities may offer a greater number of exchange programs for students at Bahraini universities. Bahraini students are well-travelled compared to their GCC peers, as illustrated in the table below:⁵

Country	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	UAE
Population	1,200,000	3,400,000	3,500,000	1,900,000	30,800,000	8,700,000
Students Studying Abroad (total)	4,096	10,686	10,049	3,410	62,535	8,562
Students Studying Abroad (per 100,000)	341	314	287	179	203	98

(Note: these figures are from 2012.)

⁴ Online Visa (2022) Visa Policy of Bahrain. Available at [Visa Policy of Bahrain | Entry Requirements | Onlinevisa.com](https://www.onlinevisa.com/bahrain/entry-requirements) [Accessed July 5th 2022].

⁵ World Population Review (2022)

- Saudi Arabia Population 2022. Available at [Saudi Arabia Population 2022 \(Demographics, Maps, Graphs\) \(worldpopulationreview.com\)](https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-comparisons/saudi-arabia-population-2022/) [Accessed July 10th 2022]
- Bahrain Population 2022. Available at [Bahrain Population 2022 \(Demographics, Maps, Graphs\) \(worldpopulationreview.com\)](https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-comparisons/bahrain-population-2022/) [Accessed July 10th 2022]
- Oman Population 2022. Available at [Accessed September 1st 2022]
- Kuwait Population 2022. Available at [Accessed September 1st 2022]
- Qatar Population 2022. Available at [Qatar Population 2022 \(Demographics, Maps, Graphs\) \(worldpopulationreview.com\)](https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-comparisons/qatar-population-2022/) [Accessed September 1st 2022]
- United Arab Emirates Population 2022. Available at [United Arab Emirates Population 2022 \(Demographics, Maps, Graphs\) \(worldpopulationreview.com\)](https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-comparisons/uae-population-2022/) [Accessed September 1st 2022];

Bridgestock, L. (2022) Middle Eastern Students Abroad: In Numbers. Available at [Middle Eastern Students Abroad: In Numbers | Top Universities](https://www.bridgestock.com/middle-eastern-students-abroad-in-numbers-top-universities) [Accessed July 10th 2022].

However, there are currently no EU national figures amongst the most popular destinations for Bahraini students. Having existed effectively as a British protectorate for over a century prior to 1971, the UK remains the most popular overseas destination for Bahrainis students, with more than 25% of their international students studying there; Jordan and the UAE being second and third.⁶ Bahrain's domestic further education facilities, meanwhile, are comparatively lacklustre, with their highest ranked institution, the University of Bahrain, being at 801-1000 on the QS university rankings.⁶ Bahrain's difficulties employing domestic graduates may not reflect difficulties creating graduate-level jobs as much as it reflects that domestic graduates' credentials carry little prestige. Were the EU to allow more of Bahrain's domestic students the chance to enhance their studies through exchanges, Bahrain may be able to get the most from its domestic workforce, plug skill gaps in its economy, and diversify industry by offering a more qualified workforce to investors.

The third, and perhaps most challenging reform, is to pursue agreements for easier migration for Bahraini citizens to work within the EU. Whilst Bahrain is in some sectors more reliant on migrant labour and may be wary of experiencing a 'brain drain' of its own citizens, it is currently struggling to integrate many of its domestic graduates into the economy. For these younger graduates, the opportunity of living and working in the higher-wage EU, even in a lower-skilled job, may be appealing ahead of continuing to search for graduate jobs at home. Meanwhile, many EU countries have experienced some labour shortages in the wake of the pandemic, and so this may be a mutually advantageous solution.

Crucially, the targets of these policies, particularly the second and third, are primarily those who are currently disadvantaged by the GoB's domestic policies, such as those struggling for career opportunities or sought-after qualifications. This may insulate the EU against accusations that it is merely lending credence to the government with a poor human rights

⁶ Top Universities (2022) University of Bahrain. Available at [University of Bahrain : Rankings, Fees & Courses Details | Top Universities](#) [Accessed July 10th 2022].

record and status quo. However, these policies could still provide the EU with a degree of economic leverage over Bahrain, and an incentive for the GoB to maintain good terms between them - such as by aligning itself to a greater extent with the EU's human rights goals than at present. Moreover, it intertwines Bahrain's economic fortunes with the EU more closely, exposes a greater number of Bahraini citizens to the EU's norms, and it makes Bahrain's economic success hinge to a greater extent on maintaining a positive reputation. Unlike the economic behemoths of the international stage such as China, Bahrain may be in less of a position to test the Western powers' willingness to cooperate, or indeed weather, any downturn in economic relations with them; likewise, Bahrain's pull for investors is comparatively weaker, and their economy may be more reliant on the success of tourism in particular, making tarnishing their own reputation comparatively riskier than for other nations. On the EU side, many of these policies could be implemented without the need for large amounts of direct spending, it presents opportunities for the EU to supplement its own labour force, and it reinforces commitments and initiatives on the EU's existing agenda, such as international outreach in education as seen in the recently renewed Erasmus+ scheme.