



SAUDI ARABIA

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Chapter 1 | Geography



View of Al-Ula in Al Madinah Region
Flickr / Sammy Six - Al Ula

Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is slightly more than one-fifth the size of the United States. It is the largest state on the Arabian Peninsula, composing around 80% of the region. The country shares borders with seven neighbors and three major bodies of water. The Kingdom's maritime claims include a 12-nautical-mile expanse off its coastal borders. Saudi Arabia also asserts jurisdiction over numerous small islands, and claim some sea beds and subsoils beyond the international 12-nautical-mile limit.^{1,2}

Saudi Arabia's northern neighbor states are Jordan, Iraq, and Kuwait.³ Eastern neighbors include the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar. The northern border stretches from the Gulf of Aqaba in the west to Ras al-Khafji on the Persian Gulf in the east, measuring almost 1,400 km (870 mi). The country's highest elevation is 665 m (2,181

1 Central Intelligence Agency, "Saudi Arabia: Geography," in *The World Factbook*, 13 May 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html>

2 Eleanor Abdella Doumato, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment," in *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, ed. Helen Chapin Metz (Washington DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1993), https://cdn.loc.gov/master/frd/frdcstdy/sa/saudiarabiaccount00metz_0/saudiarabiaccount00metz_0_djvu.txt

3 William L. Ochsenwald, Joshua Teitelbaum, and Harry St. John Bridger Philby, "Saudi Arabia: Land," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 25 May 2019, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/525348/Saudi-Arabia>

ft) and its highest point is Jabal Sawda of the Sarawat mountain range, with an elevation of 3,133 m (10,278 ft).^{4, 5} The southeastern portion of Saudi Arabia, known as the Rub al-Khali desert, has a border with Oman.⁶

Saudi Arabia's population is estimated to be more than 34 million people. As of 2018 estimates, about 68% of the population consists of Saudi nationals, with the other 32% being expatriates.^{7, 8} With approximately 22% of the world's oil reserves, Saudi Arabia is the world's second largest crude oil producer after the United States. Almost half of the country's GDP comes from oil revenues.^{9, 10, 11}

Saudi Arabia is home to Islam's two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina. Wahhabism, an austere form of Islam that relies on a literal interpretation of the Quran and the Hadith, is the country's dominant sect.¹²

Geographical Divisions

With an area of 2,149,690 sq km (830,000 sq mi), Saudi Arabia is the largest country in the Persian Gulf region.¹³ With no permanent lakes or rivers, much of that space is desert.¹⁴ The country consists of five natural regions: the southern region, which runs along the border with Yemen and is home to the Rub al-Khali and al-Nafud deserts; the western region, or highlands, that runs along the Red Sea. In the central region is Nejd, which covers the rocky central plateau. Lastly, the eastern region of al-Ahsa encompasses the coastal plain along the Persian Gulf.¹⁵

Asir, the Southern Region

Asir begins near the holy city of Mecca and extends southwest, ending at the Yemen border. The most fertile areas of the country are in this region, alongside its coastal mountains. Here, peaks rise much higher than those in the northern range, as high as 3,000 m (9,843ft).¹⁶ In all, Asir covers an estimated 100,000 sq km (40,000 sq mi) of the country, varying from coastal plains to mountains, and upper valleys.¹⁷

The western portion of Asir is home to the Tihamah lowlands, a coastal plain that averages 65 km (40 mi) in width. Tidal plains border this rich sedimentary plain on the west, while on the east, fertile upper slopes frame region. These upper slopes were transformed by farmers for agricultural purposes. Rainfall supports these crops and

4 Central Intelligence Agency, "Saudi Arabia: Geography," in *The World Factbook*, 13 May 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html>

5 Benjamin Elisha Sawe, "Tallest Mountains in Saudi Arabia," *World Atlas*, 25 April 2017, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/tallest-mountains-in-saudi-arabia.html>

6 Wild Frontiers, "The Empty Quarter Desert—Rub Al Khali," 14 December 2017, https://www.wildfrontierstravel.com/en_US/community/blog/post/the-empty-quarter-desert-rub-al-khali

7 Worldometers, "Saudi Arabia Population (Live)," 22 May 2019, <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/saudi-arabia-population/>

8 Global Media Insight, "Saudi Arabia's Population Statistics of 2019," 27 March 2019, <https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/saudi-arabia-population-statistics-2018/>

9 OPEC, "OPEC Share of World Crude Oil Reserves," 2019, https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/data_graphs/330.htm

10 U.S. Energy Information Administration, "The United States is Now the Largest Global Crude Oil Producer," 12 September 2018, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=37053>

11 CNN, "Saudi Arabia Fast Facts," 2 April 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/04/01/middleeast/saudi-arabia-fast-facts/index.html>

12 Nabil Mouline, "Can the Saudis Break Up with Wahhabism?" *New York Times*, 3 July 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/03/opinion/saudi-arabia-monarchy-wahhabism.html>

13 Central Intelligence Agency, "Saudi Arabia: Geography," *The World Factbook*, 13 May 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html>

14 Splendid Arabia, "Deserts of Saudi Arabia," n.d., <http://www.splendidarabia.com/kingdom/deserts/>

15 Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/15.htm>

16 Eddy De Pauw, *An Agroecological Exploration of the Arabian Peninsula* (Aleppo, Syria: International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas, 2002), <https://books.google.com/books?id=jlVSxGhTOT4C&lpg=PA1&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false>

17 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Asir," 10 June 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Asir-region-Saudi-Arabia>

vegetation, and supports Saudi Arabia's only forested areas. This region is relatively more populated than the others, largely because of its agricultural potential.^{18, 19}

The eastern side of Asir slopes gently downward. The Rub al-Khali Lava Beds (*harrat*) are part of the Asir mountain ranges, which contain evidence of relatively recent volcanic activity. Oasis agriculture is found along the fertile wadis, ancient dry riverbeds that only carry fresh water from seasonal rains. Prominent wadis in the area are Wadi ad-Dawasir, Wadi Hanifa, and Wadi al-Rummah.^{20, 21}

Rub al-Khali and the Southern Region

The southern region is comprised of portions of other regions such as al-Bahah, Jizan, Asir, and Najran.²² The Rub al-Khali (Empty Quarter) desert occupies most of the region and nearly 25% of the country.²³ Roughly the size of Texas, it is the largest sand sea in the world and one of the driest places on the planet. Wind-sculpted sand dunes run roughly northeast to southwest, some reaching an altitude of 1,200 m (3,900 ft). The elevation drops from 600 m (1,969 ft) in the west to 180 m (591 ft) in the east. The sand is just as varied. It is soft and fine in the west, while stable sand sheets and salt flats cover the east. Sand mountains can reach as high as 300 m (984 ft).²⁴
²⁵ Not many people live in this region because of the intense heat and scarce water.^{26, 27, 28}

Hejaz, the Western Region

Hejaz traces along the Red Sea above the Asir and includes the Hejaz Range. Coastal plains border the Red Sea, widening in a southward direction. Along the coast, high levels of humidity combine with summer temperatures of up to 40°C (104°F), making the climate uncomfortable. The port city of Jeddah and the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina are located in this region. This rugged landscape receives little rain and intense sun. A few coastal plains dot the Red Sea coast, which lacks natural harbors.^{29, 30, 31}

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- 18 Eleanor Abdella Doumato, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment," in *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, ed. Helen Chapin Metz (Washington DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1993), https://cdn.loc.gov/master/frd/frdcstdy/sa/saudiarabiaccount00metz_0/saudiarabiaccount00metz_0_djvu.txt
- 19 Saudi Arabia Market Information Resource and Directory (SAMIRAD), "Geographical Regions of the Kingdom: Southern Region," n.d., <http://www.saudinf.com/main/a33.htm>
- 20 Eleanor Abdella Doumato, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment," in *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, ed. Helen Chapin Metz (Washington DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1993), https://cdn.loc.gov/master/frd/frdcstdy/sa/saudiarabiaccount00metz_0/saudiarabiaccount00metz_0_djvu.txt
- 21 World Atlas, "Major Wadis of the Arabian Peninsula," 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/major-wadis-of-the-arabian-peninsula.html>
- 22 Saudi Tourism, "Aseer Najran, Jazan, and Baha Provinces," n.d., <https://www.sauditourism.sa/en/aboutKSA/CultureAndHistory/heritage/Folklore/Pages/AseerNajranJazanAndBaha.aspx>
- 23 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Rub 'al-Khali," 22 September 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Rub-al-Khali>
- 24 Eleanor Abdella Doumato, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment," in *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, ed. Helen Chapin Metz (Washington DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1993), https://cdn.loc.gov/master/frd/frdcstdy/sa/saudiarabiaccount00metz_0/saudiarabiaccount00metz_0_djvu.txt
- 25 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Rub 'al-Khali," 22 September 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Rub-al-Khali>
- 26 Saudi Arabia Market Information Resource and Directory (SAMIRAD), "Geographical Regions of the Kingdom: Rub al-Khali," n.d., <http://www.saudinf.com/main/a35.htm>
- 27 Earth Observatory, "Empty Quarter, Arabian Peninsula," 1 February 2003, <https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/77714/empty-quarter-arabian-peninsula>
- 28 Climates to Travel, "Climate—Saudi Arabia," n.d., <https://www.climatestotravel.com/climate/saudi-arabia>
- 29 Eleanor Abdella Doumato, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment," in *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, ed. Helen Chapin Metz (Washington DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1993), https://cdn.loc.gov/master/frd/frdcstdy/sa/saudiarabiaccount00metz_0/saudiarabiaccount00metz_0_djvu.txt
- 30 Saudi Arabia Market Information Resource and Directory (SAMIRAD), "Geographical Regions of the Kingdom: Western Region," n.d., <http://www.saudinf.com/main/a32.htm>
- 31 Joshua Teitelbaum, William L. Ochsenwald, and Harry St. John Bridger Philby, "Saudi Arabia: Land," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 25 May 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia>

Nejd, the Central Region

The Nejd, or “highland” in Arabic, is a stony plateau located east of the Hejaz and Asir. The plateau spreads across the peninsula, sloping toward the east from an elevation of 1,360 m (4,462 ft) to 750 m (2,461 ft) at its easternmost limit. This region is hot and dry during the summer, with temperatures exceeding 45°C (113°F). In winter, the temperatures are cold, often dropping below 0°C (32°F).³²

This region contains many oases and salt marshes (*sabkah*), and is home to a growing agricultural industry.³³ These water sources help the growing agricultural industry that has developed in the area.³⁴ A number of wadis also exist in Nejd, generally running eastward away from the Red Sea. Jebel Tuwayq, an arc-shaped ridge above the plateau with an elevation of 100–250 m (328–820 ft), is at the center of Nejd. This region is home to the national capital, Riyadh, and the traditional home of the ruling House of Saud.³⁵

The Eastern Region

Some of Saudi Arabia’s major cities and vast oil reserves are located in the eastern region, along the Persian Gulf. Ras Tanura is a major port city and home to the headquarters of Saudi Aramco, the national oil company.³⁶ Several major oases and oasis cities, like Qatif and Hofuf, are also located in this region. Northwesterly winds, known as *shamals*, commonly blow across the region. These winds are common in June and worsen in July. Wind speeds can reach up to 50 kph (31 mph).^{37, 38} The al-Ahsa oasis, the largest oasis in the world, is located here and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.³⁹

Topographical Divisions

Deserts and Mountains

In addition to the Rub al-Khali, Saudi Arabia is home to two other major deserts. At the northern limit of the Nejd is the peninsula’s second largest desert, the al-Nafud. This desert is approximately 64,750 sq km (25,000 sq mi) in size. The al-Nafud has longitudinal sand dunes averaging 6 to 15 m (20 to 49 ft) in height, but some reach 30 m (98 ft). This vast desert has a reddish hue that comes from the iron oxide found in the sand.^{40, 41} Separating the Nejd from eastern Arabia is the al-Dahna. It runs south for 125 km (78 mi) in a narrow arc. Often called the River of Sand, this narrow band of rose-colored sand dunes connects the north to the Rub al-Khali. Its sand dunes are as high as 137 m (450 ft) in some places, although heights of 46 m (150 ft) are more typical. Even though this

32 Fanack, “Geography of Saudi Arabia,” 2 January 2019, <https://fanack.com/saudi-arabia/geography/>

33 Saudi Arabia Market Information Resource and Directory (SAMIRAD), “Geographical Regions of the Kingdom: Central Region,” n.d., <http://www.saudinf.com/main/a31.htm>

34 Eleanor Abdella Doumato, “Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment,” in *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, ed. Helen Chapin Metz (Washington DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1993), https://cdn.loc.gov/master/frd/frdcstdy/sa/saudiarabiaccount00metz_0/saudiarabiaccount00metz_0_djvu.txt

35 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, “Najd,” 9 April 2014, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Najd>

36 Anthony Dipaola, “This is Where Saudi Arabia Gets its Oil,” *Bloomberg*, 2 December 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/photo-essays/2018-12-03/this-is-where-saudi-arabia-gets-its-oil>

37 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, “Shamal,” 20 July 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/science/shamal>

38 Saudi Arabia Market Information Resource and Directory (SAMIRAD), “Geographical Regions of the Kingdom: Eastern Region,” n.d., <http://www.saudinf.com/main/a34.htm>

39 UNESCO, “al-Ahsa Oasis, an Evolving Cultural Landscape,” n.d., <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1563>

40 George S. Rentz, William L. Ochsenwald, Robert Bertram Serjeant, and Basheer K. Nijim, “Arabia: An-Nafūd,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 25 May 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Arabia-peninsula-Asia#ref45282>

41 Eleanor Abdella Doumato, “Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment,” in *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, ed. Helen Chapin Metz (Washington DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1993), https://cdn.loc.gov/master/frd/frdcstdy/sa/saudiarabiaccount00metz_0/saudiarabiaccount00metz_0_djvu.txt

region has less water than the al-Nafud, winter and spring pastures sprout up and bring the Bedouin people here to graze their animals.^{42, 43}

Saudi Arabia has mountains in 11 defined regions. Out of the 5,213 identified peaks in the country, Jabal Sawda's peak is the highest, measuring 2,994 m (9,826 ft).^{44, 45} The Tuwayq Mountains form the backbone of one of the most densely populated regions of the country, the Nejd, which is home to the capital, Riyadh.⁴⁶ The Asir Mountains typically receive more rainfall than anywhere else in the country, ranging from 600–1,000 mm (23.6–39.4 in).⁴⁷ Many mountains in Saudi Arabia still bear the names given to them in ancient times and are of great significance to Islam.⁴⁸

Climate

Saudi Arabia has a desert climate with low annual rainfall. Humidity and temperatures vary by region. Although the temperatures along the Red Sea coast are generally lower, the humidity is oppressive. In summer months, temperatures can reach 54°C (129°F) during the day in some areas throughout the country. Spring and fall temperatures are relatively moderate, averaging about 29°C (84°F). Temperatures frequently drop to 10°C (50°F) in the south near the Sarawat mountains.^{49, 50}

The winter months, December through February, are cooler, averaging around 23°C (73°F) countrywide. In the interior and in the north, daytime temperatures rarely fall below 0°C (32°F). Evening temperatures can be much cooler, falling below freezing in the western mountains and in the extreme north.^{51, 52}

Rainfall normally falls between October and March and is often erratic. In some areas, there may be only one or two downpours within the span of a year. Along the western Red Sea coast, monsoons typically bring 30 cm (12 in) of rain and may bring as much as 50 cm (20 in).^{53, 54}

42 George S. Rentz, William L. Ochsenswald, Robert Bertram Serjeant, and Basheer K. Nijim, "Arabia: An-Dahnā," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 25 May 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Arabia-peninsula-Asia#ref45284>

43 Eleanor Abdella Doumato, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment," in *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, ed. Helen Chapin Metz (Washington DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1993), https://cdn.loc.gov/master/frd/frdcstdy/sa/saudiarabiaccount00metz_0/saudiarabiaccount00metz_0_djvu.txt

44 Peakery, "Asia—Saudi Arabia," n.d., <https://peakery.com/region/saudi-arabia-mountains/>

45 George S. Rentz, William L. Ochsenswald, Robert Bertram Serjeant, and Basheer K. Nijim, "Arabia: Najd," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 25 May 2018, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/31551/Arabia/45281/Najd?anchor=ref484861>

46 Tschangho J. Kim, "Riyadh," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 4 January 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Riyadh>

47 Arab News, "The Place: The Mountains of Asir," 2 February 2019, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1445606/saudi-arabia>

48 Dunya News, "The Sacred Mountains of Saudi Arabia," 7 June 2017, <http://dunyaenews.tv/en/World/391816-The-sacred-mountains-of-Saudi-Arabia>

49 Joshua Teitelbaum, William L. Ochsenswald, and Harry St. John Bridger Philby, "Saudi Arabia: Climate," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 25 May 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia/Climate>

50 "Saudi-Arabia," *Weather Online*, 2012, <http://www.weatheronline.co.uk/reports/climate/Saudi-Arabia.htm>

51 Joshua Teitelbaum, William L. Ochsenswald, and Harry St. John Bridger Philby, "Saudi Arabia: Climate," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 25 May 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia/Climate>

52 WeatherOnline, "Saudi-Arabia," 2019, <https://www.weatheronline.co.uk/reports/climate/Saudi-Arabia.htm>

53 Joshua Teitelbaum, William L. Ochsenswald, and Harry St. John Bridger Philby, "Saudi Arabia: Climate," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 25 May 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia/Climate>

54 Climates to Travel, "Climate—Saudi Arabia," n.d., <https://www.climatestotravel.com/climate/saudi-arabia>

Bodies of Water

There are no natural rivers or lakes in Saudi Arabia and available surface water or groundwater resources are limited. Saudis rely heavily on desalinated water to meet their potable water needs. Saudi Arabia produces nearly 50% of the world's desalinated water. Nearly 467 km (290 mi) of pipelines carry desalinated water to the capital city, Riyadh.^{55, 56} The most prominent bodies of water around the Arabian Peninsula are the Red Sea to the west and the Persian Gulf to the east.⁵⁷

Red Sea

The Red Sea separates the Arabian Peninsula from Africa, serving as a maritime border between Saudi Arabia and a number of neighboring countries, such as Egypt, Sudan, and Eritrea. It has a maximum depth of 3,040 m (9,974 ft), overall length of 1,931 km (1,200 mi), and measures 306 km (190 mi) across its widest point.^{58, 59} At its northwestern end, the Red Sea connects to the Gulf of Suez and on the east it joins the Gulf of Aqaba. The Sinai Peninsula lies between the two. To the south, the Red Sea narrows into the Bab al-Mendab Straits, merging with the Gulf of Aden.⁶⁰ The Red Sea is a strategic area vital to global shipping.^{61, 62, 63}

Persian Gulf

The Persian Gulf is Saudi Arabia's eastern maritime border, separating the Arabian Peninsula from Iran.⁶⁴ The gulf forms the nation's maritime borders with Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. Approximately 990 km (615 mi) long and ranging 55–370 km (34–230 mi) in width, the Persian Gulf has an average depth of 50 m (164 ft). At its deepest point, it expands to 90 m (295 ft).^{65, 66} The Persian Gulf is one of the most strategic waterways in the world and a major transportation route for oil. More than 700 billion barrels of proven oil reserves lie within it, along with nearly 45% of the world's natural gas reserves.⁶⁷

Wadis

Saudi Arabia has numerous *wadis*, which often feature a braided appearance resulting from sediment buildup caused by inconsistent water flow.⁶⁸ While wadis provide some fresh water, most of the kingdom's water comes from underground sources and dozens of desalination plants.^{69, 70}

- 55 Benjamin Elisha Sawe, "Are There Any Rivers in Saudi Arabia?" *World Atlas*, 3 December 2018, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/are-there-any-rivers-in-saudi-arabia.html>
- 56 Saudi Arabia Market Information Resource and Directory (SAMIRAD), "Jubail Desalination Pipeline Project," n.d., <http://www.saudinf.com/main/a8133.htm>
- 57 Global Perspectives, "Middle East: Definitions: Geographic," 2002, <http://www.cotf.edu/earthinfo/meast/Medef.html>
- 58 World Atlas, "Red Sea," 15 September 2015, <http://www.worldatlas.com/aatlas/infopage/redsea.htm>
- 59 B. Charlotte Schreiber and William B.F. Ryan, "Red Sea," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 26 March 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Red-Sea>
- 60 World Atlas, "Red Sea," 15 September 2015, <http://www.worldatlas.com/aatlas/infopage/redsea.htm>
- 61 World Atlas, "Red Sea," 15 September 2015, <http://www.worldatlas.com/aatlas/infopage/redsea.htm>
- 62 B. Charlotte Schreiber and William B.F. Ryan, "Red Sea," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 26 March 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Red-Sea>
- 63 Aljazeera, "Saudi Arabia seeks new political bloc in strategic Red Sea region," 12 December 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/saudi-arabia-seeks-political-bloc-strategic-red-sea-region-181213065422911.html>
- 64 Central Intelligence Agency, "Saudi Arabia: Geography," in *The World Factbook*, 13 May 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html>
- 65 World Atlas, "Persian Gulf," 2019, <http://www.worldatlas.com/aatlas/infopage/persiangulf.htm>
- 66 Soft Schools, "Persian Gulf Facts," 2019, http://www.softschools.com/facts/seas/persian_gulf_facts/3331/
- 67 Encyclopedia.com, "Persian Gulf," n.d., <https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/asia/arabian-peninsula-political-geography/persian-gulf>
- 68 World Atlas, "Fluvial Landforms: What is Wadi?" 25 April 2017, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/fluvial-landforms-what-is-wadi.html>
- 69 Oxford Business Group, "Saudi Arabia Expands its Desalination Capacity," 2015 <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/analysis/world-leader-efforts-under-way-expand-desalination-capacity>
- 70 Albawaba Business, "Saudi Arabia, Largest Producer of Desalinated Water, to Build 9 More Plants," by Syndigate Info, 22 January 2018, <https://www.albawaba.com/business/saudi-arabia-desalination-plants-red-sea-coast-1077706>

Major Cities

As of 2018, approximately 84% of Saudi Arabia's population lives in urban areas. A little less than half of the urban population lives in five major cities spread geographically throughout the country.⁷¹

City	Population ⁷¹
Riyadh	4,725,000
Jeddah	3,234,000
Mecca	1,484,000
Medina	1,104,000
Dhahran-Dammam-al-Khobar	902,000

Riyadh

The name of Saudi Arabia's capital and its largest city, Riyadh, comes from the word *rawdah*, which translates as a place of gardens and trees. The city transformed from a small village of mud bricks into one of the wealthiest and fastest growing cities in the world after the discovery of oil in 1973. The city is located near an oasis in the Nejd region and functions as the political, financial, and administrative center of the country. Besides oil, the plastic and metal industries have a significant presence throughout the city. The government-owned petrol company Aramco and its refineries are the biggest sources of employment.^{72, 73, 74}

The city's population is divided into Saudi and non-Saudi residents. In 2010, the total population was a little over 6.5 million, although current estimates stand at more than 7 million. About 70% of the population is Saudi. The non-Saudi population consists of more than a dozen nationalities including Indians, Pakistanis, Egyptians, Filipinos, Sudanese, and a small number of Westerners.^{75, 76} Most of Riyadh's residents are young; half of its population is under the age of 20 and only about 20% are over the age of 60.⁷⁷

There are 17 universities in Riyadh, including King Saud University, the top university in the country.⁷⁸ Riyadh is also home to the world's largest all-female university. The King Khalid International Airport is located 35 km (20 mi) north of Riyadh. It is the country's second largest airport and is used as a Royal Saudi Air Force base.⁷⁹

The city is extremely hot in the summer, with temperatures climbing into the low 40s°C (over 100s°F). In the winter, temperatures are much cooler, averaging in the below 10°C (high 40s°F).⁸⁰

71 Central Intelligence Agency, "Saudi Arabia: People and Society," in *The World Factbook*, 13 May 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html>

72 Saudi Arabia Market Information Resource and Directory (SAMIRAD), "Riyadh," n.d., <http://www.saudinf.com/main/a81.htm>

73 Tschangho J. Kim, "Riyadh," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 4 January 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Riyadh>

74 Lonely Planet, "Riyadh," n.d., <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/saudi-arabia/riyadh>

75 World Population Review, "Riyadh Population 2019," 2019, <http://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/riyadh-population/>

76 Global Media Insight, "Saudi Arabia's Population Statistics of 2019," 27 March 2019, <https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/saudi-arabia-population-statistics-2018/>

77 Tschangho J. Kim, "Riyadh," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 4 January 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Riyadh>

78 King Saud University, "About KSU," n.d., <https://ksu.edu.sa/en/about-ksu>

79 King Khalid International Airport, "Riyadh Airport (RUH)" n.d., <https://www.riyadh-airport.com/>

80 Time and Date, "Climate & Weather Averages in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia," 30 May 2019, <https://www.timeanddate.com/weather/saudi-arabia/riyadh/climate>

Jeddah

Jeddah is the primary industrial port on the Red Sea and its transportation hubs serve as main points of entry for Muslim pilgrimages. It has become the second-largest city in Saudi Arabia, with a population of more than 4 million. The city covers a huge area in the Hejaz region in western Saudi Arabia. Jeddah's location on an ancient trade route has made it Saudi Arabia's most cosmopolitan city.^{81, 82 83}

In contrast to the more conservative Riyadh, headquarters for the Saudi religious police (formally known as the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice), Jeddah is considered more progressive. Jeddah has become known as a city with relaxed attitudes towards things technically banned in Saudi Arabia, such as alcohol or mixed gender parties. As a result, Jeddah has been the subject of boycotts and condemnation.^{84, 85, 86} It was the kingdom's diplomatic capital until 1982. Some of the people of Jeddah speak the Hejazi dialect of Arabic. There is also a large non-Saudi population in the city.^{87, 88}

Jeddah's economy has diversified from its dependence on pilgrims; new contributing factors to the economy include fishing, steel-rolling mills, oil refineries, cattle raising, and the manufacture of cement, clothing, and pottery. Nevertheless, the city's largest revenue source is from pilgrims travelling to Mecca. King Abdulaziz International Airport, just outside Jeddah, is Saudi Arabia's busiest airport. The Hajj terminal is the fourth largest terminal in the world.^{89, 90, 91}

Temperatures in the summer reach the low 40s°C (over 100°F) and average 18°C (mid-60s°F) in the winter.⁹²

Mecca

Mecca (Makkah) is the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, and serves as the center of the Islamic religion. Nestled in the hills approximately 70 km (42 mi) southeast of Jeddah, Mecca is home to an estimated 1.3 million people.⁹³ At one time, the city was a commercial hub that connected the Mediterranean world of commerce with South Arabia, East Africa, and South Asia. Saudi law denies access to the city and its environs to non-Muslims.^{94, 95}

The city is the most sacred place in the world for Muslims, whose faith requires that wherever Muslims are in the world, they face toward Mecca during their five daily prayers. During the tenth month of the Islamic calendar,

81 Central Intelligence Agency, "Saudi Arabia: People and Society," in *The World Factbook*, 13 May 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html>

82 World Population Review, "Jeddah Population 2019," 2019, <http://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/jeddah-population/>

83 Lonely Planet, "Introducing Jeddah," 2019, <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/saudi-arabia/hejaz/jeddah>

84 InterNations, "Moving to Riyadh," n.d., <https://www.internations.org/riyadh-expats/guide/moving-to-riyadh-15795>

85 Aljazeera, "Saudi Hastag Berating 'Liberal' Jeddah Triggers Backlash," 7 August 2014, <http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201408071909-0024027>

86 The Observers, "Jeddah Party-Goers Arrested by Saudi Police," 29 December 2016, <https://observers.france24.com/en/20161229-alcohol-skimpy-clothes-jeddah-party-goers-arrested-saudi-police>

87 Saudi Arabia Market Information Resource and Directory (SAMIRAD), "Jiddah," n.d., <http://saudinf.com/main/a85.htm>

88 David Levene, "Mosques, Markets and Motoring Women: Jeddah, Saudi Arabia—in Pictures," *Guardian*, 2 August 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2018/aug/07/mosques-markets-and-motoring-women-jeddah-saudi-arabia-in-pictures>

89 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Jiddah," 22 February 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Jiddah-Saudi-Arabia>

90 General Authority of Civil Aviation, "King Abdulaziz International Airport," n.d., <https://gaca.gov.sa/web/en-gb/airport/king-abdulaziz-international-airport>

91 King Abdulaziz International Airport, "Information Site and Guide," n.d., <http://www.jed-airport.com/>

92 Time and Date, "Climate & Weather Averages in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia," 13 December 2018, <https://www.timeanddate.com/weather/saudi-arabia/jeddah/climate>

93 Global Media Insight, "Saudi Arabia's Population Statistics of 2019," 27 March 2019, <https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/saudi-arabia-population-statistics/>

94 John Bagot Glubb and Ass'ad Sulaiman Abdo, "Mecca," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 7 February 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mecca>

95 Nicolai Sinai and William Montgomery Watt, "Muhammad," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 25 January 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Muhammad>

millions of Muslims make the *hajj* to Mecca. Islam's holiest shrine, the Ka'aba, is located inside the Grand Mosque of Mecca. Each pilgrim walks around the Ka'aba seven times and touches the Black Stone which located in the eastern corner of the shrine (although this is not required.)^{96, 97}

In recent decades, Mecca has been the site of dramatic urban transformation and development. At one time, an ancient city surrounded the Ka'aba. It was home to the Prophet Muhammad's wives and associates and those of early caliphs. The old city has been gradually demolished and replaced by luxury high rises and modern infrastructure to accommodate the millions of yearly pilgrims. The transformation is in line with the strict interpretation of Islam practiced in the kingdom, which forbids the veneration of shrines. Nevertheless, critics lament the disappearance of irreplaceable historic and religious heritage while pointing out the enormous profits accruing to the Saudi royal house.^{98, 99, 100}

Temperatures in Mecca soar above 40°C (105°F) from May to October.¹⁰¹ Mecca only receives a small amount of between November and January, but it is still vulnerable to flash floods.¹⁰² The city's livelihood depends primarily on revenues from pilgrims.^{103, 104}

Medina

Medina has a population of 1.2 million people and is the second-holiest location for Muslims, located about 350 km (217 mi) north of Mecca. Arabic speakers also refer to the city as Madinat Rasul Allah, or City of the Messenger of God. Medina was a place of refuge for the Prophet Muhammad after he fled from Mecca. It was there that Muhammad built his initial community of believers, known as the Ummah. Like Mecca, only Muslims can visit Medina, the burial place of the prophet.^{105, 106} Today, the Prophet's Mosque is visited by pilgrims on the way back from Mecca.^{107, 108}

Prince Mohammad Bin Abdulaziz International Airport, also known as Medina Airport, is located in Medina and is among the largest airports in the country. In operation since 1974, the airport handles domestic and international

flights, mainly from the Middle East and other Islamic countries. During the Hajj season, the airport sees a large

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- 96 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Ka'bah," 28 March 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kaaba-shrine-Mecca-Saudi-Arabia>
- 97 Saudi Arabia Market Information Resource and Directory (SAMIRAD), "The Holy City of Mecca," n.d., <http://www.saudinf.com/main/a83.htm>
- 98 *Economist*, "The Destruction of Mecca," 2 March 2017, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2017/03/02/the-destruction-of-mecca>
- 99 Alan Taylor, "Mecca Then and Now, 128 Years of Growth," *Atlantic*, 29 September 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2015/09/mecca-then-and-now-128-years-of-growth/408013/>
- 100 Rafiq A. Tschannen, "The Tragic Transformation of Mecca," *Muslim Times*, 11 June 2013, <https://themuslimtimes.info/2013/06/11/the-tragic-transformation-of-mecca/>
- 101 Weather Atlas, "Monthly weather forecast and Climate Mecca, Saudi Arabia," accessed 16 December 2018, <https://www.weather-atlas.com/en/saudi-arabia/mecca-climate>
- 102 Eric Leister, "Heavy Rain, Deadly Flooding to Continue Across The Middle East into Sunday," *AccuWeather*, 24 November 2018, <https://www.accuweather.com/en/weather-news/heavy-rain-deadly-flooding-to-continue-across-the-middle-east-into-sunday/70006688>
- 103 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Ka'bah," 28 March 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kaaba-shrine-Mecca-Saudi-Arabia>
- 104 World Population Review, "Mecca Population 2019," 2019, <http://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/mecca-population/>
- 105 John Bagot Glubb and Ass'ad Sulaiman Abdo, "Medina," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 27 May 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Medina-Saudi-Arabia>
- 106 Nicolai Sinai and William Montgomery Watt, "Muhammad," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 25 January 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Muhammad>
- 107 John Bagot Glubb and Ass'ad Sulaiman Abdo, "Medina," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 27 May 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Medina-Saudi-Arabia>
- 108 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Prophet Mosque," 27 June 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Prophets-Mosque>

volume of charter traffic.^{109, 110}

Numerous universities are located in Medina, including the Islamic University of Madinah, Taibah University, and King Abdulaziz University, which features a large collection of religious books and rare copies of the Quran.^{111, 112, 113}

Dhahran-Dammam-al-Khobar

Dhahran-Dammam-al-Khobar is a coastal region in Saudi Arabia's oil-producing Eastern Province, forming the Dammam Metropolitan Area alongside the Persian Gulf. The headquarters of Saudi Aramco, the largest oil company in the world, is located in Dhahran.¹¹⁴

The area is served by Dammam's King Fahd International Airport.¹¹⁵ The airport, the University of Petroleum and Minerals, and Aramco employ many residents. Saudi Arabia's largest military air base, used by U.S. air forces during the Persian Gulf War in 1991, is located in Dhahran. The kingdom's largest east coast seaport, Dammam, is located here.^{116, 117}

The largest seaport on the eastern coast of Saudi Arabia is the port of Al-Dammam. Dhahran is home to King Fahd Petroleum and Minerals University. Al-Dammam, which is a petroleum and natural gas center, is home to King Faisal University.^{118, 119}

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- 109 General Authority of Civil Aviation, "Prince Mohammad Bin Abdulaziz International Airport," n.d., <https://gaca.gov.sa/web/en-gb/airport/prince-mohammad-bin-abdulaziz-international-airport>
- 110 Centre for Aviation, "Madinah Mohammad Bin Abdulaziz Airport," n.d., <https://centreforaviation.com/data/profiles/airports/madinah-mohammad-bin-abdulaziz-airport-med>
- 111 EdArabia, "List of 25 Best Universities in Madina (2019 Fees)," 2019, <https://www.edarabia.com/universities/madina/>
- 112 World Population Review, "Population of Cities in Saudi Arabia (2019)," 2019, <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/saudi-arabia-population/cities/>
- 113 King Abdulaziz University, "Special Collections," n.d., <https://library.kau.edu.sa/Content-212-EN-258492>
- 114 *Economist*, "Saudi Arabia's stalled IPO will dent investor confidence," 23 August 2018, <https://www.economist.com/business/2018/08/23/saudi-aramcos-stalled-ipo-will-dent-investor-confidence>
- 115 Airport Technology, "King Fahd International Airport," 2019, <https://www.airport-technology.com/projects/king-fahd/>
- 116 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Dhahran," 17 September 2013, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Dhahran>
- 117 World Energy Cities Partnership, "Dammam," n.d., <https://energycities.org/member-cities/dammam-saudi-arabia>
- 118 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Dhahran," 7 September 2013, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Dhahran>
- 119 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Al-Dammām," 23 June 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Al-Dammam>

Environmental Concerns

Pollution of all kinds is a serious problem in Saudi Arabia. According to the World Health Organization, the country is experiencing a significant pollution crisis, with Riyadh in particular recently ranked among the 20 most polluted cities in the world. Poor air quality is mainly caused by the oil refineries operating near urban areas. Saudi Arabia's recently launched 2030 Development Plan initiative intends to address concerns about overall pollution and sustainability, seeking to improve practices in the petroleum industry and invest in renewable sources of energy.^{120, 121}

The desert regions of Saudi Arabia suffer from overgrazing, which has caused significant loss of vegetation.¹²² An estimated 70–90% of the Arabian Peninsula overall faces the threat of desertification from overgrazing and other manmade factors. Historically, the nomadic Bedouin people regulated access to these pastures through the indigenous *hema*, or rationed grazing, system for natural resources. The government abolished this system in 1953 to allow for open grazing, although there are efforts underway to revive it in light of the overgrazing crisis.¹²³ With overgrazing and dwindling water resources, up to 143 million people could be forced to relocate by 2050 if the danger cannot be resolved.^{124, 125}

Urban water and wastewater management are also problematic as the population continues to expand.¹²⁶ In Jeddah, for example, sewage treatment in particular has been historically a major problem for the population, which in 2009 saw two-thirds of residents without access to central sewage. In 2009 during the Hajj, sewage spills fueled by uncontrolled flooding near Jeddah killed more than 120 people.¹²⁷ In order to alleviate and address this hazard, the government plans to erect two sewage treatment plants in the city.^{128, 129}

In 1991, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region suffered serious environmental damage during the Persian Gulf War as the Kuwaiti pipelines ruptured and polluted the Gulf waters with crude oil. Saudi Arabia's eastern shoreline experienced what was considered the world's largest oil spill at the time, estimated to be as much as eight million barrels. Scientists found coastal sediments to contain 7% oil resulting from the disaster.¹³⁰

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- 120 Farid B. Chaaban, "Chapter 7: Air Quality," *Green Growth Knowledge Platform*, ed. Najib Saan, October 2017, <http://www.greengrowthknowledge.org/resource/2017-report-arab-forum-environment-and-development-arab-environment-10-years>
- 121 World Health Organization, "Saudi Arabia Statistics Summary (2002–Present)," 25 April 2019, <http://apps.who.int/gho/data/node.country.country-SAU?lang=en>
- 122 Arab News, "Urban growth, increase in livestock encroach on desert vegetation in Kingdom," 9 April 2017, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1081501/saudi-arabia>
- 123 Raymond De Young and Stephen Kaplan, "Adaptive Muddling," in *The Localization Reader: Adapting to the Coming Downshift*, eds. Raymond De Young and Thomas Princen (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012), <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~rdeyoung/tragedy.html>
- 124 Arab News, "Urban growth, increase in livestock encroach on desert vegetation in Kingdom," 9 April 2017, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1081501/saudi-arabia>
- 125 Caline Malek, "Desertification an imminent threat, creating unstable grounds for development," *Arab News*, 17 October 2018, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1389081/middle-east>
- 126 Numbeo, "Pollution in Jeddah (Jiddah), Saudi Arabia," May 2019, <https://www.numbeo.com/pollution/in/Jeddah-Jiddah>
- 127 Maurice Picow, "Death by Sewage: Saudi Arabia's Desire to 'Go Green' Spoiled by Sewage Scandal," *Green Prophet*, 6 January 2010, <http://www.greenprophet.com/2010/01/saudi-arabia-sewage/>
- 128 Saudi Gazette, "Jeddah to get new sewage treatment plant," 25 February 2019, <http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/559958/SAUDI-ARABIA/Jeddah-to-get-new-sewage-treatment-plant>
- 129 Saleh Faraj Magram, "A Review on the Environmental Issues in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia with Special Focus on Water Pollution," 2009, <https://scialert.net/fulltextmobile/?doi=jest.2009.120.132>
- 130 Eleanor Abdella Doumato, "Chapter 2: The Society and Its Environment," in *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, ed. Helen Chapin Metz (Washington, DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1993), https://cdn.loc.gov/master/frd/frdcstdy/sa/saudiarabiaccount00metz_0/saudiarabiaccount00metz_0_djvu.txt

Natural Hazards

Flooding is the most common natural hazard in Saudi Arabia. Cities located at the foot of the nation's mountains, such as Jeddah and Mecca, are particularly vulnerable to heavy rains that can lead to flash flooding. Flash flooding occurs most often between November and February.¹³¹ Other natural hazards that plague the country include earthquakes, water shortages, and volcanic activity.^{132, 133} The northward movement of the Arabian plate occasionally triggers earthquakes in the western regions.¹³⁴ Saudi Arabia also experiences frequent sand or dust storms, which can occur around major cities as well as in rural or desert regions.¹³⁵ Shifting sands can close roads and negatively impact pipelines and factories.¹³⁶ Problems resulting from the shifting of sand dunes have potentially serious consequences, especially as urban growth expands. Severe sandstorms have the potential to disrupt oil exports.¹³⁷

131 Gov.uk, "Foreign Travel Advice: Saudi Arabia—Natural Disasters—Flooding," 21 May 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/saudi-arabia/natural-disasters>

132 GFDRR, Saudi Arabia," 2019, <https://www.gfdr.org/en/saudi-arabia>

133 *United Press International*, "Saudi Arabia Hit by Sandstorm," 26 February 2012, http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2012/02/26/Saudi-Arabia-hit-by-sandstorm/UPI-56881330297461/

134 Saudi Geological Survey, "Earthquake Seismology," n.d., <http://www.sgs.org.sa/English/NaturalHazards/Pages/Earthquakes.aspx>

135 Habib Toumi, "Heavy Sandstorm Hits Parts of Saudi Arabia," *Gulf News*, 22 February 2012, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/saudi-arabia/heavy-sandstorm-hits-parts-of-saudi-arabia-1.986395>

136 Saudi Geological Survey, "Geohazard," n.d., <http://www.sgs.org.sa/English/NaturalHazards/Pages/Geohazard.aspx>

137 *Telegraph*, "Blinding Sandstorm Hits Kuwait and Saudi Arabia Halting Oil Exports," 10 March 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/picturegalleries/worldnews/4967897/Blinding-sandstorm-hits-Kuwait-and-Saudi-Arabia-halting-oil-exports.html>

Saudi Arabia in Perspective

Chapter 1 | Geography, Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

1. Rub al-Khali is the largest sand desert in the world. True False
2. Flooding is a serious natural hazard in Saudi Arabia. True False
3. Saudi Arabia is the world's largest crude oil producer. True False
4. Saudi Arabia has no natural rivers or lakes. True False
5. Riyadh is one of the most polluted cities in the world. True False

Saudi Arabia in Perspective

Chapter 1 | Geography, Assessment Answers

1. True:
Literally meaning “Empty Quarter,” the massive Rub al-Khali desert sits along Saudi Arabia’s southeastern region and occupies nearly 25% of the country.
2. True:
Flooding is the most common natural hazard in Saudi Arabia, typically brought on by heavy rains between November and February.
3. False:
The United States is the world’s largest producer of crude oil, with Saudi Arabia coming in second. Saudi Arabia has approximately 22% of the world’s oil reserves.
4. True:
With no permanent natural rivers or lakes in the country, Saudi Arabia relies heavily upon desalinated water to meet its demands.
5. True:
Riyadh is among the 20 most polluted cities in the world. Its poor air quality is mainly caused by nearby oil refineries.

Chapter 2 | History



Ruins at Madain Saleh, once part of the ancient Nabatean Empire
Flickr / Sammy Six

Introduction

The Arabian Peninsula has been home to many tribes and rulers in its long history, but none as dominant as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Modern Saudi Arabia traces its roots back to the rise of the Saud clan, which came to prominence in the 16th century; by the early 19th century, it was ruling much of the Arabian Peninsula. Rivalries forced the Sauds out of power in the late 19th century, exiling them to the harsh desert lands of the southern region. In 1901, Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman al-Saud (Bin Saud) returned from exile, and a year later captured Riyadh.¹ From there, the Saud clan united most of the peninsula into a single country, and on 23 September 1932 declared his tribal confederation the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.^{2,3}

While the current state of the country took shape relatively recently, the region has an extensive history, tracing back as much as 20,000 years into the late Ice Age. The desert terrain of today was once a vast, lush climate featuring grasslands, rivers, and a variety of animals. As the climate changed drastically, it transformed into the intense deserts of today. As civilization evolved, the peninsula became an important travel and trade route.⁴

- 1 United Nations Development Programme, "Saudi Arabia: History," 2012, http://www.sa.undp.org/content/saudi_arabia/en/home/countryinfo.html
- 2 Harry St. John Bridger Philby et al., "Saudi Arabia: History," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 8 December 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia>
- 3 Riyadh Vision, "King Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud (Ibn Saud)," n.d., <http://www.riyadhvision.com.sa/biographies/king-abdul-aziz-bin-abdul-rahman-al-saud-ibn-saud/>
- 4 The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, "About Saudi Arabia: History," n.d., <https://www.saudiembassy.net/history>

The Prophet Muhammad and the birth of Islam changed the course of history for the region forever. In the centuries before the official formation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Arabian Peninsula unified under Islam, which also saw Arabic become the most common language system.⁵ Saudi Arabia is home to Islam's two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina. Wahhabism, a form of Islam that relies on the literal interpretation of the Quran and the Hadith, rose to become the country's dominant faith.⁶

Today, Saudi Arabia is a powerful force in the region. Under the leadership of Salman bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud since 2015, the country has moved towards social and economic modernization, but not without some controversy.⁷

Early History

Pre-Islam

The Arabian Peninsula has thrived with life for millions of years. As far back as the late Cretaceous period, the future location of Saudi Arabia was a land of savannahs, consistent rainfall, permanent bodies of water, and a wide variety of life. Some evidence suggests that this lush landscape was one of the destinations for humankind as it expanded out of Africa.^{8, 9, 10} This early period is a stark contrast to the harsh desert terrain of today, with no permanent bodies of water and sparse rainfall.¹¹ As early as 6000 BCE, trade routes began to form in the region, leading to the formation of the first significant civilization, Dilmun, near modern day Dammam. As settlements and tribes flourished, so did conflicts between them. These small city-states or kingdoms often warred against each other. Political and social fragmentation persisted through the mid-6th century CE, when the unification of the peninsula began.^{12, 13, 14}

Birth and Spread of Islam

The history of the region and the world changed after 570, when Muhammad was born in Mecca. Muslims believe that around 610, Muhammad began receiving prophetic revelations from God. By 618, Muhammad had cultivated a significant number of followers to his new religion of Islam. Regional authorities became concerned and forced Muhammad and his followers out of Mecca. The group migrated to nearby Medina and continued to grow. By Muhammad's death in 632, he had regained control of Mecca and most of the region was loyal to the Muslim community he had established and led. His successors, known as caliphs, established a vast empire and

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- 5 The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, "About Saudi Arabia: History," n.d., <https://www.saudiembassy.net/history>
- 6 Nabil Mouline, "Can the Saudis Break Up with Wahhabism?" *New York Times*, 3 July 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/03/opinion/saudi-arabia-monarchy-wahhabism.html>
- 7 BBC News, "Saudi Arabia Profile—Timeline," 23 November 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703523>
- 8 Lonely Planet, "Arabian Peninsula in Detail: Timeline," n.d., <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/arabian-peninsula/background/history/timeline/a/nar/a6fb5564-a999-4ee2-817b-0e20ee63be8e/1333684>
- 9 LiveScience, "Chart of Geological Time (Infographic)," LiveScience, 22 April 2016, <https://www.livescience.com/54516-chart-of-geological-time-infographic.html>
- 10 Michael Marshall, "Arabia Was Once a Lush Paradise of Grass and Woodlands," *BBC Earth*, 23 February 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20150223-arabia-was-once-a-lush-paradise>
- 11 World Weather and Climate Information, "Climate and Average Weather in Saudi Arabia," n.d., <https://weather-and-climate.com/average-monthly-Rainfall-Temperature-Sunshine-in-Saudi-Arabia>
- 12 William Smyth, "History: Pre-Islamic Period," *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, ed. Helen Chapin Metz (Washington DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1993), <http://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/4.htm>
- 13 Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission, "History," n.d., <https://sacm.org.au/history/>
- 14 Lonely Planet, "Arabian Peninsula in Detail: Timeline," n.d., <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/arabian-peninsula/background/history/timeline/a/nar/a6fb5564-a999-4ee2-817b-0e20ee63be8e/1333684>

united Arabs against rival powers like Constantinople and Persia. Arabs subsequently took control of an area that extended from Spain to Pakistan.^{15, 16, 17}

Caliphates

The period after Muhammad's death saw significant change for the region. The rule of the four succeeding caliphs, known as the Rashidun, saw significant turmoil over three decades. By 661, there were numerous tribal uprisings that built toward the first Muslim Civil War.¹⁸ Once the Rashidun Caliphate era ended, the Umayyad dynasty was established by the Quraysh tribe of Mecca. The Umayyad hereditary line of caliphs ruled until 750, when they were overthrown by the Abbasids, who ruled from Baghdad. The Abbasid Empire controlled the peninsula and expanded to the east and west, significantly improving trade and establishing trade posts as far away as the Philippines.¹⁹ The power of the Abbasids gradually declined until in 1528 they were overthrown by the Mongols and all heirs were murdered.^{20, 21}

The Rule of the Saud Family

Origins (1450–1744)

The Saud family first rose to prominence when they settled in Ad Diriyah of central Najd, near Riyadh. In the 16th century, the family acquired date groves, a successful crop for the arid region. In time, the Sauds became leaders of a thriving village that developed around them.²²

The rise of Wahhabism and the First Saudi State (1744–1823)

The first Saudi state and House of Saud lineage was born out of an alliance between two men: Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad bin Saud. During the mid-18th century, Wahhab traveled to Ad Diriyah and met with emir Saud, seeking support for his controversial form of Islam.²³ Saud granted his protection in return for loyalty, legitimacy, and tithes. With the alliance established, Saud began attacking regional villages and towns, seizing popular Shi'a Muslim strongholds that opposed Wahhabism. As this new state grew in size and stature, it took control of a massive territory that eventually encompassed modern day Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and slivers of land in modern Yemen, Kuwait, and Oman. Wahhabism promoted the concept of *jihad* (or struggle) against non-believers and any Muslims who disputed its teachings. The doctrine also allowed for

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- 15 Nicolai Sinai and William Montgomery Watt, "Muhammad," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 4 June 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Muhammad>
- 16 Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/15.htm>
- 17 Lonely Planet, "Arabian Peninsula in Detail: Timeline," n.d., <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/arabian-peninsula/background/history/timeline/a/nar/a6fb5564-a999-4ee2-817b-0e20ee63be8e/1333684>
- 18 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Rashidun," 1 June 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Rashidun>
- 19 Islamic History, "The Abbasid Caliphate," n.d., <https://islamichistory.org/the-abbasid-caliphate/>
- 20 Asma Afsaruddin, "Umayyad Dynasty," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 29 March 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Umayyad-dynasty-Islamic-history>
- 21 Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/15.htm>
- 22 Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/7.htm>
- 23 William Smyth, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting," in *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, ed. Helen Chapin Metz (Washington DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1993), <https://www.loc.gov/item/93028506/>

the Saud dynasty to assert and maintain authority over the nomad tribes.²⁴ Neighboring empires such as the Ottomans began to take notice of their expansion and prominence.^{25, 26}

By the time of Muhammad bin Saud's death in 1765, the Saud family controlled most of the Najd. Saud's son Abdul Aziz bin Muhammad bin Saud assumed command of the state and carried on the union with Wahhab. Expansion of their burgeoning empire was on the forefront of Abdul Aziz's mind, while Wahhab established policies and dealt with civil matters until his death in 1792. The Saudi expansion continued uninterrupted until the inevitable conflict with the Ottoman Empire was sparked in earnest in 1804, after occasional skirmishes and intrusions in prior years.^{27, 28, 29}

In 1814, Abdullah bin Saud assumed control upon Abdul Aziz's death. His expansion tactics provoked the Ottomans. The state's rapid growth also brought it into direct conflict with the rest of the Muslim world, challenging both Shi'ite and mainstream Sunni Islam mainstays. As the Saud-Wahhabi forces destroyed many of the shrines and monuments of Muslim saints, opposition to their rule mounted. In 1818, the Wahhabis were soundly defeated.³⁰ Under instructions from the Ottomans, Egyptian viceroy Muhammad Ali captured and razed the Saud hometown Ad Diriyah and later captured Riyadh, effectively dismantling the emerging state. Abdullah was subsequently sent to Istanbul and beheaded in 1818. For the next five years, the Ottomans dominated the region, stripping the Saud family of power.³¹

The Second Saudi State (1824–1891)

Between 1824 and 1834, Turki bin Abdullah bin Saud, a cousin of Abdul Aziz, reclaimed Ad Diriyah and made Riyadh the new operational base for the House of Saud, kickstarting the second Saudi state. During his decade-long rule, Turki succeeded in recapturing most of the lands that had been lost to the Ottomans.³²

Turki's successful rule ended suddenly in 1834 when he was assassinated by a cousin. The cousin was promptly executed and Turki's eldest son, Faisal, assumed leadership of the state. Faisal's rule was fraught with complications almost immediately; tensions with Egypt over payment of a tribute led to Faisal's capture and subsequent incarceration by Egyptian forces. With Faisal gone, Khalid bin Saud, a rival claimant to power, was installed as leader. Khalid ruled for approximately five years before a revolution ultimately resulted in Faisal returning to leadership.^{33, 34, 35}

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- 24 Talip Kūcūkan, "Some Reflections of the Wahhabiyyah Movement," *Hamdard Islamicus* XVIII, no. 2 (1995), <http://www.sunnah.org/audio/onwahhabis.htm>
- 25 Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/15.htm>
- 26 House of Saud, "Saudi Royal Family History," n.d., <https://houseofsaud.com/saudi-royal-family-history/>
- 27 Christopher M. Blanchard, "The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafiyya" (report, Congressional Research Service, Washington, DC, 24 January 2008), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RS21695.pdf>
- 28 William Smyth, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting," in *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, ed. Helen Chapin Metz (Washington DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1993), <https://www.loc.gov/item/93028506/>
- 29 Joshua Teitelbaum, William L. Ochsenwald, and Harry St. John Bridger Philby, "Saudi Arabia: History: The Wahhabi Movement," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 8 June 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia/The-Wahhabi-movement#ref45225>
- 30 William Smyth, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting," in *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, ed. Helen Chapin Metz (Washington DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1993), <https://www.loc.gov/item/93028506/>
- 31 Saudi Arabia Market Information Resource and Directory (SAMIRAD), "History," n.d., <http://www.saudinf.com/main/b25.htm>
- 32 House of Saud, "Saudi Royal Family History," n.d., <https://houseofsaud.com/saudi-royal-family-history/>
- 33 Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/15.htm>
- 34 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Saudi Arabia: History: The Second Saudi State," n.d., <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia/The-Wahhabi-movement#ref45226>
- 35 Harry St. John Bridger Philby, William L. Ochsenwald, and Joshua Teitelbaum, "Saudi Arabia: Second Sa'ūdī State," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 25 May 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia/The-Wahhabi-movement#ref45226>

Faisal's death in 1865 led to a renewed push by the Ottoman Empire to challenge the Saudi state and extend deeper into the Arabian Peninsula. Factional infighting in the Saud family hindered its ability to respond to this significant threat.³⁶ In 1889, after several years of drought and civil war, Faisal's youngest son Abdul Rahman bin Faisal al-Saud seized power fragmenting the House of Saud.³⁷ Confronted with the combined might of the Ottoman Empire and the Rashid clan from nearby Hail, Abdul Rahman conceded defeat in 1891, ending the second Saudi state. He sought refuge with the Bedouin tribes in the Rub al-Khali desert. Abdul Rahman and his family, including son Abdul Aziz, eventually relocated to Kuwait.³⁸

While Abdul Rahman's reign ended abruptly, his son's journey to power was only beginning. Abdul Aziz remained in Kuwait for a number of years, where he studied international affairs. In 1902, he led a group of 40 men in a successful attack on Riyadh. Emboldened by this success, Abdul Aziz then drove out the Ottoman leaders in 1906, culminating in him becoming the undisputed ruler of central Arabia.^{39, 40, 41}

The Third Saudi State (1906–1932)

Following Abdul Aziz's recapture of Riyadh and assumption of power, he unified warring tribes across the Arabian Peninsula and promptly started the third Saudi state. These efforts laid the foundations for modern Saudi Arabia; also key to this development was the signing of the Anglo-Saudi Friendship Treaty in 1915, through which the British officially recognized Saudi control of Najd, Hasa, Qatif, and Jubail and legitimized the newly-reformed state. The terms of the treaty established that the territories controlled by the House of Saud would become a British protectorate; the treaty also established territorial boundaries, a tactic by the British to ensure that Kuwait, Qatar, and the Trucial States (modern day United Arab Emirates) would retain their sovereignty.⁴²

In choosing to form an alliance with the British, Abdul Aziz placed himself in a difficult position with religious groups such as the Ikhwan, who were opposed on religious grounds to British involvement on the peninsula. The Treaty of Jeddah in 1927 only deepened this divide, culminating in an armed revolution against the Saudi ruler in 1929. Support from the scholarly religious authorities, known as the *ulama*, as well as the general population eventually allowed the House of Saud to defeat the rebels by 1930. In 1932, Abdul Aziz formally established of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.⁴³

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- 36 John Pike, "Abdul Rahman bin Faisal Al-Saud [1889-1891]," Global Security, 9 July 2011, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/gulf/abdul-rahman-bin-faisal.htm>
- 37 Saudi Arabia Market Information Resource and Directory (SAMIRAD), "History," n.d., <http://www.saudinf.com/main/b28.htm>
- 38 Harry St. John Bridger Philby et al., "Saudi Arabia: History," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 8 December 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia/The-Wahhabi-movement#ref45226>
- 39 Gerd Nonneman, "Saudi-European Relations 1902-2001: A Pragmatic Quest for Relative Autonomy," *International Affairs* 77, no. 3 (2001): 639-640, https://www.academia.edu/3520214/Saudi-European_relations_1902-2001_a_pragmatic_quest_for_relative_autonomy
- 40 William Smyth, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting," in *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, ed. Helen Chapin Metz (Washington DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1993), <https://www.loc.gov/item/93028506/>
- 41 Harry St. John Bridger Philby, William L. Ochsenwald, and Joshua Teitelbaum, "Saudi Arabia: Ibn Sa'ūd and the Third Sa'ūdī State," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 25 May 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia/Death-of-Faysal#ref45229>
- 42 Tarig Anter, "Treaty of Darin (1915): New Saudi Land Came into Existence," Modern Ghana, 14 January 2014, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/515742/1/treaty-of-darin-1915-new-saudi-land-came-in-to-exi.html>
- 43 Harry St. John Bridger Philby et al., "Saudi Arabia: History: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 8 June 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia/The-Kingdom-of-Saudi-Arabia>

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (1932–Present)

King Abdul Aziz (1931–1953)

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a Sunni-majority country, was established on 23 September 1932 by a royal decree that unified the kingdoms of the Hejaz and Najd. Abdul Aziz (also known as Ibn Saud) formally assumed the title of king and named his son as heir apparent, setting the tone for leadership going forward. Given that the monarchy's success depended on establishing a lineage, the king arranged for strategic marriages to women from all the major Saudi tribes. By the time of his death, it is estimated that Abdul Aziz had as many as 100 wives, who produced approximately 160 offspring, including 34 sons who survived him.^{44, 45, 46}

The discovery of oil at Dammam in 1938 by American geologists ultimately transitioned the kingdom's economy from tourism (pilgrimage) to hydrocarbons production and export. Exploitation of oil began in earnest in 1941; by 1944, foreign oil workers had set up operations in droves, culminating in the creation of Aramco, the national oil company. The country's new wealth also brought about inflation, deficits, and foreign borrowing in the early days of oil exploitation.⁴⁷

Kings Saud, Faisal (1953–1975)

Upon the death of Abdul Aziz, his eldest son Saud bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud was crowned king in 1953; Faisal bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud, Saud's half-brother, was declared heir apparent and took a prominent role in the government. Saud's rule started with the expansion of government entities, such as the creation of the council of ministers and the ministries of health, education, and commerce. Establishing formal education was a focus for Saud, and he arranged for the country's first university, King Saud University, to open in 1957.⁴⁸

With oil production in full swing, the country's population grew rapidly, especially in cities like Riyadh and Jeddah. Modernization was in full swing; mud-brick houses and unpaved or undeveloped spaces were soon replaced by modern features such as hospitals, roads, schools, apartments, and airports. While the country prospered, its leadership was fraught with discontent. Saud and Faisal were often at loggerheads, which played out in the royal court; governmental power and authority switched between the two in rapid succession during the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁴⁹ Senior members of the royal family urged Saud to formally relinquish power to Faisal, who continued to build popularity by introducing a series of extreme economic measures that balanced the budget and stabilized the currency.⁵⁰

Saudi relations with the United States were tense during the early days of Saud's rule, but as they became more cordial—culminating in his visit to the United States, a first for Saudi monarchs—relations with Arab states worsened. Senior members of the royal family became increasingly frustrated with Saud, who they feared was

44 Harry St. John Bridger Philby et al., "Saudi Arabia: History: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 8 June 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia/The-Kingdom-of-Saudi-Arabia>

45 Simon Henderson, "New Saudi Rules on Succession: Will They Fix the Problem?" Washington Institute, 25 October 2006, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/new-saudi-rules-on-succession-will-they-fix-the-problem>

46 House of Saud, "Saudi Royal Family History," n.d., <https://houseofsaud.com/saudi-royal-family-history/>

47 Harry St. John Bridger Philby et al., "Saudi Arabia: History: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 8 June 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia/The-Kingdom-of-Saudi-Arabia>

48 Harry St. John Bridger Philby et al., "Saudi Arabia: History: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 8 June 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia/The-Kingdom-of-Saudi-Arabia>

49 Harry St. John Bridger Philby et al., "Saudi Arabia: History: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 8 June 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia/The-Kingdom-of-Saudi-Arabia>

50 Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/15.htm>

trying to alter the rules of succession. This, combined with his sustained reckless spending, prompted the royal family to urge Saud to relinquish power, but not title, to Faisal.⁵¹

Finally, in 1964, the *ulama* issued a decree deposing Saud and formally making his brother Faisal king.⁵² Faisal promptly created a ministry of justice and persuaded his brothers to observe the principle of birth order, in order to regulate and settle the matter of royal succession. Faisal also issued a decree making the king head of state and head of government/prime minister. Faisal remained in power until a disgruntled nephew assassinated him in 1975. The king's half-brother, Khalid bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud, then assumed the throne.^{53, 54}

King Khalid (1975–1982)

Khalid was more liberal than his predecessors and made a point to strengthen ties with Arab neighbors. During his reign, the country continued to see rapid growth and prosperity. Khalid would prove instrumental in bringing together neighboring countries Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates to promote economic and security initiatives.⁵⁵

Internal dissent erupted in November 1979 when 500 Sunni Muslims seized control of the Grand Mosque in Mecca on the grounds that they felt the monarchy was corrupt and had too strong of an alliance with Western nations. The Saudi military, with the help of French counterterrorism forces, eventually defeated the militants. Sixty dissidents were publicly beheaded.^{56, 57, 58} Two weeks after the mosque incident, Khalid deployed 20,000 government troops to the Eastern Province to suppress a Shi'ite rebellion inspired by Ayatollah Khomeini's ascendance in Iran. About two dozen protestors were killed and hundreds arrested. After restoring order, the government rolled out an economic development program aimed at improving the standard of living in predominately Shi'ite areas.^{59, 60, 61}

In 1981, the Saudis hosted meetings for the Organization of the Islamic Conference and formed the Gulf Cooperation Council that same year. The next year, Khalid fell ill and died; Crown Prince Fahd bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud, Khalid's half-brother, became king.^{62, 63}

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- 51 William Smyth, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting," in *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, ed. Helen Chapin Metz (Washington DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1993), <https://www.loc.gov/item/93028506/>
- 52 William Smyth, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting," in *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, ed. Helen Chapin Metz (Washington DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1993), <https://www.loc.gov/item/93028506/>
- 53 BBC News, "1975: Saudi's King Faisal Assassinated," n.d., http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/march/25/newsid_4233000/4233595.stm
- 54 Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/15.htm>
- 55 House of Saud, "Saudi Royal Family History," n.d., <https://houseofsaud.com/saudi-royal-family-history/>
- 56 William Smyth, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting," in *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, ed. Helen Chapin Metz (Washington DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1993), <https://www.loc.gov/item/93028506/>
- 57 John Pike, "Mecca," *Global Security*, 7 September 2011, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/gulf/mecca.htm>
- 58 Stephen Rakowski, "How the 1979 Siege of Mecca Haunts the House of Saud," *Stratfor*, 2 July 2017, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/how-1979-siege-mecca-haunts-house-saud>
- 59 Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/15.htm>
- 60 "Saudi Arabia," *PBS Frontline*, 2005, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saudi/etc/cron.html>
- 61 Frederic Wehrey, "The Forgotten Uprising in Eastern Saudi Arabia," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 14 June 2013, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2013/06/14/forgotten-uprising-in-eastern-saudi-arabia-pub-52093>
- 62 William Smyth, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting," in *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, ed. Helen Chapin Metz (Washington DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1993), <https://www.loc.gov/item/93028506/>
- 63 Harry St. John Bridger Philby et al., "Saudi Arabia: History: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 8 June 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia/The-Kingdom-of-Saudi-Arabia>

King Fahd (1982–2005)

Khalid's half-brother Fahd became king in 1982, also assuming the title of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques.⁶⁴ Facing 20% fewer oil revenues, the government quickly reduced the number of foreign workers in a bid to "Saudiize" the labor force.⁶⁵ Growing class divisions helped fuel anti-Western sentiments and discontent with corruption. The pressure increased when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. Fahd requested aid from the United States to help defend his borders against the threat posed by the invasion of Kuwait. During the conflict, U.S. forces were authorized to stay on Saudi territory, a move that prompted serious criticism from religious hardliners.^{66, 67, 68}

Many members of the royal family fled the country as concerns over national insecurity grew. Besieged by the moderates and the conservatives, Fahd announced three major reforms in 1992, including an emphasis on the Islamic monarchy and changes to the rules of succession. Following a stroke in 1995, Fahd relinquished government operations to his half-brother Abdullah, who continued in this role until Fahd's death in 2005 at the age of 84.^{69, 70}

King Abdullah (2005–2015)

Upon Fahd's death in 2005, Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud became the sixth king of Saudi Arabia at the age of 81. Abdullah, a son of Abdul Aziz, spent many years with Bedouin tribes in the desert, gaining a profound respect for religion, heritage, and history. He also traveled as a diplomat, visiting the United States on many occasions starting in the 1970s.⁷¹

Abdullah focused on defense of the Arab world and brokering peace throughout the region; stability and security were of utmost importance to him.⁷² Saudi Arabia's intense reliance upon oil troubled Abdullah, leading to initiatives to limit deregulation, bolster foreign investment, and increase privatization. In 2009, he introduced several reforms that affected the judiciary, armed forces, and various ministries. In 2011, he announced that starting in 2015 women could vote in municipal elections, be appointed to the Majlis al-Shura, and run for office. He died in 2015 at the age of 90.^{73, 74, 75}

64 House of Saud, "Saudi Royal Family History," n.d., <https://houseofsaud.com/saudi-royal-family-history/>

65 William Smyth, "Chapter 1: Historical Setting," in *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, ed. Helen Chapin Metz (Washington DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1993), <https://www.loc.gov/item/93028506/>

66 Harry St. John Bridger Philby et al., "Saudi Arabia: History: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 8 June 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia/The-Kingdom-of-Saudi-Arabia>

67 Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/15.htm>

68 David Hirst, "King Fahd of Saudi Arabia," 1 August 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2005/aug/02/guardianobituaries.saudi-arabia>

69 Douglas Martin, "King Fahd, 82, Dies; Guided the Saudis Between Tradition and Modernization," *New York Times*, 2 August 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/02/world/middleeast/king-fahd-82-dies-guided-the-saudis-between-tradition-and.html>

70 Anthony Shadid, "Abdullah Becomes Saudi King on Death of Half Brother Fahd," *Washington Post*, 2 August 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/08/01/AR2005080100138.html>

71 House of Saud, "Saudi Royal Family History," n.d., <https://houseofsaud.com/saudi-royal-family-history/>

72 House of Saud, "Saudi Royal Family History," n.d., <https://houseofsaud.com/saudi-royal-family-history/>

73 Harry St. John Bridger Philby et al., "Saudi Arabia: History," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 8 June 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia/The-Persian-Gulf-War-and-its-aftermath#ref337744>

74 Douglas Martin and Ben Hubbard, "King Abdullah, a Shrewd Force Who Reshaped Saudi Arabia, Dies at 90," *New York Times*, 22 March 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/23/world/middleeast/king-abdullah-who-nudged-saudi-arabia-forward-dies-at-90.html>

75 CNN, "King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al Saud Fast Facts," 30 April 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2012/12/28/world/meast/king-abdullah-bin-abdulaziz-al-saud---fast-facts/index.html>

King Salman (2015–Present)

In January 2015, Crown Prince Salman bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud became the new king at the age of 79. Salman is one of the “Sudairi Seven,” considered the most influential subgroup of the House of Saud. The Sudairi Seven are full-blooded brothers and sons of Abdul Aziz. In the years prior, Salman served in governmental roles in a number of capacities, such as deputy governor, governor of Riyadh, and defense minister.^{76, 77}

In 2017, Salman appointed his son, Mohammed bin Salman, as crown prince, after removing previous crown prince Muhammad bin Nayif from the role.⁷⁸ In November of that same year, the crown prince ordered a high-profile purge of officials on the basis of corruption allegations. More than a dozen princes and hundreds of top officials were arrested and detained at the Ritz Carlton in Riyadh for more than two months.⁷⁹

Recent Developments

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) wields significant power in Saudi Arabia; he maintains authority over all major parts of government, including defense and matters involving the economy. MBS presents himself as a reformer, pushing initiatives considered liberal by Saudi Arabia standards, but is also a contentious figure for authorizing a high-profile purge of the government and for supposed human rights violations.⁸⁰

Saudi Arabian foreign policy has been characterized as aggressive and is often complicated by the long-simmering Sunni–Shi’a conflicts of the region. In 2016, Saudi Arabia executed Shi’a cleric Nimr al-Nimr, igniting protests and leading to the severance of ties with Iran.⁸¹ In 2017, Saudi Arabia led other Arab countries in imposing an ongoing sea, land, and air blockade on Qatar for its ties to Iran.^{82, 83} Since 2015, Saudi Arabia has led a controversial and destructive military intervention against Houthi rebels in Yemen.^{84, 85}

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) formed in 2009 when offshoots of al-Qaeda from Yemen and Saudi Arabia united. AQAP’s goal is to establish a caliphate across the Arabian Peninsula; the group is a serious threat to westerners in the region and the entire peninsula. Despite a sustained drone campaign by the United States and suppression by the Saudi government, AQAP has continued to coordinate attacks on its enemies, citing MBS’s relatively liberal attitude toward the arts as one motivating factor.^{86, 87, 88}

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- 76 Global Security, “al Sudairi Clan,” n.d., <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/gulf/sudairi.htm>
- 77 House of Saud, “Saudi Royal Family History,” n.d., <https://houseofsaud.com/saudi-royal-family-history/>
- 78 Harry St. John Bridger Philby, William L. Ochsenwald, and Joshua Teitelbaum, “Saudi Arabia: Second Sa’ūdī State,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 25 May 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia/The-Wahhabi-movement#ref45226>
- 79 CNN, “King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud Fast Facts,” 7 December 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/02/27/middleeast/king-salman-bin-abdulaziz-al-saud-fast-facts/index.html>
- 80 BBC News, “Saudi Arabia Country Profile,” 23 November 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14702705>
- 81 BBC News, “Saudi Arabia Profile—Timeline,” 23 November 2018, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14703523>
- 82 Christopher M. Blanchard, “Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations,” Congressional Research Service, 21 September 2018, <https://fas.org/sqp/crs/mideast/RL33533.pdf>
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- 84 BBC News, “Saudi Arabia Country Profile,” 23 November 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14702705>
- 85 Kathleen Schuster, “Yemen’s War Explained in 4 Key Points,” *Deutsche Welle*, 8 October 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/yemens-war-explained-in-4-key-points/a-40056866>
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Saudi Arabia has experienced some social progress in recent years, with the ban on women driving lifted in 2017 and the return of public cinema in 2018.⁸⁹ However, the country's sociopolitical environment is not without complications. While some Saudi women recently have been appointed to prominent business and government positions, hundreds of women reportedly flee the country each year, seeking asylum and new lives in places with less gender restrictions.^{90, 91} The Saudi government has allegedly taken notice of this exodus and has embarked on efforts to track down and return these women to the country.⁹²

Saudi Arabia's progressive developments have been largely overshadowed on the world stage by the 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who was reportedly ambushed, tortured and killed in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. At first, Saudi officials said they had no knowledge of what happened to Khashoggi when he visited the consulate on 2 October 2018; soon, the Saudi narrative diverged widely, from no knowledge to accidental death to other attempts at explaining what happened. The Turkish government has revealed significant details about the incident and has suggested that the murder was ordered at the highest levels of Saudi Arabian government.⁹³ Since then, there have not been any overt actions taken or conclusions drawn about direct involvement of Saudi officials. As a result, the Khashoggi matter remains one of the most urgent press freedom cases in the world.⁹⁴

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Saudi Arabia in Perspective

Chapter 2 | History, Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

1. Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab was an 18th century cleric who promoted strict adherence to traditional Islamic law. True False
2. Saudi Arabia was established at the end of World War I, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. True False
3. The “Sudairi Seven” are the seven minarets that encircle the Great Mosque of Mecca. True False
4. The siege of Mecca refers to the blockade on the holy city by the Ottoman Turks during their conquest of the Arabian Peninsula in the 16th century. True False
5. Mohammed bin Salman became the new king of Saudi Arabia in 2017, at the age of 32. True False

Saudi Arabia in Perspective

Chapter 2 | History, Assessment Answers

1. True:
Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab founded Wahhabism, which demands a literal interpretation of the Quran. The alliance he formed with ibn al-Saud in 1744 resulted in the foundation of the first Saudi dynasty and state.
2. False:
The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established on 23 September 1932 after the unification of the Hejaz and Najd kingdoms with the House of Saud. Abdul Aziz (also known as Ibn Saud) formally assumed the title of king.
3. False:
The “Sudairi Seven” is the most influential clan in the House of Saud. The “Sudairi Seven” are the sons of founding King Abdul Aziz and Hussa bint Ahmad Al Sudairi (also known as Umm Fahd).
4. False:
The siege of Mecca took place in 1979 when a group of Muslim extremists seized the Grand Mosque and called upon Saudis to revolt against the monarchy. Saudi security forces, with the help of French commandos, reclaimed the mosque after two weeks of fighting.
5. False:
In 2017, King Salman appointed his son, Mohammed bin Salman, as crown prince, after removing previous crown prince Muhammad bin Nayif from the role. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman wields significant power in Saudi Arabia; he maintains authority over all major parts of government, including defense and matters involving the economy.

Chapter 3 | Economy



Towers in Riyadh
Flickr / Maher Najm

Introduction

The discovery of oil revolutionized the Arabian Peninsula and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. While the Saudi economy once consisted of self-contained commercial activity in scattered pockets, oil and gas are now the primary exports and overwhelming contributors to GDP.^{1, 2} The World Bank classifies Saudi Arabia as a high-income country. The kingdom is a member of the G-20, and oil exports have driven its economic growth for decades; petroleum accounts for 90% of exports, 87% of budget revenues, and 42% of the country's GDP.^{3, 4}

Until recently, Saudis enjoyed cheap utilities and gasoline, free health care, and education, including college, no taxes, and access to government jobs.^{5, 6} Beginning in 2014, however, a plunge in oil prices and a rapidly growing

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population caused an erosion of the kingdom's trade surplus, forcing it to find new ways to reduce reliance on income from crude exports.^{7, 8}

The country's heavy dependence on oil has prompted the government to attempt diversifying the economy and expand the private sector in the telecommunication, alternative power, and natural gas sectors.⁹ The Saudi economy, especially the oil industry, has historically relied on foreign workers, yet recent government policies placing restrictions on foreigners have caused an exodus of this workforce.^{10, 11} To increase Saudi participation in domestic labor, the government has introduced its "Saudization" policy, Nitaqat, which aims to reduce unemployment through the development of small and medium enterprises.¹² Because many Saudis lack the education and training necessary to fill private sector jobs, the government has invested large sums into education and vocational training. Since the push to expand and improve education, Saudi Arabia has become the largest market for education services in the region. The private education sector is expected to expand significantly by 2030.^{13, 14} Other efforts to expand the economy are underway, including the creation of economic cities throughout the nation to promote foreign investment.^{15, 16}

Today, Saudi Arabia remains one of the world's largest oil producers, frequently trading the top spot with the United States or Russia in terms of barrels per day.^{17, 18} Its proven reserves are estimated to be between 20% and 25% of the world's known oil reserves, making it second only to Venezuela.^{19, 20} Given Saudi Arabia's relatively small domestic oil requirements, other countries are unlikely to challenge its disproportionate influence over international crude oil markets in the future.²¹

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- 7 Oxford Business Group, "Saudi Arabia diversifying at home and increasing foreign links," 2018, <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/overview/branching-out-state-seeks-diversification-home-and-increased-links-abroad>
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Agriculture

With just under 2% of the country's land considered arable, the agricultural sector in Saudi Arabia is understandably small, employing 6.26% of the workforce and accounting for 2.6% of GDP.^{22, 23} Heavy reliance on expensive desalination plants for water to cultivate crops has forced the Saudis to address food security and the future of their agricultural sector. Despite tremendous success with wheat and grain production in the 1990s, a large majority of food is imported.²⁴ Saudi Arabia is buying or leasing land in other countries for agricultural purposes, including South Africa, Ethiopia, and Sudan.^{25, 26, 27} The Saudis are also developing fish farms and aquaculture, especially along the Red Sea coast.^{28, 29}

Industry

During the 1980s, the Saudi government undertook a program to create a modern industrial sector with two major goals. The first goal was to make use of the kingdom's enormous gas production as industrial inputs to produce chemicals and petrochemicals for export. The second goal was to build energy-intensive industries for import substitution and infrastructure needs.^{30, 31} Part of these efforts included the development of industrial cities, such as Jubail on the Persian Gulf coast and Yanbu on the Red Sea coast.^{32, 33, 34} Major industrial products include basic petrochemicals, ammonia, industrial gases, sodium hydroxide, cement, fertilizer, plastics, and metals. Other prominent industrial subsectors are construction and commercial ship and aircraft repair.³⁵ As of 2017, industrial exports accounted for just over 19% of all exports and contributed 8.7% to the non-oil GDP.³⁶ While the construction sector has been regarded as the second-largest non-oil industry in the country, it has experienced a decline in recent years. Nevertheless, it is expected to see an upswing, with the announcement of a number of major upcoming projects.³⁷

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- 34 Saudi Industrial Development Fund, "Industrial Development in Saudi Arabia," 12 July 2019, <http://www.sidf.gov.sa/En/INDUSTRYINSAUDIARABIA/Pages/IndustrialDevelopmentinSaudiArabia.aspx>
- 35 Central Intelligence Agency, "Saudi Arabia," in *The World Factbook*, 27 June 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html>
- 36 Saudi Industrial Development Fund, "Industrial Development in Saudi Arabia," n.d., <https://www.sidf.gov.sa/en/IndustryinSaudiArabia/Pages/IndustrialDevelopmentinSaudiArabia.aspx>
- 37 Basil M.K. al-Ghalayini, "Saudi Construction Gets a Big Boost," Arab News, 9 February 2019, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1449611>

Energy

Oil drives the Saudi economy, accounting for 50% of GDP and nearly 90% of export revenues.³⁸ The state-owned Saudi Arabia Oil Company (Aramco) controls the country's oil production. Natural gas, including methane and ethane, is a proven national commodity. As of 2014, Saudi Arabia was ranked sixth on a global scale of proven reserves of natural gas. Aramco, the world's ninth-largest producer of natural gas, began increasing production and developing additional fields in two.^{39, 40, 41}

To help meet growing electrical needs, the government is also investing in solar farms. Since 2012, the Saudi government has earmarked an estimated USD 350 billion for renewable energy initiatives, although there has not been any significant construction.⁴² Saudi Arabia intends to create solar farms, assembly plants, and factories to meet its increasing electricity needs while decreasing oil-based power. In 2019, it was announced that thanks to the success of the Saudi-led development of the Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum Solar Park in Dubai, the kingdom will seek the development of its own concentrated solar power park.^{43, 44}

Trade

Saudi Arabia maintains a significant trade surplus.⁴⁵ As of 2017, the country's major export partners are Japan (12.2%), China (11.7%), South Korea (9%), India (8.9%), the United States (8.3%), the United Arab Emirates (6.7%), and Singapore (4.2%).⁴⁶

Major imports include machinery and equipment, foodstuffs, chemicals, motor vehicles, and textiles. Major import partners include China (15.4%), the United States (13.6%), the United Arab Emirates (6.5%), Germany (5.8%), Japan (4.1%), India (4.1%), and South Korea (4%).^{47, 48}

38 Central Intelligence Agency, "Saudi Arabia: Economy," in *The World Factbook*, 26 June 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html>

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46 Central Intelligence Agency, "Saudi Arabia: Economy," in *The World Factbook*, 27 June 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html>

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Services

Saudi Arabia has put forth significant efforts to diversify its services sectors as part of the Saudi Vision 2030 initiatives. Since 2002, many services sectors have been privatized—including portions of education and healthcare—drawing criticism from consumers because of the pacing of privatization and issues concerning quality.⁴⁹ The services sector contributed 53.2% to the GDP in 2017, and between 2011 and 2018, there was approximately 32% growth in its GDP.⁵⁰

The Vision 2030 initiatives touch virtually all of the service sectors. Education services receive significant support from the Saudi government and are the most renowned in the region.⁵¹ Retail is poised to grow in the coming years after a recent slump; with estimates at USD 106 billion in 2019, projections suggest the sector could grow to USD 119 billion by 2023.⁵² Hotels and resorts are similarly set for rapid growth to accommodate authorized tourism; the number of international visitors is expected to increase by 4% each year.⁵³

Real estate, which faltered in recent years, is expected to rebound as obstacles in residential real estate are rectified, and real estate investment trusts expand throughout the country.^{54,55} Entertainment is receiving a massive push as well, with the development of a 100,000 sq m (1,076,391 sq ft) entertainment complex in Riyadh—the first of many proposed—as part of a USD 35 billion overall investment that will revolutionize the sector.^{56,57} Saudi information and communication markets are the largest in the region and will see public-private partnerships in the coming years to allow for more private investment and competitiveness.^{58,59}

As Saudi Arabia's economy adjusts in response to Saudi Vision 2030, the services workforce is experiencing shifts in size and demographics as well. The services sector has seen an increase in women employees and grew 25% overall in the first quarter of 2019.⁶⁰ Despite growth, the sector's workforce is not without controversy, as foreigners increasingly find themselves ineligible for certain jobs due to the country's Saudization policies.⁶¹

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Tourism

Although Saudi Arabia has a plethora of cultural, religious, and natural attractions, tourism has been historically underdeveloped. However, in recent years, the tourism industry has rapidly grown, to the point that its contribution to the GDP reached 9% in 2018.^{62, 63, 64, 65} Some 85% of this contribution is from leisure travelers; just 15% is credited to business travelers.⁶⁶

According to 2017 estimates, just over 16 million international tourists visited the country, more or less consistent with statistics from preceding years.⁶⁷ In 2018, almost 2.4 million tourists were specifically in Saudi Arabia as part of the hajj.⁶⁸ Religious tourism remains the biggest part of this sector, with leisure tourism expanding thanks to the initiatives of the Vision 2030 stimulus program. In 2019, tourism is expected to contribute between USD 25 and 70 billion.^{69, 70, 71, 72}

In order to enter Saudi Arabia as a visitor, a visa, and a valid reason are required. Tourist visas are only authorized for specific groups and limited timeframes. Applications can be submitted online.^{73, 74, 75} Authorities generally issue visas only for work, visits with family members who are Saudi nationals, or to Muslims performing the hajj or visiting Muslim holy sites.^{76, 77}

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Banking

The government established the Central Bank of Saudi Arabia, also known as the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency (SAMA), in 1952. SAMA is responsible for issuing the national currency, the Saudi Riyal (SAR).⁷⁸ In July 2019, USD 1 equaled SAR 3.75.⁷⁹ Among the Central Bank's other main duties are supervising commercial banks, managing foreign exchange reserves, and conducting monetary policy promoting exchange rate stability.⁸⁰ SAMA's efforts to liberalize the banking sector have resulted in the licensing of several foreign banks, many originating from Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Currently, 13 Saudi banks and 16 licensed banks operate inside Saudi Arabia, and observers rate the banking system as one of the safest in the world, behind only Canada and Switzerland.^{81, 82, 83}

Islamic banks, which ban interest earnings, enjoy a particular advantage in Saudi Arabia. The growth of deposits in such banks has been greater than in the conventional banking sector. The Saudi adherence to Sharia law and principles makes Islamic banks preferable to many customers, giving Islamic banks access to larger volumes of non-interest-bearing accounts than conventional banks, many of which have now developed Sharia-compliant accounts.⁸⁴

Saudi Arabia has a stock exchange, the Tadawul, which the Capital Market Authority oversees. The market began in the 1930s with the establishment of the first joint stock company, Arab Automobile. By 1975, there were 14 publicly traded companies. The market remained an informal one until the 1980s when the government created SAMA to develop and regulate the market. In 2007, the Council of Ministers gave formal approval for the formation of the stock exchange. In March 2019, the Tadawul total capitalization was about USD 534.82 billion.⁸⁵ More than 200 stocks currently trade on the exchange.^{86, 87}

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Standard of Living

Saudi Arabia's per capita GDP of approximately USD 54,500 makes it the 22nd wealthiest country in the world, as of 2017.^{88, 89} Although oil revenues have raised the standard of living for many Saudis, the country is still considered developing from an economic perspective.⁹⁰ The public sector, with minimum annual incomes around USD 9,600, employs a majority of Saudi nationals. The minimum for expatriates working in the public sector has been set at USD 4,160 annually.^{91, 92} Private sector wages have no established minimum and are generally much lower, although the Ministry of Labor has signaled the desire to create greater wage parity.⁹³ The average annual salary for Saudi families is just under USD 40,000, while the average Saudi citizen makes approximately USD 31,716.^{94, 95} Poverty in Saudi Arabia reached 12.7% in 2017, giving the kingdom the 10th lowest rate in the world.⁹⁶

An extensive safety net has helped elevate the standard of living for most Saudis. Universal free education has raised the nation's literacy rate to 94.7% as of a 2015 estimate.^{97, 98} Although the healthcare sector was recently privatized, public healthcare is still available to all Saudis. Life expectancy currently stands at 75.7 years, with males estimated at 74.2 years and females at 77.3 years.^{99, 100} Social security old age pensions, equaling 2.5% of average monthly earnings for the last two years of employment, are available for qualifying men (60 or older) and women (55 or older). The monthly minimum is about USD 400.^{101, 102}

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Employment Trends

Among Saudi citizens, the unemployment rate climbed to a record 12.9% in 2018. Economic participation for those 15 years old and above was reported at 42.3% during the same period. These rates demonstrate a downward trend, as unemployment was at 24.2% in 2016.^{103, 104} In 2016, the government launched Saudi Vision 2030, a stimulus plan aimed at diversifying the country's economy and improving matters such as infrastructure and unemployment. Mohammed bin Salman has stated that he hopes to see unemployment hit 7% as a result of Vision 2030's initiatives. However, this doesn't seem likely given the lack of progress since the program launched.^{105, 106, 107, 108}

Tax hikes and austerity measures aimed at reducing the country's budget deficit have hurt private sector employers and slowed job creation. Most of the country's job seekers are young adults, who make up about half of the population.^{109, 110, 111} Since the launch of Vision 2030, women have been allowed to drive and work as long as they remain separated from male workers and customers.¹¹² The measure aims to increase female participation in the workforce to 30%.^{113, 114}

The government has long been the largest employer of Saudi nationals, who prefer government jobs because of the higher pay and better hours. Public sector jobs make up roughly one-third of jobs that employ Saudis or expatriates, according to a 2015 estimate.¹¹⁵

In 2011, the country instituted the Nitaqat program, designed to encourage "Saudization," or an increased employment of Saudi nationals.¹¹⁶ This initiative has resulted in massive numbers of expatriates being forced from employment in favor of Saudi nationals; this exodus of qualified employees has had some detrimental effects in

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various industries. Recent revisions to the program are designed to encourage companies operating in Saudi Arabia to meet revised Saudi national employee quotas.^{117, 118, 119}

Unemployment among university graduates has been a significant concern in Saudi Arabia. As recently as 2018, it was estimated that more than half of the total unemployed are graduates.^{120, 121} The high unemployment among young urban workers represents a potential threat to stability, as dissatisfaction and frustration rise. In 2016, 24.2% of Saudis aged 15–24 were reported as unemployed. With nearly 60% of the population under the age of 30, creating new jobs is essential and a primary concern for the government.^{122, 123, 124}

Women are particularly hard-hit by unemployment. Although many are well-educated, tradition, and cultural pressures make them less competitive in the job market. As recently as 2016, women with a bachelor's degree or licenses made up about three-fourths of all unemployed females. However, changes are happening within the country. The Ministry of Labor and Social Development has launched initiatives to root out discrimination based on sex and to accommodate women in workplaces.^{125, 126}

Foreign Workers

Saudi Arabia is home to 11 million foreign workers from more than a hundred countries, according to 2017 estimates.¹²⁷ The country has come under international criticism for failing to protect foreign workers from what amount to slave-like working and living conditions imposed by employers. As part of the Vision 2030 plan, Saudi Arabia is cooperating with the International Labor Organization on curtailing violations against foreign workers and developing laws that protect their rights.^{128, 129, 130}

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Immigration policy is restrictive in Saudi Arabia. Non-Saudis may work in the country, but must be sponsored by an employer in order to obtain a residency card, called an iqama. Residency is established for a fixed term with the issuance of an iqama, which can be renewed annually.¹³¹ Foreign workers represent about half of the workforce, primarily in manual labor, accounting, service, and domestic work. The large expatriate workforce has placed additional pressures on employment, leading to Saudi Arabia encouraging expatriates to leave. Since 2017, more than one million foreign workers have left.^{132, 133} Despite this encouragement for foreign departures, changes to the iqama program in 2019 will allow foreign nationals to work and live in Saudi Arabia without a sponsor, effectively allowing them to reside in the country on a permanent basis. They will also be allowed to own property and make investments.¹³⁴

Outlook

In April 2016, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman announced Vision 2030, a multifaceted plan to diversify Saudi Arabia's economy and end its dependence on oil. The plan aims to shrink the public sector and build a strong private sector, which would become the main employer in the country and a vehicle for economic growth. Another aspect of Vision 2030 is to create a large sovereign wealth fund by selling a 5% stake in Saudi Aramco.^{135, 136} The International Monetary Fund expressed doubts about the plan while mildly endorsing it. The stock offering will be the world's biggest initial public offering.^{137, 138, 139}

With the 16th largest economy by GDP, the outlook for Saudi Arabia is generally good, according to 2017 estimates. In May 2019, oil output slumped, reflecting a downward trend of output below the established quota of 10.31 million barrels per day.¹⁴⁰ In spite of these recent slumps, global demand is expected to accelerate.¹⁴¹ The construction industry saw some setbacks in 2015 and 2016, resulting from weak oil prices, but with the advent of Vision 2030, the industry appears to be rebounding. In 2018, the Saudi government committed to investing more than USD 820 billion on over 5,000 construction projects throughout the country, increasing the sector by around 4%.^{142, 143, 144} Similar to the construction sector, power is poised to see an expansion in the coming years.

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Power initiatives include the implementation of smart grid technology and the promotion of international grid connectivity.¹⁴⁵

The Saudi economy is projected to expand during the next few years, mainly due to a moderate recovery in oil production levels and oil prices and recently initiated economic reforms. A good sign for the economy is the country's inflation statistics. In 2018, the average was 2.5%, representing a downward trend over the preceding decade, when inflation topped out at 9.87% in 2008.¹⁴⁶ Although there was a budget surplus in 2018, projections foresee a fiscal deficit of 7% in 2019, depending on the stability or instability of the oil market.¹⁴⁷ Non-oil GDP is expected to expand about 3% per year. Since the old social contract based on government employment, large subsidies, and free public services is no longer viable, rising poverty will likely become a problem.^{148, 149}

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Saudi Arabia in Perspective

Chapter 3 | Economy, Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

1. The energy sector is the primary contributor to Saudi Arabia's GDP. True False
2. Saudis buy land in other countries to grow crops. True False
3. Banks in Saudi Arabia are forbidden from collecting interest earnings. True False
4. Vision 2030 is a government program aimed at expanding Saudi Arabia's oil and gas industry. True False
5. Because Saudi Arabia depends on skilled labor, the country has special laws that protect the rights of foreign workers. True False

Saudi Arabia in Perspective

Chapter 3 | Economy, Assessment Answers

1. True:
Oil drives the Saudi economy, accounting for 50% of GDP and nearly 90% of export revenues.
2. True:
Since less than 2% of the country's land is considered arable, Saudi Arabia is buying or leasing land in countries such as South Africa, Ethiopia, and Sudan to augment its agricultural production.
3. False:
Although Islamic banking bans the collection of interest earnings and is popular in Saudi Arabia, conventional banks may also operate in the kingdom. Many of the conventional banks have developed Sharia compliant accounts.
4. False:
Vision 2030 is a plan to diversify Saudi Arabia's economy and end its dependence on oil. The initiatives include reforms for the tourism, health, and defense industries and a reduction in subsidies.
5. False:
Foreign workers represent about half of the workforce, primarily in manual labor, accounting, services, and domestic work. Saudi Arabia has come under international criticism for failing to protect foreign workers from harsh working and living conditions imposed by employers.

Chapter 4 | Society



Pilgrims praying near Mecca
Flickr / Al Jazeera English

Introduction

Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam, and as such, holds an importance to the religion unlike any other Muslim nation. Within its boundaries are Mecca and Medina, Islam’s two holiest city shrines; Saudi kings are also officially dubbed the Custodians of the Two Holy Mosques. Saudi culture and society are heavily influenced by Islam; specifically, the tenets of Wahhabism, a strict form of Islam developed in the 18th century by theologian Mohamed ibn Wahhab.^{1, 2, 3} By recent estimates, as many as 97 percent of Saudis are Muslims, and many see themselves as the real and “true” Muslims.^{4, 5}

Currently, Saudi Arabia does not tolerate religious freedom. All aspects of religious expression are established by appointed clerics and regulated by law. Non-Islamic worship is not permitted within the country, and it is illegal for Saudis to convert to another faith. The Wahhabi form of Islam is the official religion of Saudi Arabia, as well as the

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- 4 Central Intelligence Agency, “Saudi Arabia: People and Society,” *The World Factbook*, 21 July 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html>
- 5 CBS News, “The Most Heavily Muslim Countries on Earth: 13. Saudi Arabia,” n.d., <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/most-heavily-muslim-countries-on-earth/14/>

ideological foundation of its people. Saudi society is a pious one, with laws and governance, such as mandatory prayer sessions throughout the day, designed to uphold and enforce Islamic edicts and traditions. There is strict segregation of the sexes; alcohol is prohibited for Saudi nationals and foreigners, polygyny is permitted, and penalties for crimes are severe and sometimes public. All education stresses obedience to the nation and loyalty to Islamic law.^{6, 7, 8}

Second only to religion is the family unit, a cornerstone of Saudi life. Much of one's daily interaction takes place within the context of the family. Saudis tenaciously guard their privacy and homes and, unlike other Arab cultures, have far fewer social spaces.^{9, 10}

These relatively strict aspects of Saudi society are being challenged in new ways as the government pursues steps to relax social and legal restrictions. Some recent changes include women being allowed to vote and drive, and the opening of night clubs and theaters, which were previously forbidden.^{11, 12, 13} However, progress proves to be complicated and relatively slow moving; most aspects of society, such as one's choice of clothing, are still subject to strict governance.^{14, 15, 16}

Ethnicity/Linguistic Groups

Saudis are a relatively homogenous group, with about 90% of the population being Arab and 10% claiming Afro-Asian descent.¹⁷ Saudi Arabians are members of the world community known as *ummah*, which accounts for people from diverse geographic and ethnic backgrounds. This collective identity as Muslims transcends all sub-ethnic distinctions.¹⁸

Regionalism also plays an important role in Saudi culture. Some people in the Hejaz region are the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, referred to as Ashraf. Other groups trace their lineage to ancient Arab tribes, while others of Arabic origins originate from beyond the Arabian Peninsula.¹⁹ The tribes in Saudi Arabia consider

6 Thomas Reese, "Saudi Arabia, from the Past into the Future," National Catholic Reporter, 23 February 2017, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/faith-and-justice/saudi-arabia-past-future>

7 Dalia Fahimy, "5 Facts About Religion in Saudi Arabia," Factank, 12 April 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/12/5-facts-about-religion-in-saudi-arabia/>

8 Stephen Kalin, "As Saudi Society Liberalizes, It Reckons with Hardline Past," Reuters, 14 May 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-religion/as-saudi-society-liberalizes-it-reckons-with-hardline-past-idUSKCN1SI0EW>

9 Cultural Portfolio, "Saudi Arabia," n.d., [http://dpuadweb.depauw.edu/\\$1~mkfinney/teaching/Com227/culturalPortfolios/Saudi_Arabia/Family.htm](http://dpuadweb.depauw.edu/$1~mkfinney/teaching/Com227/culturalPortfolios/Saudi_Arabia/Family.htm)

10 Gail Cohen, "Culture Traditions in Saudi Arabia," *USA Today*, n.d., <https://traveltips.usatoday.com/culture-traditions-saudi-arabia-16963.html>

11 Aya Batrawy, "New Saudi Club to Open with Ne-Yo, but Alcohol Still a No-No," AP, 13 June 2019, <https://www.apnews.com/91ba85a16daa4c22a46829e5d3d1d842>

12 Alexandra Zavis, "Trying to Shake Off Its Ultraconservative Image, Saudi Arabia Launches a New Industry: Fun," *Los Angeles Times*, 14 September 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-saudi-arabia-fun-20180914-story.html>

13 Alexandra Zavis, "Saudi Arabia's First New Cinema in Decades Holds Its Grand Opening with a Screening of 'Black Panther,'" *Los Angeles Times*, 19 April 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-saudi-arabia-cinema-opening-20180419-story.html>

14 Joel Barnard, "Business Dress Etiquette in Saudi Arabia," *USA Today*, n.d., <https://traveltips.usatoday.com/business-dress-etiquette-saudi-arabia-55013.html>

15 *Economist*, "Saudi Arabia's Dress Code for Women," 28 January 2015, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2015/01/28/saudi-arabias-dress-code-for-women>

16 ExPat Woman, "Saudi Arabia Dress Code for Foreigners," 17 October 2017, <https://www.expatswoman.com/saudi-arabia/guide/faqs/saudi-arabia-dress-code-for-foreigners>

17 Central Intelligence Agency, "Saudi Arabia: People and Society," *The World Factbook*, 21 July 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html>

18 Countries and their Cultures, "Saudi Arabia," n.d., <https://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Saudi-Arabia.html>

19 Countries and their Cultures, "Saudi Arabia," n.d., <https://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Saudi-Arabia.html>

themselves pure “Arabs,” based on their ancestral roots in the peninsula. Over the centuries, other ethnic groups have migrated to the peninsula and settled there.^{20, 21}

Since 2011, about 2.5 million Syrian refugees who fled Syria’s civil war have settled in Saudi Arabia. Indians, the second largest minority group, are in the country as workers in the domestic sector. Pakistanis, Filipinos, Bangladeshis, Egyptians, and Yemenis also live in Saudi Arabia as sponsored foreign workers.²²

Religion

Islam is the second-largest religion in the world after Christianity, with about 1.8 billion followers, roughly 24% of the global population.²³ The Sunni branch of Islam is by far the most dominant subgroup, making up upwards of 90% of the total population, with Shia composing most of the remainder.^{24, 25} Islam was founded in the seventh century by the Prophet Muhammad, who was born in Mecca in 570 CE. In 622, Muhammad traveled from Mecca to Medina with his supporters to escape persecution. The journey, which became known as the Hijra (migration), marks the beginning of the Islamic era and the Islamic calendar. After Muhammad’s death in 632, the religion spread around the world, reaching Spain in the West and Indonesia in the East.²⁶

In accordance with Saudi law, all Saudi nationals are Muslims.²⁷ The majority are Sunnis, but a significant minority are Shiites, most of whom are located in the eastern regions.²⁸ Relations between Sunnis and Shiites are tense and have sometimes escalated to violence.^{29, 30} The Shia minority is subjected to sanctions and economic discrimination. Although they are allowed to celebrate their holiday of Ashura, they are not allowed to hold large events or gather in large numbers.³¹

Muslims adhere to the five pillars of faith. The first is the *shahada* (the basic declaration of the faith) expressed by repeating the phrase, “There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet.” The second pillar is *salat* (prayer): Muslims face Mecca and pray five times a day at appointed hours (dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and mid-evening). The third pillar is *zakat* (the giving of alms). The fourth pillar is *sawm* (fasting) during the daylight

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- 20 Kenneth Kimutai, “Saudi Arabia’s Ethnic Groups and Nationalities,” World Atlas, 13 June 2018, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/saudi-arabia-s-ethnic-groups-and-nationalities.html>
- 21 Central Intelligence Agency, “Saudi Arabia: People and Society,” *The World Factbook*, 21 July 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html>
- 22 Kenneth Kimutai, “Saudi Arabia’s Ethnic Groups And Nationalities,” World Atlas, 13 June 2018, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/saudi-arabia-s-ethnic-groups-and-nationalities.html>
- 23 Michael Lipka, “Muslims and Islam: Key Findings in the U.S. and around the World,” Pew Research Center, 9 August 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>
- 24 Christopher M. Blanchard, “Islam: Sunnis and Shiites,” Congressional Research Service, 28 January 2009, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RS21745.pdf>
- 25 Elizabeth Chuck, “What Are the Differences between Sunni and Shiite Muslims?” NBC News, 4 January 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/mideast/what-are-differences-between-sunni-shiite-muslims-n489951>
- 26 History.com, “Islam,” 5 January 2018, <https://www.history.com/topics/religion/islam>
- 27 Central Intelligence Agency, “Saudi Arabia: People and Society,” *The World Factbook*, 29 July 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html>
- 28 Adam Coogole, “Saudi Arabia’s ‘Reforms’ Don’t Include Tolerance of Shia Community,” Human Rights Watch, 21 September 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/09/21/saudi-arabias-reforms-dont-include-tolerance-shia-community>
- 29 *Telegraph*, “Saudi Arabia: Police ‘Open Fire’ on Protesters,” 4 October 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/saudi-arabia/8806765/Saudi-Arabia-Police-open-fire-on-protesters.html>
- 30 Toby Matthiesen, “Saudi Arabia’s Shiite Problem,” *Foreign Policy*, 7 March 2012, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/07/saudi_arabia_s_shiite_problem
- 31 Kenneth Kimutai, “Religion in Saudi Arabia,” World Atlas, 30 July 2018, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/religious-beliefs-and-freedoms-in-saudi-arabia.html>

hours of the month of Ramadan. The fifth pillar is performing the *hajj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca) once in a lifetime for those who are physically and financially able to do so.^{32, 33}

Muslims regard the Quran as a sacred text. If copies become old or are damaged, they are disposed of with care. Texts are not burned with trash or other items. A Quran can be buried. Before burial, it is wrapped in a clean cloth and then buried where people cannot walk over it.^{34, 35}

Sunni and Shia Islam

After Muhammad's death, political disagreements about who would succeed him led to divisions that persist to this day. His closest companions wanted his successor to come from their circle, but others believed that only a family member could be a legitimate successor and leader of Islam. A third group called the Ummayyads, formed from the leaders of Muhammad's tribe, sought to be the only determiners of his successor.^{36, 37, 38}

Muhammad's associates were able to choose his advisor, Abu Bakr, as the first caliph (successor). Those who favored Ali, a cousin of Muhammad's and the husband of his daughter Fatima, made Ali the fourth caliph. Just before opposition to Ali's caliphate culminated in war, Ali agreed to mediation. However, his passivity encouraged disappointed followers to assassinate him. Those who believed in his right to the caliphate became Shia, the "Party of Ali." About two decades later, Ali's son, Husayn, attempted to claim his hereditary caliphate. Husayn was killed in battle, and his head taken to the ruling caliph. Shiites commemorate Husayn's death each year with ritualistic self-flagellation and mourning known as Ashura.^{39, 40} Beliefs about succession later developed into religious rather than political differences, expanding the gap between Sunni and Shia Islam.⁴¹

Another major disagreement between Shiites and the Sunnis involves the Shia attribution of divine qualities to their imams. The Sunnis view this as a severe violation of the Islamic belief in only one god. There are various Shia sects; the largest, known as "Twelvers," believe that their 12th imam, known as the Mahdi, or messiah, was taken into hiding by God and will return at the end of the world.^{42, 43}

The form of Islam embraced by Sunnis in Saudi Arabia and by the government is Wahhabism. Wahhabism demands a literal interpretation of the Quran. The movement grew from the teachings of Mohamed ibn Wahhab,

32 Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/15.htm>

33 Arab World Media, "The Five Pillars of Islam," 8 September 2018, <https://www.arabworldmedia.org/field-guides/the-five-pillars-of-islam/>

34 Allison Keyes, "How to Properly Dispose of Sacred Texts," National Public Radio, Morning Edition, 24 February 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/02/24/147321213/how-to-properly-dispose-of-sacred-texts>

35 Whitney Eulich, "Quran Burning: What Is the Respectful Way to Dispose of Islam's Holy Book?" *Christian Science Monitor*, 21 February 2012, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Global-News/2012/0221/Quran-burning-What-is-the-respectful-way-to-dispose-of-Islam-s-holy-book>

36 Mike Shuster, "The Origins of the Shia-Sunni Split," National Public Radio, 12 February 2007, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7332087>

37 Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/15.htm>

38 Oxford Islamic Studies, "Umayyad Caliphate," n.d., <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2421>

39 Mike Shuster, "The Origins of the Shia-Sunni Split," National Public Radio, 12 February 2007, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7332087>

40 Christopher M. Blanchard, "Islam: Sunnis and Shiites," Congressional Research Service, 28 January 2009, 4–5, <http://www.fas.org/spp/crs/misc/RS21745.pdf>

41 Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/15.htm>

42 Mike Shuster, "The Origins of the Shia-Sunni Split," National Public Radio, 12 February 2007, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7332087>

43 Christopher M. Blanchard, "Islam: Sunnis and Shiites," Congressional Research Service, 28 January 2009, 5, <http://www.fas.org/spp/crs/misc/RS21745.pdf>

who in the 18th century wished to return to a pure form of Islam and focus on its belief in a unitary god, thus ridding Islam of some polytheistic tendencies.^{44, 45, 46}

Facing opposition to his teachings, Mohamed ibn Wahhab aligned with the house of Saud, which was a regional power. The Saudi rulers swore an oath of allegiance, promising to establish a state governed according to strict Islamic principles.⁴⁷ When Ibn Saud, the founder of the modern nation of Saudi Arabia, attempted to consolidate his power and unite the kingdom under his rule, he enlisted the support of nomadic Bedouins known as the Ikhwan, or Muslim brothers. Renowned warriors, the Ikhwan were Wahhabi Islamic puritans who wanted to spread their strict form of Islam throughout the Middle East.^{48, 49}

Conflicts with the Ikhwan eventually escalated into war, which Ibn Saud conducted with the approval of the clerics of the *ulama* (custodians of tradition). To maintain the support of the *ulama* and to appease the Ikhwan and their conservative supporters, Ibn Saud created a strict fundamentalist state based on Quranic principles.⁵⁰

For over 200 years, this austere form of Wahhabi Islam has been the dominant faith of the nation. It demands a literal interpretation of the Quran and the Hadith, a collection of traditions and sayings of Muhammad. Strict Wahhabis consider followers of all other religions, including other forms of Islam, as heathens and enemies of Islam. As a consequence of adherence to Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia is one of the most conservative countries in the world.^{51, 52, 53}

Cuisine

Saudis generally eat three meals a day: Saudis generally eat a light breakfast consisting of cheese, yogurt, eggs, jam, and bread. The midday meal, eaten around 2:30 p.m., is the largest and most leisurely meal, generally consisting of mutton or chicken with rice and a variety of side vegetables, salads, and fresh fruit.⁵⁴ Evening meals are similar to lunch, served between 8:00 and 10:00 p.m. According to Muslim tradition, Saudis do not eat pork or drink alcohol.

Food varies by region, a reflection of Saudi Arabia's tradition and history. Dishes in the Eastern Province tend to have a wider variety of spices, such as cardamom, turmeric, cloves, cinnamon, saffron, cumin, and coriander. This province is also home to a distinguished tradition of seafood and special rice dishes. Basmati rice is often flavored with raisins, onions, rose water, and a variety of spices.⁵⁵

44 Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/15.htm>

45 Dalia Fahmy, "5 Facts about Religion in Saudi Arabia," Pew Research, 12 April 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/12/5-facts-about-religion-in-saudi-arabia/>

46 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "The Wahhābī Movement," 27 July 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia/The-Wahhābī-movement>

47 Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/15.htm>

48 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Ikhwān," 7 September 2015, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ikhwan>

49 Frontline, "A Chronology: The House of Saud," 1 August 2005, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saud/cron/>

50 Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992), <http://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/15.htm>

51 Jason Burke, "Saudi Arabia is Simply a Very Different Society from Egypt, Tunisia or Syria," *Guardian*, 30 June 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/30/saudi-arabia-not-egypt-reform>

52 Yury Barmin, "Can Mohammed bin Salman Break the Saudi-Wahhabi Pact?" *Al Jazeera*, 7 January 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/mohammed-bin-salman-break-saudi-wahhabi-pact-180107091158729.html>

53 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Hadith," 25 September 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hadith>

54 Countries and Their Cultures, "Saudi Arabia," n.d., <http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Saudi-Arabia.html>

55 Ni'Mah Isma'il Nawwab, "The Culinary Kingdom," *Aramco World*, January/February 1999, <https://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/199901/the.culinary.kingdom.htm>

Meccan food, originating east of Jeddah along the coast of the Red Sea, is famous for its flavorful meat dishes. Popular dishes include mabshur (finely ground lean lamb pressed into kebabs and grilled) and mulukhiyyah (chicken or meat in a soup-like mix served with bread or rice). Other common dishes include shikamba (a creamy lamb meatball soup), kuffeh (ground meat patties), kabsa (a chicken and rice dish flavored with tomato paste), and waraq unab (stuffed grape leaves).^{56, 57}

Common drinks are sweet black or mint tea, fruit juices, and soft drinks.^{58, 59} Coffee is more than a beverage in Saudi Arabia—it plays an important role in social interaction. The coffee ceremony, which is practiced throughout the Mid-East region, follows ancient rules of preparation etiquette. The beans are ground using mortar and pestle and flavored with cardamom. Coffee is brought to a boil three times, each time in a different pot. Cups are filled only halfway, and custom dictates that one accepts no more than three cups. Shaking the cup from side to side means you have had enough. Inviting someone to coffee or tea is a great compliment. Refusing the invitation is an insult.⁶⁰

Traditional Dress

Saudi Arabia has no written legal dress code, but there are common clothing items for men, and the government has traditionally enforced a strict, modest dress code for women. In public, Saudi women were required to always wear an *abaya*, a loose-fitting, full-length robe that is typically black, or a long, loose-fitting dress. The material from which the abaya is made often indicates a woman's social status. In 2018, however, this requirement was amended to allow women to wear clothing other than the *abaya* so long as the attire is considered “decent and respectful.” Many abayas are reversible, black on one side and blue on the other. Women may reverse the abaya and wear the blue side while at home.^{61, 62}

Throughout most of the country, women are expected to cover their hair and faces when they are in public. Very conservative Muslim women wear a veil (niqab) over their entire face except for the eyes. Recent online protests have challenged this requirement, demanding the freedom to choose.⁶³ In other areas, particularly in more relaxed Jeddah, women can wear veils covering only the lower half of the face or even a simple scarf (hijab) covering the hair. Full face veils in Jeddah are normally an indication that the woman is a visitor from other parts of the kingdom. These established policies are being reviewed by the current leaders in Saudi Arabia. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman formally announced that “the decision is entirely left for women to decide what type of decent and respectful attire she chooses to wear,” although women are still subjected to relatively strict governmental oversight of their wardrobe.^{64, 65}

56 Ni'Mah Isma'il Nawwab, “The Culinary Kingdom,” *Aramco World*, January/February 1999, <https://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/199901/the.culinary.kingdom.htm>

57 Food in Every Country, “Saudi Arabia,” 2012, <http://www.foodbycountry.com/Kazakhstan-to-South-Africa/Saudi-Arabia.html>

58 Ni'Mah Isma'il Nawwab, “The Culinary Kingdom,” *Aramco World*, January/February 1999, <https://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/199901/the.culinary.kingdom.htm>

59 Safari the Globe, “Food, Dining, & Drinks in Saudi Arabia,” March 2013, <http://www.safaritheglobe.com/saudi-arabia/culture/food-drinks/>

60 Food in Every Country, “Saudi Arabia,” 2012, <http://www.foodbycountry.com/Kazakhstan-to-South-Africa/Saudi-Arabia.html>

61 Stephen Kalin, “Saudi Women Should Have Choice Whether to Wear Abaya Robe: Crown Prince,” *Reuters*, 19 March 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-women/saudi-women-should-have-choice-whether-to-wear-abaya-robe-crown-prince-idUSKBN1GV190>

62 PRI, “Niqab Under My Foot—Saudi Women Step on Veils in Online Protest,” *Reuters*, 31 December 2018, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2018-12-31/niqab-under-my-foot-saudi-women-step-veils-online-protest>

63 *Deutsche Welle*, “Saudi Women Step on Face Veils in Online Protest,” 29 December 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/saudi-women-step-on-face-veils-in-online-protest/a-46891033>

64 Emma Day, “Wearing an Abaya or Hijab Is a Woman's Choice, Says Saudi Crown Prince,” *Emirates Woman*, 19 March 2019, <https://emirateswoman.com/wearing-an-abaya-is-a-womans-choice-says-saudis-crown-prince/>

65 Rebecca Staudenmaier, “Saudi Arabia: Prince Says Women Should Decide Whether to Wear Robes, Face Veils,” *Deutsche Welle*, 19 March 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/saudi-arabia-prince-says-women-should-decide-whether-to-wear-robos-face-veils/a-43043071>

Regardless of profession or social status, Saudi men wear a traditional thobe, a dress shirt that is suitable for their desert climate. There is a lightweight summer version made of cotton and a darker, heavier, winter one made of wool. On formal occasions, men may wear a bisht or mishlah (cloak) over the thobe. These often come in white, brown, or black with gold trim. The male headdress has three parts: the *taiga*, a small white under cap that keeps in place the *gutra*, a large folded piece of cloth, usually made of cotton, atop the head, and the *egal*, a double-coiled black cord, used to anchor the headpiece in place. The *gutra* is either white or a red and white checker pattern. No particular significance is attached to the colors, but white is more common in the summer months. The most common footwear is sandals (madas) made from leather or open-back shoes with socks^{66, 67, 68}

Foreign men are expected to dress in clothing appropriate to their home countries. Darker colors are recommended over lighter shades. In most cases, those working in offices should wear suits. Clothing should be generally loose-fitting in nature. Although most Saudis wear sandals, foreigners are not required to do so. It is inappropriate to wear tight pants, short sleeves, or shorts. The situation is more difficult for foreign women; it is recommended that women wear loose-fitting dresses with high necklines, long sleeves, and a hemline that falls to at least mid-calf. Alternatively, they may elect to wear an abaya over their business attire. It is also advisable for a woman to wear, or at least to carry, a headscarf.^{69, 70}

Gender Issues

Despite recent progressive overtures toward gender equality, Saudi Arabia is one of the least gender-equal nations in the world, ranking 141 out of 149 countries.⁷¹ The law does not guarantee gender equality; males in the kingdom enjoy a higher status than women.⁷² Women's activities have traditionally been highly regulated, and strict segregation of the sexes is still found throughout Saudi society. Recent developments seem to indicate a shift toward more equality, although this progress is tepid at best.⁷³ Women are treated as minors and subjected to the concept of wilayah, a policy of guardianship that requires the permission of male guardians or relatives for women to travel, attend school, work, leave the home, or engage in many other daily activities. Women are also typically required to have a male relative to speak on their behalf, although the recent progressive moves by the Council of Ministers seek to reform wilayah and grant women more rights.^{74, 75, 76}

In recent years, and especially since the rise of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2017, some restrictions on women have been rolled back. In 2015, women were allowed to vote and stand as candidates in municipal

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- 66 Rima al-Mukhtar, "Traditional & Modern: The Saudi Man's Bisht," Arab News, 9 November 2012, <http://www.arabnews.com/fashion/traditional-modern-saudi-mans-bisht>
- 67 Huda, "Clothing Items Worn by Islamic Men," Learn Religions, 26 September 2018, <https://www.learnreligions.com/mens-islamic-clothing-2004254>
- 68 Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, "Traditional Costumes," n.d., <https://www.saudiembassy.net/culture-art>
- 69 World Business Culture, "Business Culture in Saudi Arabia," n.d., <https://www.worldbusinessculture.com/country-profiles/saudi-arabia/culture/business-dress-style/>
- 70 Eleanor McKenzie, "Business Dress Etiquette in Saudi Arabia," Our Everyday Life, 29 September 2017, <https://oureverydaylife.com/business-dress-etiquette-in-saudi-arabia-12085703.html>
- 71 Global Gender Gap Report, "Saudi Arabia," World Economic Forum, 2018, http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2018.pdf
- 72 Margaret Cocker, "How Guardianship Laws Still Control Saudi Women," *New York Times*, 22 June 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/22/world/middleeast/saudi-women-guardianship.html>
- 73 Dima Abumaria, "More Gender Equality in Saudi Arabia," *Jerusalem Post*, 5 August 2019, <https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/More-gender-equality-in-Saudi-Arabia-597660>
- 74 Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Arabia," n.d., <https://www.hrw.org/middle-east/n-africa/saudi-arabia>
- 75 Margaret Cocker, "How Guardianship Laws Still Control Saudi Women," *New York Times*, 22 June 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/22/world/middleeast/saudi-women-guardianship.html>
- 76 Joseph Hincks, "Saudi Arabia is Introducing Landmark Reforms for Women. But the Activists Who Pushed for Them Remain in Prison," *Time*, 5 August 2019, <https://time.com/5644080/saudi-arabia-guardianship-women/>

elections; however, when campaigning, women candidates had to speak from behind a partition or be represented by men. Several women were elected to municipal councils that year.^{77, 78} Restrictions on women in the workforce have been gradually relaxed, as the kingdom's rulers seek to decrease unemployment and boost the economy. More women are working in mixed gender settings and in the private sector. In 2018, the ban on women driving, the only law of its kind in the world, was officially lifted.^{79, 80}

With the restrictive *wilayah* guardianship system technically still in place, many of the newfound freedoms remain subject to the whims of fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons. Furthermore, the government has been carefully and slowly rolling out the reforms to ensure it alone receives credit. The transitions have not been smooth. As the driving ban was about to lift in 2018, authorities arrested a group of prominent women activists who had pushed to end the ban.^{81, 82}

Women have the legal right to own and inherit property, but shares are about half of that to which men are entitled. As reform is implemented, many people are still in prison for violating the laws that are being reformed, with no plans to adjust their sentences.^{83, 84} Gender segregation laws have prevented women from working outside the home. But since Vision 2030 was initiated in 2016, aiming to increase female participation in the workforce, there has been an unspoken and unofficial acceptance of some gender mixing in the workplace. However, many restrictions remain. For example, drug stores and optics shops employ women, but they are required to be separated from male workers and customers; shops selling lingerie and other intimate women's products employ only female sales representatives. By the beginning of 2018, about 600,000 Saudi women were working in the private sector, compared to 9,000 in 2011. Reforms to the guardianship policy to be implemented in 2019 will alleviate some of these restrictions.^{85, 86}

Women cannot use public swimming pools or gyms, and until recently, could not attend or participate in sports events. In 2012, Saudi Arabia sent its first female athletes to the Olympics, but they had to cover their hair and be accompanied by a male guardian. In 2017, the National Stadium allowed women spectators to a sports event for the first time, but women were segregated from men and had to enter through different gates.⁸⁷ That same year, when the ban on women drivers was removed, the Uber and Careem ride-hailing apps began hiring women as

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79 Sarah Hassan, "Saudi Women Join the Workforce as Country Reforms," CNN, 7 February 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/06/middleeast/saudi-women-in-the-workforce/index.html>

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professional drivers (captinahs).^{88, 89, 90} Male drivers who work in ride-sharing companies serve female customers without getting in serious trouble with the religious police.⁹¹

The mutaween or religious police patrol the streets and the malls to enforce the strict interpretation of Islamic law, and until recently had the authority to place people under arrest. Known for their zeal in enforcing religious codes, they can have a stark impact on Saudis' lives. In an infamous incident from 2002, the religious police did not let female students evacuate their burning school because they were not covered properly. Fourteen girls died, and 50 were injured in the fire.^{92, 93}

Arts

As with all other aspects of Saudi society, art is governed by the country's Islamic heritage. Saudi Arabia's artistic roots are some of the oldest in the world. Popular forms of art include folk music, dance, and works of poetry. The country's strong artistic tradition can be seen in traditional dress and jewelry, as well.⁹⁴ Still-photography and video film are generally acceptable. With the establishment of a dedicated culture ministry, Saudi Arabia is poised to expand artistic endeavors previously banned in the country, such as film, which was banned for 35 years until 2018.^{95, 96, 97} Expansion of art and culture, as enacted through Vision 2030, is attracting a lot of attention from younger Saudis looking to explore artistic ventures.⁹⁸

Music and Dance

Saudi folk music and dance encapsulate the country's long, storied history. Shaped by the indigenous Bedouin tribes and other nomadic peoples who migrated to the lands, traditional music and dance features influences from around the world. Given the size of Saudi Arabia, folk music and dance vary regionally. A popular form of dance is the al-Sihba, originating in the Hejaz region and featuring Arab and Spanish influences. Mecca, Medina, and Jeddah are home to a popular dance style called al-Mizmar, which is accompanied by flute music.⁹⁹ The popular Samri folk dance is usually performed with *daf* drums and poetry recitals. Popular traditional dance includes Ardha, an ancient dance developed in the Najd region that involves singers, dancers, poetry, and swordplay.^{100, 101}

- 88 Aryn Baker, "We Took a Ride with Saudi Arabia's First Women Taxi Drivers," *Time*, 25 June 2018, <http://time.com/5320608/saudi-arabia-women-drivers-ban-taxi-driver-uber-careem/>
- 89 Sarah El Sirgany, "Uber's Mideast Rival Is Hiring Women Drivers in Saudi Arabia," *CNN Business*, 26 June 2018, <https://money.cnn.com/2018/06/26/technology/careem-women-drivers-cars-saudi-arabia/index.html>
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- 96 Vinita Bharadwaj, "Contemporary Artists Rock the Boat Gently in Saudi Arabia," *New York Times*, 18 January 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/19/world/middleeast/contemporary-artists-rock-the-boat-gently-in-saudi-arabia.html?pagewanted=all>
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- 98 Deema al-Khudair, "Arts and Culture, a Driving Force in the Creative Economy in Saudi Arabia," *Arab News*, 7 February 2019, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1447736/saudi-arabia>
- 99 Arab News, "Hijazi Mizmar Dance Adds Color to Celebrations," 25 April 2014, <http://www.arabnews.com/news/561036>
- 100 Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, "About Saudi Arabia: Culture & Art," n.d., <https://www.saudiembassy.net/culture-art>
- 101 Fanack, "Music and Dance in Saudi Arabia," 12 December 2016, <https://fanack.com/saudi-arabia/society-media-culture/culture/>

Calligraphy

Arabic calligraphy dates back about 1,400 years to the very beginnings of Islam. Characterized as a quintessential Islamic art form, particularly in light of the absence of most other forms of graphic art, Saudis continue to revere calligraphy. Museums collect and mount rare manuscripts for exhibitions. Initially, the emphasis of calligraphy was on illustrating the Quran. Over time, calligraphers adorned metalwork, ceramics, glass, and textiles. Elegantly rendered inscriptions can be found on the interior walls of mosques, as well as public office buildings and private homes.^{102, 103}

Poetry and Folktales

In the days before Islam, Arabs considered poetry the highest art form. Bedouin folklore represents a rich tradition, capturing tales of personal exploits and tribal conquests. Much of the folklore was related in the form of poetry and passed down orally over the generations. More than an art form, the oral poetry tradition was a means by which cultural traditions and history could be retained and passed on to succeeding generations. Poetry is a popular artform today and the focus of many cultural events, such as the Jenadriyah National Culture and Heritage Festival. Poetry is so popular that it is also often televised.¹⁰⁴

Sports and Recreation

Soccer, first introduced in Saudi Arabia in the 1920s, is now one of the most popular sports in the nation. Spectators wildly cheer the Saudi men's national team, which is ranked 68 on in the world. In the 1994 World Cup match between Saudi Arabia and Belgium, Saudi player Saeed al-Owairan deftly dribbled the ball across the field from deep in the Saudi half to score one of the most spectacular goals in the sport's history.^{105, 106} Saudi Arabia also routinely does well in the Asian Cup. Other popular sports in the kingdom include volleyball, gymnastics, swimming, basketball, and golf. Saudi Arabia is home to a number of high-quality golf courses featuring sand mixed with oil to prevent erosion.^{107, 108, 109}

Camel Racing

Camel racing is a major sport in Saudi Arabia, and competition can be fierce. During the winter, regular races take place at King Fahd International Stadium in Riyadh. Each year, more than 2,000 camels race in the al-Janadriyah National Festival.^{110, 111} Today, the festival is the largest cultural event in the country, drawing more than half a million spectators.¹¹²

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- 110 Lucien Zeigler, "17-Day Long Janadriyah Festival for Saudi Heritage and Culture to Begin April 3," Saudi-US Trade Group, 27 March 2013, <http://sustg.com/17-day-long-janadriyah-festival-for-saudi-heritage-and-culture-to-begin-april-3/>
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Falconry

Falconry (qans) has a long history in the kingdom. Training either the Saker or Peregrine falcons is a time-consuming hobby. In spite of the fact that some falcons can be very expensive to purchase and maintain, an increasing number of young Saudis are participating in the sport. Falcon hunting season runs from October to March.¹¹³ The popular King Abdul Aziz Falconry Festival is staged annually in Riyadh and offers prizes valued at more than USD 4 million.¹¹⁴ Among the wealthiest Saudis, falconry serves the same function as golf does in many nations, providing a venue to relax and conduct business.^{115, 116, 117}

Equestrian Sports

Competitive equestrian sports did not gain popularity in Saudi Arabia until relatively recently, despite the fact that the kingdom has a long history of horse breeding and riding, which is considered a preferred activity in Islamic cultures.¹¹⁸ The purebred Arabian horse, found in the country, is considered one of the most popular breeds in the world. Riders come from all over the country to compete in the King's Cup and Crown Prince's Cup during the al-Janadriyah National Festival. Some of the races include seven-hour endurance contests conducted in a series of stages.¹¹⁹ The last time Saudi Arabia participated in Equestrian competitions for the Summer Olympics was in 2012 when the Saudi team won a bronze medal.¹²⁰

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Saudi Arabia in Perspective

Chapter 4 | Society, Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

1. According to the Saudi legal dress code, women in public must wear a black abaya over their clothes. True False
2. The majority of Muslims in Saudi Arabia adhere to Shia Islam. True False
3. Movie theaters are banned in Saudi Arabia. True False
4. One of the five pillars of Islam is jihad, the fight against the enemies of Islam. True False
5. Restaurants in Saudi Arabia close during prayer times. True False

Saudi Arabia in Perspective

Chapter 4 | Society, Assessment Answers

1. False:
In 2018, Saudi women were granted the right to wear “decent and respectful” clothing and were no longer required to wear the *abaya*.
2. False:
The majority of Saudis are Sunnis, but a significant minority are Shiites. Most Shiites are located in the eastern part of the country. Relations between Sunnis and Shiites are tense and have sometimes escalated into violence.
3. False:
In 2018, the kingdom lifted the ban on cinemas and opened its first movie theater in 35 years. The first movie shown in a commercial movie theater was *Black Panther*.
4. False:
The five pillars of Islam are a declaration of faith (*shahada*), praying five times a day (*salat*), charity (*zakat*), fasting during Ramadan (*sawn*), and pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*) once in a lifetime.
5. True:
According to Saudi law, during the prayer call, all businesses have five minutes to close their doors. In restaurants, guests are not permitted to enter or leave until prayer has finished, usually about 20–30 minutes.

Chapter 5 | Security



Saudi Security Forces on parade
Flickr / Al Jazeera English

Introduction

Saudi Arabia is a key regional power due to its importance to Islam and vast reserves of oil. Although there are a number of internal threats to the kingdom, Saudi Arabia is relatively stable; its primary security concerns originate in other regional threats such as Iran or the conflict in Yemen.^{1,2} The kingdom is attempting to carve out a role in mediation and moderation within the region and to act as a voice for a “moderate Islam” that rejects extremism.³ Despite embracing this moderation role, Saudi Arabia’s conflict with Iran continues to create the potential for instability and security risks.⁴

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United States-Saudi Relations

The United States and Saudi Arabia have long enjoyed good relations based on mutual interests rooted in agreements with the kingdom to provide the United States with oil supplies at advantageous prices. This relationship has lasted decades and survived challenges such as an oil embargo in 1973 and the 9/11 attacks, in which 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi nationals. Skepticism has characterized this relationship from time to time, based on what administration is in power in the United States; recent years have seen significant warming of relations. The Saudi government has been a problematic yet strong ally in the fight against terrorism in the region.^{5, 6, 7, 8}

Security cooperation underlies much of the bilateral relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia. In 2018, the United States sold a total of USD 55.6 billion in weapons to Saudi Arabia, making the kingdom the United States' largest customer. Despite international pressure to suspend or reduce weapons sales to Saudi Arabia in the wake of the Jamal Khashoggi assassination, the United States has shown no signs of altering the relationship. Justification for the continued arms deals with Saudi Arabia is rooted in countering Iran and its alleged aggression in the region. Attitudes toward arms deals are also complicated by the Saudi-led air strikes in Yemen.^{9, 10}

In 2019, Saudi Arabia ranked 26 in total trade value with the United States. Top exports include motor vehicles, civilian aircraft and parts, and various munitions. The top import, by a massive majority of 83%, is oil, with gas next in line, bringing in 7.7%. Nothing else imported broke 2% through June 2019.¹¹ The trade deficit with Saudi Arabia was USD 10.5 billion in 2018, an increase of almost USD 8 billion from the previous year.¹²

While cooperation in security matters and trade have ramped up in recent years, reinforcing the United States' longstanding relations with Saudi Arabia, controversial actions by the kingdom have created resistance to this relationship within the U.S. government. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia continues to be a strong partner with the United States in the Middle East in counterterrorism activities.^{13, 14, 15}

- 5 Council on Foreign Relations, "U.S.-Saudi Arabia Relations," 7 December 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-saudi-arabia-relations>
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Relations with Neighbors

Iraq

Saudi Arabia shares a border with Iraq to the north and has developed a harmonious relationship with its neighbor in recent years, despite diplomatic setbacks dating back to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Relations began to improve once Haider al-Abadi became the prime minister of Iraq. Since then, the two countries have had a steady increase in cooperation and thawing of tensions. The Arar border crossing closed since 1990, is scheduled to open in October 2019. The reopening is a major development, as the crossing was originally closed in response to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. In Spring 2019, Saudi Arabia reopened a consulate in Baghdad after almost three decades and announced a USD 1 billion aid package for the country.^{16, 17, 18}

Iran

No diplomatic relations currently exist between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has made a concerted effort to unite the Arab world diplomatically against Iran, who has been accused of aggressive acts such as an attack against an oil tanker in the United Arab Emirates.¹⁹ Iran has issued general threats to countries in the region, leading the Gulf Cooperation Council and Arab League to condemn Iran's rhetoric.²⁰ Despite past antagonism, Iran has, at times, expressed an interest in developing a working relationship with the kingdom and other Arab nations.²¹

Jordan

Jordan's relationship with Saudi Arabia, once rather stable, has deteriorated in recent years due to the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's ascent to power. Bin Salman's strengthening of ties with the United States has effectively allied Saudi Arabia with the United States' stance over Palestine, causing a rift with Jordan as it remains supportive of Palestine. This souring of Saudi-Jordanian relations has adversely affected Jordan's economy, although Saudi investment continues. In 2019, it was announced that the Saudi Fund for Development will finance the construction of government schools in Jordan.^{22, 23, 24}

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Kuwait

Kuwait and Saudi Arabia enjoy favorable relations based, in part, on their shared view of regional politics and security. Kuwait has historically considered its relations with Saudi Arabia well-established, founded on mutual respect and a “belief in a common fate.” Both oil-producing countries are current members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). The countries have disagreed on matters or seen minor spats; however—when “operational differences” halted oil output from the jointly run Khafji and Wafra oilfields in 2018, there was talk of the usually strong relationship faltering. Kuwait’s deputy prime minister reiterated in 2019 that relations are strong, referring to Saudi Arabia as Kuwait’s “Saudi brother.” Authority over oil production proves to be the most significant matter of conflict between the two countries.^{25, 26, 27}

Oman

Situated to the south of Saudi Arabia, Oman’s relations with the kingdom are generally good. Membership in the Gulf Cooperation Council has helped to cement relations between the two countries, as they have worked together on issues of regional concern. Oman has acted as a mediator between Saudi Arabia and Iran, who have very poor relations with each other. Oman’s diplomatic relations with Yemen and Qatar, centers of regional conflict in recent years, have caused the potential for rifts with Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries.^{28, 29, 30}

Qatar

Relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia have been contentious. In 2017, Saudi Arabia and a number of other Arab countries cut diplomatic ties with Qatar and implemented a blockade against it, claiming the country supported terror groups such as Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Despite the severance of ties, the Saudi government has not prohibited Qatari citizens from participating in the hajj.^{31, 32} Tensions between the two countries have persisted since the blockade began, with Saudi Arabia proposing to build a massive canal in order to turn Qatar into an island.³³

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- 31 BBC News, “Qatar Row: Saudi and Egypt Among Countries to Cut Doha Links,” 5 June 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40155829>
- 32 National, “Saudi Arabia Opening ‘Electronic Gates’ for Qatari Hajj Pilgrims,” 6 July 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/saudi-arabia-opening-electronic-gates-for-qatari-hajj-pilgrims-1.883280>
- 33 Bill Bostock, “Here’s How the Locked-Down Saudi Arabia-Qatar Border Became One of the Tensest Places on Earth, Sparking Outrageous Plans to Build a 37-Mile-Long Canal and Turn Qatar into an Island,” Business Insider, 1 August 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/qatari-saudi-arabia-border-why-so-serious-2019-7>

United Arab Emirates

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have engaged in economic and military partnerships in recent years. United in their opposition to Qatar, the two nations announced enhancements in their relations in 2017, in a move that caused consternation in the Gulf Cooperation Council.³⁴ Though their relationship is mutually beneficial, it has been described as having a certain sustained level of resentment stemming from Saudi Arabia's "big brother" attitude toward its regional neighbors.³⁵ While divisions exist, the two countries are united in the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen as well as in opposition to Iranian regional influence.³⁶ In 2018, the Saudi-Emirati Coordination Council kicked off a five-year initiative for more than 40 mutual projects called the Strategy of Resolve.³⁷

Yemen

Saudi Arabia has led a military intervention in Yemen since 2015, in response to a coup staged in its southern neighbor.³⁸ The chaos within Yemen has provided an opportunity for Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and local groups loyal to the Islamic State to carry out attacks. The conflict continues, despite overtures toward striking a deal among the Houthi forces and government headed by Yemeni president Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. The Houthis hold significant territory in the western portion of the country, but the government and coalition forces have that territory surrounded as of 2019.³⁹

Regional politics play into the conflict in Yemen. The Houthi fighters, a Shia group, founded in the 1990s, comprise about a third of the Yemeni population. During the Arab Spring of the early 2010s, the Houthis were particularly active, leading to a coup against Yemeni president Hadi in 2015. The Houthis are allied with Hezbollah and Iran, who have supplied them with weaponry since hostilities in Yemen broke out. Attempts at peace talks with the Houthis have proven unsuccessful. In 2018, the Houthis declined to participate in scheduled talks in Geneva, citing security concerns.⁴⁰ The conflict persists with no end in sight.^{41, 42, 43}

34 Simeon Kerr, "UAE and Saudi Arabia Forge Economic and Military Alliance," *Financial Times*, 5 December 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/f2306d1c-d99a-11e7-a039-c64b1c09b482>

35 Hilal Khashan, "'Un-Brotherly' Saudi-Emirati Ties," *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2018, <https://www.meforum.org/7227/saudi-emirates-ties>

36 Yoel Guzansky, "Trouble in Paradise: Cracks Are Forming in the Saudi-Emirati Relationship," *National Interest*, 7 August 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/trouble-paradise-cracks-are-forming-saudi-emirati-relationship-71921>

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42 Raf Sanchez, "Mohammed bin Salman Backs Yemeni Government as Saudi-led Coalition Descends into Infighting," *Telegraph*, 12 August 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/08/12/mohammed-bin-salman-backs-yemeni-government-saudi-led-coalition/>

43 NBC News, "Saudi Arabia Rallies Around Exiled Yemen Leader after UAE-Backed Separatists Seize Aden," 12 August 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/saudi-rallies-around-exiled-yemen-leader-after-uae-backed-separatists-n1041321>

Police

Saudi Arabia has a religious police force known as the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, or Mutawa. Formed in 1940, the Mutawa is tasked with ensuring public compliance with Sharia law and national religious requirements, such as heeding the call to prayer, prohibitions against alcohol, and proper dress. Mutawa officials wear traditional Saudi clothing. At times, the Mutawa inspire distrust and anger among Saudi youth and more liberally inclined citizens. Even conservative Saudis have criticized the Mutawa for excessive enforcement.^{44, 45} In recent years, the Mutawa has seen its authority reduced and calls for its dissolution.⁴⁶

Military

Saudi Arabia's defense forces focus primarily on maintaining its territorial integrity. In recent years, there has been an increased focus on promoting regional stability. Current manpower estimates place the total force strength at about 227,000 personnel as of 2016. Of these, 75,000 are in the army, 20,000 in the air force, and 13,500 in the navy. An additional 100,000 active national guard troops are also available.^{47, 48}

The Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) has been characterized as a tribal force. Its primary mission is to protect the royal family. It is a paramilitary internal security force, with many of its members serving on active duty.^{49, 50} The Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) has at least 15 military airfields and around 350 aircraft, many purchased from the United States.^{51, 52, 53} The RSAF and USAF have a history of conducting joint training exercises, stemming from the close diplomatic ties between the two countries.^{54, 55} Other branches of the military include the Saudi Royal Navy, Royal Land Forces (RSLF), Royal Air Defense, and the Royal Saudi Strategic Missile Force, all of which are often billeted in so-called military cities, strongholds for the armed forces.^{56, 57}

44 Megan K. Stack, "In Saudi Arabia, a View from Behind the Veil," *Los Angeles Times*, 6 June 2007, <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-women6jun06-story.html>

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52 NationMaster, "Saudi Arabia Military Stats," n.d., <https://www.nationmaster.com/country-info/profiles/Saudi-Arabia/Military>

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54 David Cenciotti, "Royal Saudi Air Force Stages an Impressive Combined 'Elephant Walk' of 48 Aircraft (Including 12 New F-15SA Eagles)," *The Aviationist*, 21 February 2019, <https://theaviationist.com/2019/02/21/royal-saudi-air-force-stages-an-impressive-combined-elephant-walk-of-48-aircraft-including-12-new-f-15sa-eagles/>

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57 Global Security, "Saudi Arabia—Military Personnel," n.d., <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/gulf/sa-personnel.htm>

Cyber Security

Saudi Vision 2030 established the National Cybersecurity Authority (NCA) in 2017 to “boost the cybersecurity of the state and protect its vital interests, national security and sensitive infrastructure,” according to the Saudi Press Agency at the time of the NCA’s launch.⁵⁸ By 2019, cyber security was one of the fastest growing sectors in the kingdom.⁵⁹ This growth is timely, as the kingdom received more cyberattacks than any other country in the Middle East, with an estimated 160,000 attacks each day, according to reports in 2019. The cybersecurity industry is estimated to reach a value of USD 5.5 billion by 2023.^{60, 61}

Issues Affecting Stability

Terrorist Groups

Terrorism continues to be a significant threat within Saudi Arabia. The most active organizations are al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and Islamic State of Iraq and Ash-Sham (IS). All three organizations share the same goal of opposing the Saudi monarchy; IS specifically wants to replace the monarchy with its own rule. AQAP’s operations cross over into Yemen; all three groups conduct violent campaigns throughout the region. As a result of these threats, the U.S. Department of State cautions any authorized travel there, specifically avoiding the Yemen border. Smaller terror groups, such as Shia groups affiliated with Iran, also operate within the country.^{62, 63, 64}

Motivations vary among terror organizations; some want to challenge the monarchy; some want to establish their own government and some object to how Wahhabism is implemented in the kingdom. With nearly 75% of the Saudi population below the age of 30 and the unemployment rate for young males as high as 30%, there is a ready pool of disaffected youth who provide fertile ground for dissident ideas and extremist ideologies to take root.⁶⁵

Saudi Arabia has taken the unique step of rehabilitating disaffected citizens by establishing the Care Rehabilitation Center (formerly known as the Mohammed bin Naif Center for Counseling and Care) outside of Riyadh. Here, extremist fighters are “deprogrammed” in order to re-acclimate them to society.^{66, 67} Despite these efforts, terrorist organizations remain a significant threat, and some fighters do resume fighting even if they’ve spent time in the center.⁶⁸

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62 U.S. Department of State, “Saudi Arabia Travel Advisory,” n.d., <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/saudi-arabia-travel-advisory.html>

63 Central Intelligence Agency, “Field Listing: Terrorist Groups—Foreign Based: Saudi Arabia,” in *The World Factbook*, n.d., <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/396.html>

64 Shaul Shay, “Saudi Arabia—the Terror Threat and the Response,” International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 23 May 2019, https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2398/Saudi_Arabia-the_terror_threat_and_the_response#gsc.tab=0

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66 Bobby Ghosh, “Can Jihadis be Rehabilitated?” *Time*, 27 January 2009, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1874278,00.html>

67 Nancy Durham, “Attempting to Rehabilitate Riyadh’s Jihadists,” CBC News, 29 January 2009, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/attempting-to-rehabilitate-riyadh-s-jihadists-1.821370>

68 Mohammed al-Sulami, “Saudi Security Eliminates ‘Most-Wanted’ Daesh Terrorists,” Arab News, 7 January 2017, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1035476/saudi-arabia>

Despite its trouble with terrorist groups, Saudi Arabia itself is considered one of the largest state sponsors of groups designated as terrorist organizations by the U.S. State Department.⁶⁹

Political Reform

The ruling Saud family maintains absolute authority over political and civil matters. All political positions are appointed, not elected. The monarchy maintains its hold over political and civil affairs through extensive surveillance, squashing dissent by criminalizing it, and supporting sects aligned with Wahhabism. Sharia law is closely adhered to within the country and advises policy and legislation. The structure of the government is dictated specifically by the Basic Law of Government, a 1992 royal document that lays out the foundation for the Saudi government.^{70, 71}

The Shiite population, concentrated mostly in the east, is increasingly restive, resulting in escalating violence. The government has a history of violent crackdowns on Shia groups and cities, such as when the town of Awamiyah was battered in 2017. However, the Saudi government has recently made conciliatory gestures to the Shia community by boosting infrastructure/reconstruction projects, easing prosecution from the religious police, and appointing a Shia cabinet member.⁷² Progress is complicated and slow, however, and is compounded by Saudi Arabia's tensions with Shia-dominated Iran.⁷³

The monarchy has been subjected to political and social challenges over the years, from a variety of groups. The conservative Sahwa, or Islamic Awakening movement, has challenged the Saudi government since the 1960s with what it sees as the government's failure to conform to Islamic values, widespread corruption, and subservience to the United States. The ability of Sahwa advocates to build a diverse coalition prompted the Saudi government, which in the past was conciliatory toward the movement, to persecute key members, underscoring the narrow parameters of government tolerance toward unofficial social movements. The government and the Shawa movement seem headed toward a hard separation.⁷⁴ In fact, authorities are increasingly cracking down on all manner of political dissent.^{75, 76}

The kingdom has also altered the authorized manner of issuing *fatwas* (legal pronouncements) in recent years; in 2010, it was decided that only the Council of Senior Scholars could issue public fatwas, effectively curbing any potential fatwas issued in opposition to the Saudi government. This control over public fatwas allows the

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- 72 *Economist*, "Shias are Doing Better in Saudi Arabia," 30 August 2018, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/08/30/shias-are-doing-better-in-saudi-arabia>
- 73 Omaira Al Najjar, "The Saudi Shia: Between an Iranian Rock and a Saudi Hard Place," Al Jazeera, 7 May 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/saudi-shia-iranian-rock-saudi-hard-place-190507153257184.html>
- 74 Arwa Ibrahim, "What is Sahwa, the Awakening Movement under Pressure in Saudi?" Al Jazeera, 5 June 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/sahwa-awakening-movement-pressure-saudi-190603100555782.html>
- 75 Jane Kinninmont, "Saudi Arabia's New Crown Prince Promises Reforms to Everything Except Politics," Chatham House, 24 July 2017, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/saudi-arabia-s-new-crown-prince-promises-reforms-everything-except-politics>
- 76 *Economist*, "Radical Reforms in Saudi Arabia Are Changing the Gulf and the Arab World," 21 June 2018, <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2018/06/21/radical-reforms-in-saudi-arabia-are-changing-the-gulf-and-the-arab-world>

Saudi government to align the fatwas with its own initiatives and goals.^{77, 78} In 2019, the rule that only men were authorized to issue fatwas was altered to allow women the potential to issue them as well.⁷⁹ Also, in 2019, the kingdom created an electronic fatwa service for hajj pilgrims.⁸⁰

The rules of succession are another source of instability within the government. In 2006, the king established the Allegiance Council, a panel of 35 princes, to vote on the eligibility of future monarchs. The panel is tasked with naming a crown prince to succeed the king; the council represents each line of the Saud family and votes to nominate heirs.^{81, 82} The council is a necessity given the huge size of the ruling family, now estimated to be over 5,000. Prince Mohammed bin Salman was selected to be first in succession in the royal family.^{83, 84, 85, 86}

Relations with Wahhabi Clergy

The Saudi government and Wahhabi clergy have deep, intertwined relations dating back to the birth of the kingdom itself. Since the creation of Saudi Arabia, the monarchy has relied on the Wahhabi religious establishment to provide legitimacy for the House of Saud by helping crush resistance and curb religious extremism.^{87, 88} Although the relationship has been historically symbiotic, the government has clashed at times with the clergy on ideological terms.^{89, 90} Increasingly, tensions between the clergy and the more reformist king have weakened the alliance. Tensions flared in 2012 when the king dismissed the head of the religious police over differences in policy.⁹¹ Walking the tightrope between the demands of the clergy and political reformers is a delicate task. Recently, Mohammed bin Salman has sought to further curb the clergy's power in order to reframe Islam within the kingdom.^{92, 93, 94}

- 77 Abdullah Alaoudh, "State-Sponsored Fatwas in Saudi Arabia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 3 April 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/75971>
- 78 Islamic Supreme Council of America, "What is a Fatwa?" n.d., <https://www.islamicsupremecouncil.org/understanding-islam/legal-rulings/44-what-is-a-fatwa.html>
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- 83 Alia Chughtai, "Line of Succession to Saudi Arabia's Throne," Al Jazeera, 21 June 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2017/06/line-succession-saudi-arabia-throne-170621175317617.html>
- 84 Naser Al Wasmi, "Saudi Arabia's Allegiance Council Gives Prince Mohammed bin Salman Vote of Confidence," N World, 21 June 2017, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/saudi-arabia-s-allegiance-council-gives-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-vote-of-confidence-1.92347>
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- 88 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Wahhabi," 14 December 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Wahhabi>
- 89 Anouar Boukhars, "At the Crossroads: Saudi Arabia's Dilemmas," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 26, no. 1 (2006), <http://journals.hil.unb.ca/index.php/jcs/article/view/2167/2562>
- 90 Angus McDowall, "Saudi Rulers Reconsider Ties to Wahhabi Clergy," Reuters, 17 December 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-islam/saudi-rulers-reconsider-ties-to-wahhabi-clergy-idUSKBN0JV1M120141217>
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- 92 Raihan Ismail, "The Power of Saudi Arabia's Clerics and the Struggle for Religious Authority," ABC, 31 October 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/power-of-saudi-clerics/10451284>
- 93 Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Prince, Asserting Power, Brings Clerics to Heel," *New York Times*, 5 November 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/05/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-wahhabism-salafism-mohammed-bin-salman.html>
- 94 Chiara Pellegrino, "Mohammad bin Salman and the Invention of Tradition," Oasis, 19 June 2018, <https://www.oasiscenter.eu/en/mbs-saudi-arabia-moderate-islam>

Economic Issues

Saudi Arabia's high unemployment rate is a significant problem for the country. In 2018, unemployment reached a record high of 12.9%; it saw a mild, steady drop in 2019, falling to 12.5% in the first quarter.^{95, 96, 97} In 2012, student demonstrations at King Khalid University focused attention on problems of education and employment. Several similar protests led by young people have occurred across the country, leading the king to promise a series of educational and employment reforms.⁹⁸ In 2016, the government launched Saudi Vision 2030, a stimulus plan aimed at diversifying the country's economy and improving matters such as infrastructure and unemployment. Mohammed bin Salman has stated that he hopes to see unemployment hit 7% as a result of Vision 2030's initiatives. However, this doesn't seem likely given the lack of progress since the program launched.^{99, 100, 101, 102}

Rising domestic consumption of energy is a priority for the government and a key element to Vision 2030. The kingdom is a massive consumer of energy, eclipsing Europe's natural gas and electricity consumption statistics. Prior to Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia had no significant investments in renewable energy. A number of renewable energy projects are scheduled to start in the near future.^{103, 104, 105}

Water Security

Saudi Arabia is the eighth most water-stressed country in the world, with a baseline water stress level noted at "extremely-high" in 2019. The World Resources Institute estimated that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council countries treat an estimated 84% of their wastewater, but only 44% is ever reused.^{106, 107} Water consumption in the kingdom has reached twice the world average in recent years. Virtually all potable water comes from desalination plants, which is a costly procedure. Agriculture accounts for a massive amount of the water consumption within the country, estimated at 80% of total usage.^{108, 109, 110} Reforming water consumption,

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- 95 Rob Lee, "How Saudi Arabia Plans to Tackle Unemployment," Borgen Project, 19 November 2018, <https://borgenproject.org/how-saudi-arabia-plans-to-tackle-unemployment/>
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- 102 Leyal Khalife, "Fix Your CV: Saudi Arabia to Create Over Half a Million Jobs by 2030," Step Feed, 25 April 2019, <https://stepfeed.com/fix-your-cv-saudi-arabia-to-create-over-half-a-million-jobs-by-2030-3425>
- 103 Vision 2030, "A Renewable Energy Market," n.d., <https://vision2030.gov.sa/en/node/87>
- 104 World Data, "Energy Consumption in Saudi Arabia," n.d., <https://www.worlddata.info/asia/saudi-arabia/energy-consumption.php>
- 105 Rania El Gamal and Stanley Carvalho, "Saudi Arabia Sees Domestic Energy Use Falling, Plans Renewables Push," Reuters, 15 January 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-energy-reforms/saudi-arabia-sees-domestic-energy-use-falling-plans-renewables-push-idUSKCN1P918N>
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sustainability, and security is a key aspect of the National Water Strategy 2030, a program within Vision 2030 that aims to provide up to 3 million cu m of water.^{111, 112}

Outlook

Reform is at the forefront of Saudi Arabia's society with the continued implementation of the Saudi Vision 2030 initiatives and programs. As new industries are opened, existing industries are bolstered, and tourism and entertainment are ramped up, Saudi Arabia is exposed to new potentials for threats. While reforms are moving at a faster pace than usual for the kingdom, the government still does not tolerate public demonstrations and has made controversial moves against media outlets and journalists. Travel advisories by the U.S. State Department still advise anyone able to travel to Saudi Arabia to exercise increased caution, particularly within 50 miles of the Yemeni border. As the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen persists, this threat will continue.^{113, 114, 115}

With the matter of succession settled in 2017, Mohammed bin Salman is set to be king once the reign of King Salman ends. Since his promotion to crown prince, bin Salman has been a controversial figure. On one hand, he has been the driving force behind reforms that have relaxed restrictions on Saudis and seek to alleviate the country's dependence on oil. On the other hand, he has cracked down on the ruling family in what has been perceived as a political ploy to consolidate his grip on power. It has also been alleged that he has committed violent crackdowns on opposition voices, most infamously the grisly assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, allegedly directed by bin Salman himself. Khashoggi's assassination continues to inspire international calls for action against the kingdom.^{116, 117, 118, 119}

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Saudi Arabia in Perspective

Chapter 5 | Security, Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

1. After the 9/11 attacks on the United States, in which 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi nationals, the U.S. government temporarily suspended diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia. True False
2. Qatar is one of Saudi Arabia's closest allies. True False
3. The Saudi National Cybersecurity Authority makes Saudi Arabia one of the most cyber secure countries in the world. True False
4. The main terrorist groups in Saudi Arabia oppose the monarchy. True False
5. Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy, but the king must comply with Sharia law and the Quran. True False

Saudi Arabia in Perspective

Chapter 5 | Security, Assessment Answers

1. False:
The Saudi government has been a problematic—yet strong—ally of the United States. Relations between the countries have survived the oil embargo of 1973, the 9/11 attacks, and the assassination of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul.
2. False:
In 2017, Saudi Arabia and several other Arab countries cut diplomatic ties with Qatar and implemented a blockade against it. Saudi Arabia closed its only border crossing with Qatar in 2017 and has claimed that Qatar interferes in Saudi Arabia’s domestic affairs, supports terrorism, and is too close with Iran.
3. False:
According to reports, in 2019, the kingdom received more cyberattacks than any other country in the Middle East, with an estimated 160,000 attacks each day.
4. True:
In Al-Qaeda, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and Islamic State of Iraq and Ash-Sham (IS) oppose the Saudi monarchy; IS specifically wants to replace the monarchy with its own rule.
5. True:
The ruling Saud family maintains absolute authority over political and civil matters. The monarchy maintains its hold over political and civil affairs through extensive surveillance, criminalization of dissent, and support of sects aligned with Wahhabism. Sharia law advises policy and legislation.

Saudi Arabia in Perspective

Further Readings and Resources

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Saudi Arabia in Perspective

Final Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

1. Saudi Arabia has a desert climate with low annual rainfall. True False
2. Saudi Arabia is an attractive destination for international tourists. True False
3. Saudi citizens are required by law to follow the Wahhabi school of Sunni Islam. True False
4. Coffee plays an important role in social interaction in Saudi Arabia. True False
5. Jeddah is Saudi Arabia's most cosmopolitan city. True False
6. The *niqab* is a small manmade well found in the oases of Saudi Arabia. The well is lined with stones and covered with a cap of wood or stone. True False
7. Non-Muslims cannot visit the two holiest cities of Islam. True False
8. Arabic calligraphy, dating back some 1,400 years, is the main classical Islamic art form. True False
9. Cooler temperatures along the coast of the Red Sea make the climate there more tolerable than in inland regions. True False

10. Shamals are the traditional camel races held in Saudi Arabia under the patronage of the royal family. True False
11. Saudis who work in the private sector are paid higher salaries than those who work in the public sector. True False
12. Saudi Arabia has no diplomatic relations with Iraq. True False
13. Asir is one of the geographical regions of Saudi Arabia. True False
14. Saudi women are allowed to work as drivers for ride-hailing companies such as Uber. True False
15. A *thobe* is a traditional dress shirt suitable for a desert climate. True False
16. Medina is the second holiest city in Islam after Mecca. True False
17. The main role of the Saudi military is to maintain the country's territorial integrity. True False
18. A damaged Quran can be burned as long as other objects are not burned along with it. True False
19. Women are treated as minors in Saudi Arabia. True False
20. The Mutawa is one of the holiest shrines in Saudi Arabia. True False
21. Traveling in Saudi Arabia is safe due to the heavy presence of police and military personnel. True False

22. Since the launch of Vision 2030, unemployment among Saudi citizens has dropped significantly. True False
23. Shia Muslims are a protected minority in Saudi Arabia. True False
24. The primary function of the Saudi Arabian National Guard is ceremonial. The guard provides funeral honors to members of the royal family and performs in official state functions. True False
25. Saudi Aramco is the national oil company of Saudi Arabia. True False

Saudi Arabia in Perspective

Final Assessment Answers

1. True:
Saudi Arabia is home to three major deserts. In the summer months, temperatures during the day can reach 54°C (129°F) in some areas.
2. False:
Only travelers with a visa and a valid reason are allowed to enter Saudi Arabia. Saudi authorities generally only issue visas for work, business, close family visits, or to Muslims on pilgrimages.
3. False:
All Saudis are Muslim by law, and most adhere to Wahhabi Sunni Islam. However, an estimated 15% of the population is Shia.
4. True:
Coffee is more than just a beverage in Saudi Arabia. The preparation of coffee follows ancient rules and etiquette, and custom dictates that one accepts no more than three cups.
5. True:
Jeddah's reputation as the gateway for Muslim pilgrims and its location on an ancient trade route have made it Saudi Arabia's most cosmopolitan city. In contrast to the more conservative Riyadh, Jeddah has a relatively progressive atmosphere.
6. False:
The *niqab* is a black veil that hides the entire face of a woman except for her eyes and usually flows down to the middle of the chest and back. Very conservative Muslim women wear a *niqab* over their entire face except for the eyes. In 2018, women in Saudi Arabia began protesting against wearing the *niqab*.
7. True:
Non-Muslims cannot enter the city of Mecca or visit areas in central Medina near the Prophet's Mosque. There are various checkpoints on roads that lead into the cities where security guards check passports and identity cards. Non-Muslims who try to enter can be deported from the country.
8. True:
Arabic calligraphy is a quintessential Islamic art form. Elegantly rendered inscriptions can be found in museums, exhibitions, mosques, public office buildings, and private homes.
9. False:
Although the temperatures along the Red Sea coast are generally lower, the humidity is oppressive.
10. False:
Shamals are northwesterly winds that are common in June and July. Wind speeds can exceed 50 kph (31 mph).

11. False:
Salaries are generally lower in the private sector, which has no established minimum wage. The Ministry of Labor has signaled the desire to create greater wage parity.
12. False:
Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Saudi Arabia has developed a harmonious relationship with Iraq. The Saudi consulate in Iraq reopened in 2019, and the Arar border crossing is scheduled to be reopened after having been closed for almost 30 years.
13. True:
Asir is the southern region of the country, extending along the southwestern border with Yemen. This region is relatively more populated than other regions, largely because of its agricultural potential.
14. True:
When the ban on women drivers was lifted in 2018, companies like Uber and Careem began hiring women as professional drivers.
15. True:
In the summertime, men wear thobes made of lightweight cotton while in colder months, they wear thobes made of wool or other heavier materials.
16. True:
Medina is the burial place of the Prophet Muhammad and the second holiest city in Islam. Medina was a place of refuge for Muhammad after he fled from Mecca.
17. True:
The Saudi military, standing at around 227,000 personnel, is focused on preserving the country's territorial integrity and promoting regional stability.
18. True:
When a copy of the Quran is no longer usable, Muslims are required to dispose of it with care. If burned, the Quran cannot be burned with other items or trash. Burial is allowed, but only if the Quran is wrapped in a clean cloth and buried away from foot traffic.
19. True:
Wilayah is a policy of guardianship that requires the permission of male guardians or relatives for women to travel, attend school, work, leave the home, be hospitalized, or engage in many other daily activities.
20. False:
The Mutawa is Saudi Arabia's religious police force, formally known as the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. The Mutawa is tasked with ensuring public compliance with Sharia law and national religious requirements, such as heeding the call to prayer, prohibitions against alcohol, and proper dress.
21. False:
Although the country is relatively secure, the U.S. State Department advises Americans who travel to Saudi Arabia to exercise increased caution, particularly within 50 miles of the Yemen border.

22. False:
The unemployment rate among Saudi citizens climbed to a record 12.9% in 2018 and dropped slightly to 12.5% in the first quarter of 2019. Most of the country's job seekers are young adults, who make up about half of the population. The unemployment rate for women is 33%.
23. False:
The government has a history of violent crackdowns on Shia groups and cities. Furthermore, the Shia minority is subjected to sanctions and economic discrimination. Although Shiites are allowed to celebrate Ashura, they are not allowed to worship in public.
24. False:
The primary mission of the Saudi Arabian National Guard is to protect the royal family. It is one of the three major branches of the Saudi armed forces and consists of members of tribes loyal to the House of Saud.
25. True:
Saudi Aramco, officially the Saudi Arabian Oil Company, is the Saudi Arabian national petroleum and natural gas company. Based in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, Saudi Aramco controls the country's oil production and is the world's ninth-largest producer of natural gas.