



CULTURAL ORIENTATION

# ARABIC-SAUDI

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*A saudi man with his horse  
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

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2019



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# CULTURAL ORIENTATION | ARABIC-SAUDI



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Profile

Introduction .....	6
Land Area and Borders .....	7
Geography and Topography .....	8
<i>Hejaz</i> .....	8
<i>Nejd</i> .....	8
<i>Al-Hasa</i> .....	9
<i>Asir</i> .....	9
<i>Rub al-Khali</i> .....	10
Climate .....	10
Bodies of Water .....	11
<i>Wadis</i> .....	11
<i>Red Sea</i> .....	11
<i>Persian Gulf</i> .....	12
Major Cities .....	12
<i>Riyadh</i> .....	12
<i>Jeddah</i> .....	13
<i>Mecca (Makkah)</i> .....	14
<i>Medina (Madinah)</i> .....	15
<i>Dhahran-Dammam-al-Khobar</i> .....	16
History .....	16
<i>Early History</i> .....	16
<i>Birth and Spread of Islam</i> .....	17
<i>Ottoman Conquest</i> .....	17
<i>Origins of the Saud Family</i> .....	17
<i>First Saudi State</i> .....	18
<i>Second Saudi State</i> .....	19
<i>Third Saudi State</i> .....	19
<i>Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – King Abdul Aziz (1931-1953)</i> .....	20
<i>King Faisal (1964-1975)</i> .....	21
<i>King Khalid (1975-1982)</i> .....	21
<i>King Fahd (1982-2005)</i> .....	22
<i>King Abdullah (2005-2015)</i> .....	22
<i>King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (2015)</i> .....	23
Government .....	23
Media .....	25
Economy .....	27
<i>Vision 2030</i> .....	27

## CULTURAL ORIENTATION | ARABIC-SAUDI

---



<i>Foreign workers</i> .....	28
<i>Employment</i> .....	28
<i>Outlook</i> .....	29
Ethnic Groups.....	29
Endnotes for Chapter 1: Profile .....	30
Assessment .....	36

### Religion

---

Introduction .....	37
Islam.....	38
<i>Sunni and Shia Islam</i> .....	39
Islam in Saudi Arabia .....	40
Religion and Government .....	41
Influence of Religion on Daily Life .....	43
Religious Convention and Gender Roles .....	44
Religious Holidays .....	45
<i>Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha</i> .....	45
<i>Hijri New Year</i> .....	46
<i>Ramadh</i> .....	46
<i>Hajj</i> .....	47
Places of Worship.....	47
Endnotes for Chapter 2: Religion .....	49
Assessment .....	52

### Traditions

---

Introduction .....	53
Honor and Values .....	54
Greetings and Introductions.....	55
Male/Female Interaction.....	57
Hospitality and Gifts .....	57
Eating and Types of Food .....	59
<i>Cuisine</i> .....	59
<i>Dining Etiquette</i> .....	61
Dress Code.....	62
Non-Religious Holidays and Celebrations .....	64
<i>National Day (Al-Yaom al-Watany)</i> .....	64
<i>Janadriyah National Heritage and Culture Festival</i> .....	64
Dos and Don'ts.....	65
Endnotes for Chapter 3: Traditions .....	66
Assessment .....	69

# CULTURAL ORIENTATION | ARABIC-SAUDI



## Urban Life

Introduction .....	70
Urban Problems .....	72
<i>Air Pollution</i> .....	72
<i>Wastewater Management and Water Pollution</i> .....	72
<i>Poverty</i> .....	73
Employment and the Demographic Challenge .....	73
Healthcare .....	75
Education .....	76
Restaurants .....	78
Marketplace and Shopping .....	81
Money and Credit Cards .....	83
Crime and Solicitation .....	89
Endnotes for Chapter 4: Urban Life .....	91
Assessment .....	96

## Rural Life

Introduction .....	97
Land Distribution .....	99
Rural Economy .....	100
Rural Transportation .....	101
Education .....	103
Healthcare .....	103
Who is in Charge? .....	105
Nomadic Pastoralism on the Arabian Peninsula .....	107
Border Crossings and Checkpoints .....	108
Landmines .....	111
Endnotes for Chapter 5: Rural Life .....	112
Assessment .....	116

## Family Life

Introduction .....	117
Typical Household .....	118
Status of Women .....	120
Status of Elderly and Children .....	121
Marriage and Divorce .....	122

## CULTURAL ORIENTATION | ARABIC-SAUDI

---



<i>Marriage</i> .....	122
<i>Divorce</i> .....	125
Weddings .....	126
Funerals.....	127
Naming Conventions.....	128
Endnotes for Chapter 6: Family Life .....	130
Assessment .....	134
Further Reading .....	135
<i>Reports and Articles</i> .....	135
<i>Videos on YouTube</i> .....	136

### Final Assessment

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Final Assessment .....	138
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*The ancient city of Al-`Ula in Al Madinah Region  
Flickr / Sammy Six - Al Ula*

## Chapter 1 | Arabic-Saudi Cultural Orientation

# Profile

## Introduction

The Saud clan rose to prominence in the 16th century and by the early 19th century was ruling much of the Arabian Peninsula. Rivalries forced the Saudis out of power, exiling them to the harsh desert lands of the southern region. In 1901, Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman al-Saud (Ibn Saud) returned from exile, and a year later captured Riyadh. From there, he united the peninsula into a single country, and on 23 September 1932 declared his tribal confederation the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.<sup>1, 2</sup>

Saudi Arabia is home to Islam's two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina. Wahhabism, an austere form of Islam that relies on the literal interpretation of the Quran and the Hadith, is the country's dominant faith.<sup>3</sup>

As of 2018, Saudi Arabia was home to 33,413,660 million people. About 64% of the population consists of Saudi nationals, and more than 30% is made up of foreign workers.<sup>4, 5</sup> 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.<sup>6, 7</sup>



Wave of pilgrims at the Al-Masjid al-Haram on Hajj  
Flickr / Al Jazeera English

For decades, Saudi Arabia has been plagued by domestic unrest and conflicts with some of its neighbors. The attack on the United States on 11 September 2001 put Saudi Arabia in a difficult position since 15 out of the 19 hijackers were Saudi nationals. Recently, Saudi Arabia has been involved in the civil wars in Yemen and Syria, a fierce regional rivalry with Iran, and a blockade on Qatar. The kingdom has been a target of al Qaeda and Islamic State terrorists.<sup>10</sup>

## Land Area and Borders



Map of Saudi Arabia and its neighbors  
CIA

With an area of 2,149,690 sq km (830,000 sq mi), about one-fifth the size of the United States, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the largest country in the Persian Gulf region. The nation shares borders with seven other countries. To the north are Iraq (814 km / 506 mi), Jordan (744 km / 462 mi), and Kuwait (222 km / 138 mi). To the east are Qatar (60 km / 37 mi) and United Arab Emirates (457 km / 284 mi). Oman (676 km / 420 mi) and Yemen (1,458 km / 906 mi) are to the south. The Red Sea forms the western border, and the Persian Gulf lies on the eastern border, separating Saudi Arabia from Iran.<sup>11, 12</sup>

## Geography and Topography

Much of Saudi Arabia is desert.<sup>13</sup> With no permanent lakes or rivers, it is one of the driest countries on earth. The country consists of five natural regions: The western region (the western highlands) runs along the Red Sea. The central region of Nejd is the heartland of the kingdom, covering the rocky central plateau. The eastern region of al-Hasa covers the coastal plain along the Persian Gulf. The southern region, which runs along the border with Yemen, consists of Rub al-Khali or the Empty Quarter (the southern desert) and al-Nafud (the northern desert).<sup>14, 15</sup>



*Mount Uhud in the area of Medinah, Hejaz region  
Flickr / Aymanzaid2*

### Hejaz



*Sunset over the Red Sea  
Flickr / Wajahat Mahmood*

The western region runs along the Red Sea north of Asir and covers the coastal plains and mountain ranges. The mountains run north to south increasing in elevation toward the south rising to a maximum height of 3,000 m (9842 ft). The coastal plains widen in the south.<sup>16, 17</sup>

### Nejd

The central region, Nejd, includes the capital Riyadh, which is the traditional home of the ruling Saud family.<sup>18</sup> Nejd consists mainly of plateaus, with a few isolated deserts. This arid region is hot and dry during the summer months, with temperatures exceeding 45°C (113°F). In winter, the temperatures are cold, often dropping below 5°C (41°F). This region contains many oases - fertile areas caused by underground water in the otherwise barren desert - and large salt marshes (sabkah) and is home to a growing agricultural industry.<sup>19</sup>



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*Sand dunes, Nejd region  
Flickr / Arnaud Desbordes*

### *Al-Hasa*

Some of Saudi Arabia's major cities and vast oil reserves are located in the eastern region, along the Persian Gulf. During the late spring and early summer months, this region is subject to the shamals, or northwest winds.<sup>20</sup>

### *Asir*



*Vicinity of Jabal Sawda, Asir region  
Flickr / marviikad*

The southern region (Asir) extends along the southwest to the border with Yemen. The most fertile areas of the country are in this region near the coastal mountains. Rainfall supports crops and vegetation, including Saudi Arabia's only forest areas. This region is relatively more populated than the others, largely because of its agricultural potential.<sup>21</sup>

## Rub al-Khali

The Rub al-Khali (Empty Quarter) in the south occupies nearly 25% of the country.<sup>22</sup> One of the driest places on the planet, roughly the size of Texas, it is the largest sand sea in the world. Wind-sculpted sand dunes run roughly northeast to southwest for many kilometers, some reaching an altitude of 1,200 m (3,900 ft). Not many people live in this region because of the intense heat and scarce water.<sup>23, 24, 25</sup>



*The Empty Quarter of Rub al-Khali  
Flickr / IrenicRhonda*

## Climate



*Dry Saudis desert, Riyadh  
Flickr / Maher Najm*

Saudi Arabia has a desert climate represented by extreme heat during the day, a drop in temperature at night, and low annual rainfall. Humidity and temperatures vary by region. In the summer (June to August), temperatures in some parts of the country reach 54°C (130°F) during the day.<sup>26</sup> Temperatures are highest in the northern and central regions. Although the temperatures along the Red Sea coast are generally lower, the humidity is oppressive. Temperatures in spring and fall are more moderate—averaging around

29°C (84°F). In the south near the Sarawat Mountains, temperatures frequently drop to 10°C (50°F).<sup>27, 28, 29</sup>

Winter (December to February) is cooler, with a country-wide average temperature of 23°C (74°F). Evening temperatures can be much cooler, falling below freezing in the western mountains and in the extreme north.<sup>30, 31</sup>

The rainy season is long, stretching from October to March, but rainfall is erratic. Some parts of the country may get only one or two downpours a year. In the Asir region along the western coast of the Red Sea, Indian Ocean monsoons can bring 30-50 cm (12-20 in) of rain.<sup>32, 33, 34</sup>

## Bodies of Water

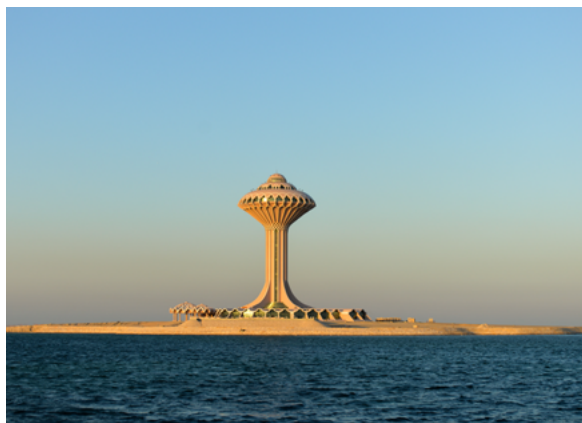
### *Wadis*

Saudi Arabia has numerous wadis (ancient dry riverbeds), which carry water from seasonal rains. Most of the kingdom's water comes from underground sources and dozens of desalination plants.<sup>35, 36, 37</sup>



*Wadi Namar Park, Namar, Riyadh  
Flickr / Maher Najm*

### *Red Sea*



*Khobar water tower on Persian Gulf, Al Kourneesh, Al Khubar, Eastern  
Flickr / Francisco Anzola*

The Red Sea separates the Arabian Peninsula from Africa. In addition to being the kingdom's western border, it serves as a maritime border for Eritrea, Sudan, Egypt, and Yemen. It extends to a maximum depth of 3,040 m (9,974 ft), is 1,900 km (1,200 mi) long, and 306 km (190 mi) at its widest point. The Red Sea connects to the Gulf of Suez in the northwest and to the Gulf of Aqaba in the east. The Sinai Peninsula lies between these two gulfs. To the south, the Red Sea narrows in the Bab al-Mendab Straits, through which an estimated 3.2 million barrels of oil a day flow toward Europe, and then merges with the Gulf of Aden, part of the Arabian Sea. The Red Sea is a strategic area vital to global shipping.<sup>38, 39, 40</sup>

## Persian Gulf

The Persian Gulf is Saudi Arabia's eastern maritime border, separating the Arabian Peninsula from Iran. The Persian Gulf also borders Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. It is approximately 990 km (615 mi) long with a width ranging from 55 km (34 mi) to 370 km (230 mi). The depth of its waters ranges from 50 m (164 ft) to 90 m (295 ft). The water temperature is warm, and the water salinity level is as high as 40% - a result of a high rate of evaporation and low inflow of fresh water. Oil from the Gulf states travels through the Persian Gulf, making it one of the most strategic waterways in the world. The Persian Gulf has more than 700 billion barrels of proven oil reserves and nearly 45% of the world's natural gas reserves.<sup>41, 42, 43</sup>



King Abdullah Financial District, City of Riyadh  
Flickr / Maher Najm

## Major Cities

### Riyadh



New development in Riyadh  
Flickr / Maher Najm

Riyadh, which means a place of gardens and trees (rawdah), is the capital and largest city of Saudi Arabia. Riyadh became one of the wealthiest and fastest growing cities in the world, turning itself from a small village of mud bricks into a modern metropolis 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. Large plastic and metal factories are located in and around the city. The government-owned petrol company Aramco and its refineries are the biggest sources of employment.<sup>44, 45, 46</sup>

The city's population is divided into Saudi and non-Saudi residents. According to the



Port city of Jeddah  
Flickr / rparson86

40s° C (over 100s° F). In the winter, temperatures are much cooler, averaging in the low 10s° C (low 50s° F).<sup>49</sup>

There are ten universities in Riyadh, including King Saud University, the top university in the country. 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.<sup>51</sup>

## Jeddah

With a population of just over 4 million people in 2017, the ancient commercial port city of Jeddah is the nation's second largest city. Jeddah is the point of entry for most pilgrims who come for the hajj to Mecca and Medina. The city covers a huge area in the Hejaz region in western Saudi Arabia, on the coast of the Red Sea. Jeddah's location on an ancient trade route has made it Saudi Arabia's most cosmopolitan city. Consequently, unlike the more conservative Riyadh, Jeddah has a more laid-back atmosphere. Some of the people of Jeddah speak Hejazi, one of the Arabic dialects. There is also a large non-Saudi population in Jeddah.<sup>52, 53, 54</sup>



City of Jeddah  
Flickr / AlejandroVN

Jeddah was the diplomatic capital of Saudi Arabia until the mid-1980s when the Saudi



*Sacred Mosque, the Masjid al-Haram in City of Mecca  
Flickr / Maher Najm*

ministry of foreign affairs and the embassies of foreign countries were moved to Riyadh.<sup>55</sup>

Temperatures in the summer reach the low 40s° C (over 100° F) and in the winter, averaging 18° C (mid-60s° F).<sup>56</sup>

The city's economy has diversified from depending exclusively on pilgrims and fishing to include steel-rolling mills, oil refineries, and the manufacture of cement, clothing, and pottery. King Abdul Aziz International Airport located outside Jeddah is Saudi

Arabia's busiest airport. The Hajj terminal is the fourth largest terminal in the world.<sup>57, 58, 59</sup>

## *Mecca (Makkah)*

Mecca, the holiest city of Islam and home to 1.3 million people, is nestled in the hills approximately 70 km (42 mi) southeast of Jeddah in the Hejaz region.<sup>60</sup>



*Mecca, as seen from Jabal al-Nour, 2009  
Wikimedia / Adiput*

Mecca is the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad and the center of the Islamic world. The world's one billion Muslims turn toward Mecca to pray five times a day. As the most sacred Muslim city, only Muslims can enter it. During the 10th month of the Islamic calendar, millions of Muslims make the yearly hajj to Mecca. Islam's holiest shrine, the Ka'aba, is located inside the Grand Mosque of Mecca. Each pilgrim is required to walk around the Ka'aba seven times and touch the Black Stone, which located in the eastern corner of the shrine.<sup>61, 62</sup>

Temperatures in Mecca soar above 40° C (105° F) from May to October. Although Mecca gets little rain, mostly between November and January, it is vulnerable to flash floods. The city's livelihood depends primarily on revenues from pilgrims.<sup>65, 66</sup>

On 20 November 1979, a group of armed Muslim extremists who claimed to have with them the new redeemer, the Mahdi, seized the Grand Mosque and called the people to rebel against the monarchy. Thousands of pilgrims were taken hostage at the site. Saudi security forces, with the help of French commandos, reclaimed the mosque and after two-weeks of fighting. At least 200 people died in the incident, including pilgrims, security forces, and insurgents.<sup>67</sup>

### *Medina (Madinah)*

Called Al-Madīnah al-Munawwarah (the Luminous City), Medina is located in the Hejaz region 450 km (280 mi) from Mecca by road. Medina was a place of refuge for the Prophet Muhammad after he fled from Mecca. In Medina he built a power base of new converts to Islam, and, later, returned to Mecca and forced residents to convert. Like Mecca, only Muslims can visit Medina, the burial place of the prophet and the second holiest city in Islam after Mecca. Today, the Prophet Mosque is visited by pilgrims on the way back from Mecca.<sup>68, 69</sup>



*City of Medina  
Flickr / marviikad*

With a population of 1.3 million people, Medina is home to 25 universities, including the Islamic University of Madinah, founded in 1961, and Taibah University.<sup>70, 71</sup> Prince Mohammad Bin Abdulaziz International Airport (also called Medina Airport) is among the largest airports in the country. It has served Medina since 1974 and handles domestic and international flights, mainly from the Middle East and other Islamic countries. During the Hajj season, the airport sees a large volume of charter traffic.<sup>72, 73</sup>

## *Dhahran-Dammam-al-Khobar*

Dhahran, Dammam, and Al Khobar form the Dammam Area. Dhahran is located 6 miles (10 km) west of Khobar in northeastern Saudi Arabia. This combined metropolitan area in the oil-producing Eastern Province lies on the Persian Gulf. Dhahran was the site of the headquarters of Saudi Aramco (Arabian American Oil Company). Saudi Arabia's largest military airbase, used by U.S. forces during the Persian Gulf War in 1991, is located in Dhahran.<sup>74</sup>



*Dhahran Mall, City of Dhahran  
Flickr / Yazeed Al Masoud*

The area is served by Dammam's King Fahd International Airport. The largest seaport on the eastern coast of Saudi Arabia is the port of Al-Dammām. Dhahran is home to King Fahd Petroleum and Minerals University. Al-Dammām, which is a petroleum and natural gas center, is home to King Faisal University.<sup>75, 76</sup>

## History

### *Early History*



*Ancient dwellings near Medina  
Flickr / Omar A.*

The Arabian Peninsula, including the area of modern-day Saudi Arabia, was inhabited for thousands of years. As early as 1000 BCE, trade routes crossed the region, transporting agricultural goods between the Nile Valley and Mesopotamia (today's Iraq). People lived in small caravan cities or kingdoms and were often at war with each other. Political fragmentation persisted through the mid-6th century CE when the unification of the peninsula began.<sup>77, 78, 79</sup>



## Birth and Spread of Islam

The history of the region, and indeed the world, changed after 570 when the Prophet Muhammad was born in Mecca. Muslims believe that around 610 Muhammad began receiving revelations from God. By 613, Muhammad began to make his revelations public, and by 618 he had sufficient followers to concern regional authorities. Forced to leave Mecca, Muhammad and his followers traveled throughout the region, gaining converts to the new religion of Islam. Upon Muhammad's death in 632, most of Arabia was loyal to the prophet and his new religion. His successors, the caliphs, quickly gained control over a vast empire and united Arabs against their Roman and Persian enemies. The Arabs soon had control of an area that extended from Spain to Pakistan.<sup>82, 83</sup>



The Battle of Badr  
Wikimedia / Lutfi Abdullah

## Ottoman Conquest

The Ottoman Turks gained control of the Hejaz region of western Arabia and the two holiest Muslim cities in 1516 and exerted their influence on the region until the end of World War I in 1918. Over the centuries, they launched various campaigns to subdue Arab territories.<sup>84, 85</sup>

## Origins of the Saud Family



Map of first Saudi State (1744-1818)  
Wikimedia / Ameen Mohammad

Al-Dariyah, in the Nejd region near the modern capital of Riyadh, has been the historic hometown of the al-Saud family since the 16th century. The town was ruled by a Bedouin chieftain named Mani al-Muraidi and later by his son Rabia. For the next several centuries, their descendants ruled the town and its surroundings.<sup>86, 87</sup>

In 1726, after decades of power struggles and assassinations, Muraidi's

great-great-great-grandson, Sheikh Muhammad bin Saud, the forbearer of the present Saud family, became emir and in 1744, forged an alliance with a Sunni cleric, Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism. The two leaders sealed their alliance with an oath and the marriage of their children (Muhammad bin Saud's son, Abdul Aziz, married the daughter of Imam Muhammad) and began a holy war to purify Arabia from other Muslim sects.<sup>88, 89, 90</sup>

## First Saudi State



Abdullah bin Saud bin Abdul Aziz, the last governor of the First Saudi State  
Wikimedia / Ammar shaker

Muhammad bin Saud offered protection to the founder of Wahhabi Islam from Shia Muslims who had revered their imams (religious leaders) for centuries and rejected the cleric's belief in one God in whom all powers rested. To advance Wahhabi Islam, Muhammad bin Saud attacked regional villages and towns, wiping out popular Shia practices.<sup>91, 92</sup>

After the death of Muhammad bin Saud in 1765, his son, Abdul Aziz bin Muhammed bin Saud, became the new ruler and founded what was later known as the First Saudi State. In 1773, he conquered Riyadh and in 1792, after Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab died, assumed the title of imam, thus presenting himself as a political and religious figure. By 1800, the al-Saud family and Wahhabism had extended their control all

over the Nejd. Then in 1803, Abdul Aziz bin Muhammed was assassinated.<sup>93, 94</sup>

In 1803 Saud, the son of Abdul Aziz provoked the Ottomans by capturing Mecca and the Hejaz. Before he died in 1814, he lost the Hejaz to Muhammad Ali, the viceroy of Egypt, which was under Ottoman rule. In 1818, under instructions from the Ottomans, Muhammad Ali captured and razed Ad-Dariyah and later captured Riyadh and dismantled the emerging Saudi state. Abdullah bin Saud bin Abdul Aziz, who had ruled since the death of his father, was sent to Istanbul and beheaded in 1818. For



Map of the Second Saudi State  
Wikimedia / Ameen Mohammad

the next five years, the Ottomans dominated the region, stripping the Saud family of power.<sup>95</sup>

### *Second Saudi State*



*Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, the founding father and first king of Saudi Arabia*  
Wikimedia / Lcxzdf56

In 1821, Turki bin Abdullah, a cousin of Saud bin Abdul Aziz, recaptured Ad-Dariyah and proceeded to Riyadh, which became the new base for the House of Saud. Thus the dynasty was restored and the second Saudi state began. Between 1824 and 1834, Turki reclaimed the rest of Nejd and consolidated his control over the area. In 1834, Turki was assassinated by his cousin, and Turki's eldest son, Faisal, became Imam. After losing to Egyptian forces in 1838, Faisal was sent to Cairo. Five years later, he escaped, reestablished Wahhabi rule, and resumed his reign until 1865.<sup>96, 97</sup>

Abdul Rahman bin Faisal Al Saud, the young son of Faisal, assumed leadership of the family in 1889 after several tumultuous years of drought and civil war, which fragmented the house of Saud. Eventually, Abdul Rahman moved to the outskirts of the Rub al-Khali (the Empty Quarter) with his son, Abdul Aziz (known as Ibn Saud), the future king of Saudi Arabia.<sup>98, 99</sup>

### *Third Saudi State*

In 1902 Ibn Saud (Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud) recaptured Riyadh. In the following years, he expanded his control over the Arabian Peninsula and reestablished the Saudi state. He unified warring tribes and laid the foundations for modern Saudi Arabia.<sup>100, 101</sup>

In 1915, Ibn Saud solidified his power with the Anglo-Saudi Friendship Treaty, in which the British recognized Saudi control of Nejd, Hasa, Qatif, and Jubail. In 1925 Ibn Saud declared himself king. This resulted in a new treaty with the British, which included a pledge to respect other British client states on the Arabian Peninsula. In 1932, Ibn Saud proclaimed the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.<sup>102</sup>

## Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – King Abdul Aziz (1931-1953)



King Abd al-Aziz (Ibn Saud)  
Courtesy Wikimedia.org

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was born on 23 September 1932, when a royal decree under the name of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia unified the kingdoms of the Hejaz and Nejd, which had been administered separately since 1927. Ibn Saud took the name, King Abdul Aziz.<sup>103</sup>

Since the survival of the monarchy depended on establishing a royal lineage, the king married women from all the major tribes. By the time of his death, King Abdul Aziz

had allegedly married as many as 100 wives, who produced about 160 offspring; 42 of which were boys.<sup>104, 105</sup>

The discovery of oil at Dammam in 1938 by American geologists transitioned the economy from tourism (pilgrimage) to hydrocarbons production and export. In 1953, King Abdul Aziz al Saud died and was succeeded by his son Saud bin Abdul Aziz.<sup>106, 107</sup>

## King Saud (1953-1964)

After King Saud bin Abdul Aziz al Saud took over, the monarchy was plagued by rivalries and factionalism for 20 years. King Saud spent lavishly and kept a court of 5,000 people in addition to harems and slaves. His brother, Faisal, sought control of the state treasury as a way to curb reckless spending and create a sound national economy. As huge profits from oil flowed through the treasury, the government became increasingly corrupt and anti-Western sentiments began to grow.<sup>108, 109</sup>



King Ibn Saud converses with President Franklin D. Roos  
Wikimedia / U.S. Army Signal Corps

Opposition movements throughout the kingdom called for a constitution, an end to foreign domination, and more civil rights. The government responded with a return to traditional values. Large-scale protests resulted in a brutal suppression; the army and national guard were expanded.<sup>110</sup>

In 1957, as ties with the United States became more cordial, King Saud visited President Eisenhower in Washington. Senior members of the royal family became increasingly frustrated with King Saud's appointment of his inexperienced sons to important government positions. The king's continued reckless spending prompted the Saud family to urge him to relinquish power to his brother Faisal, who had long been considered the more pragmatic and pious of the brothers. Faisal assumed executive powers in March 1958 and immediately introduced a series of extreme economic measures that balanced the budget and stabilized the currency.<sup>111, 112</sup>



*King Saud, 1957*  
Courtesy Wikimedia.org

### *King Faisal (1964-1975)*



*King Faisal (1964-1975)*  
Wikimedia / Saudi Press Agency

In 1964, the ulama, a body of Muslim clerics, issued a fatwa deposing King Saud and making his brother Faisal king. Faisal created a ministry of justice and persuaded his brothers to observe the principle of birth order to regulate the royal succession. He also issued a decree making the king head of state and head of government (prime minister). His rule ended in 1975 when he was assassinated by a nephew.<sup>113, 114</sup>

### *King Khalid (1975-1982)*

Khalid, who was the crown prince, became king following King Faisal's death. A more liberal ruler, he strengthened ties with Arab neighbors. Following the takeover of the Grand Mosque by dissidents in 1979 and problems with the Shiites in the Eastern province in 1980, the government formed a consultative council, the Majlis al-Shura.<sup>115</sup>

## King Fahd (1982-2005)



Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen meets with King Fahd-  
Wikimedia / Helene C. Stikke

Fahd, Khalid's half-brother, became king in 1982. Fahd was the first son of Hassa Sudairi, the favorite wife of Ibn Saud, the founder of the kingdom. Facing a 20% reduction in oil revenues, the government quickly reduced the number of foreign workers in a bid to "Saudiize" the labor force. Growing class divisions helped fuel anti-Western sentiments and discontent with corruption. The pressure increased when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990.<sup>116, 117, 118</sup>

King Fahd allowed U.S. forces to stay on Saudi territory, a move that prompted serious criticism since he was the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. Besieged by the moderates and the conservatives, King 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, King 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.<sup>119, 120</sup>

## King Abdullah (2005-2015)

Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud became the sixth king of Saudi Arabia at the age of 81. King Abdullah tried to balance the concerns of conservative clerics with increased demands for political reform and greater human rights. 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.<sup>121, 122, 123</sup>



King Abdullah (2005-2015) & King Salman and Crown Prince  
Mohammed bin Salman (2015)  
Flickr / U.S. Department of State

## King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (2015)

In January 2015, Crown Prince Salman became the new king. King Salman bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud is one of the “Sudairi Seven,” the most influential clan in the House of Saud. The Sudairi Seven are the sons of King Abdul Aziz, the founder of the kingdom, and Hussa bint Ahmad Al Sudairi, also known as Umm Fahd, the mother of King Fahd. In 2017, King Salman appointed his son, Mohammed bin Salman, as crown prince, after removing for the second time a crown prince in line to the throne. In November of that year, the crown prince ordered a high-profile purge of members of the elite suspected of corruption. 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. The young prince controls all the major parts of government including defense and the economy. He also presents himself as a reformer, including the decision to allow women to drive.<sup>126, 127</sup>



Ministry of the Interior building in Riyadh  
Flickr / Jon Rawlinson

## Government



Ministry of the Interior building in Riyadh  
Flickr / Stephen Downes

and defense of the nation.<sup>129, 130</sup>

The Quran and the Sunna serve as the country’s constitution. Islam is the official religion, and all Saudis are required by law to be Muslims.<sup>128</sup>

Saudi Arabia is a monarchy ruled by a king who is head of state and government. The rulers of the country are male descendants of the founder, King Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud. The king appoints the crown prince, ensures the application of Sharia law, and supervises the protection

The council of ministers also called the cabinet, drafts and oversees the implementation

of domestic, foreign, financial, economic, educational, and defense policies. Resolutions are passed by a majority vote. In case of a tie, the king casts the tie-breaking vote. The council represents 22 government ministries and is headed by the king, who is the prime minister, and his deputy, the crown prince. The king or his deputy preside over the council, which meets once a week. The council of ministers is advised by the Majlis al-Shura.<sup>131, 132</sup>



*Deera Square  
Wikimedia / Lukethompson*

The Majlis al-Shura, or consultative council, advises the king on a range of issues such as human rights, education, culture, foreign and Islamic affairs, health, economy, finance, and security. Council members can propose new laws, amend existing laws, and review domestic and foreign policies. The king, who is the final arbiter of state affairs, has to approve their recommendations. The king can appoint and dismiss ministers and advisors. He also has the power to dissolve the council or restructure it. Since 2005, the council has had 150 members appointed by the king to renewable four-year terms.<sup>133, 134</sup>

The Judicial system is based on Islamic law (Sharia) for both criminal and civil cases. Sharia law is based on the Quran and the Sunna, which are the practices and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad during his lifetime. The third source of Sharia law is Ijma, the consensus of opinion of Muslim scholars on issues that are not mentioned in the Quran or the Sunna; the fourth source is analogy (qias). Under Sharia law, a defendant is presumed innocent until proven guilty.

The king presides at the top of the legal system and functions as the final court of appeal and grantor of pardons. The highest judicial authority in the land is the supreme court, which has authority to establish and abolish courts and to name judges. The court system consists of three parts. The largest is the Sharia Courts, which hear most cases. These courts are divided into the Supreme Judicial Council, Courts of First Instance, and Courts of Cessation. Supplemental courts include the Board of Grievances, which hears cases that involve the government. The last part of the court system consists of special commercial, labor, and administrative courts.<sup>135</sup> Civil and political rights activists and pro-reform advocates are usually referred to the Specialized Criminal Court, which is the country's counterterrorism tribunal.<sup>136</sup>



Capital punishment can be imposed for a range of nonviolent offenses, including apostasy, sorcery, and adultery - although these are often reduced on appeal - and the government implements capital punishment for nonviolent crimes such as trafficking drugs or participating in violent demonstrations.



Man reading a newspaper  
Flickr / Waleed Alzuhair

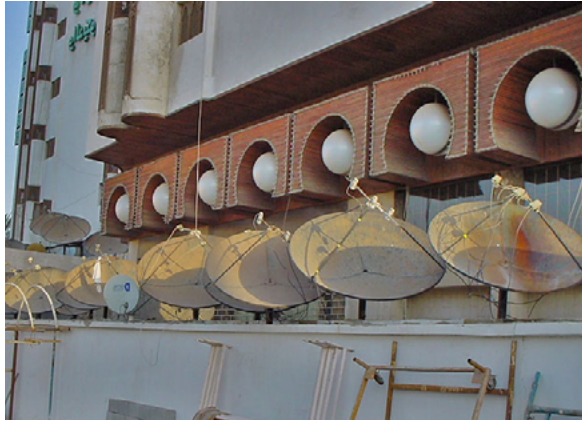
A panel of five supreme court judges must uphold a death sentence unanimously after a five-judge appellate court affirms it. Public displays of bodies after executions, along with the separated head if beheaded, are meant to act as a deterrent. Defendants have no right to seek pardon or commutation of a death penalty, but the king issues pardons during the holy month of Ramadan. Saudi Arabia executes more people than any country except China and Iran.<sup>137, 138, 139</sup>

## Media



Alyoum Newspaper headquarter in Dammam  
Flickr / Waleed Alzuhair

Saudi Arabia has a reputation as one of the most repressive media environments in the world. On the press freedom index, Saudi Arabia ranks 169 out of 180 countries. The government controls domestic media content and dominates regional print and satellite-television coverage. Saudi TV is state-run and operates four networks, including the news network Al-Ikhbariya. Private TV and radio stations are prohibited from operating within the country, but pan-Arab programs are available via satellite and subscription (Saudi investors are major players in the pan-Arab TV industry.) Newspapers are created by royal decree; there are more than a dozen daily publications in the country. Pan-Arab newspapers, though censored, are available. Self-censorship is pervasive. In 2018, Saudi authorities blocked Qatari news sites that had been critical of Riyadh and demanded that Qatar shut down the TV network Al-Jazeera.<sup>140, 141, 142</sup>



*Dishes outside of the building  
Flickr / otzberg*

Saudi nationals run considerable risks when publishing materials critical of the Saudi government even in non-Saudi newspapers. In October 2018, an international outcry erupted when Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi dissident, and columnist for the Washington Post, disappeared after entering the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Turkish authorities claimed that Khashoggi was murdered and dismembered inside the building by a Saudi team sent by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman . The crown prince and King Salman denied knowledge of the plot.<sup>134, 144, 145</sup>

There are no codified restrictions on freedom of expression, but there are serious consequences for anyone who engages in blasphemy, insults religion, endangers national unity, or defames the king. Journalists who publish material that is critical of the royal family, religious establishments, or Islam, can be fined or imprisoned.<sup>146</sup>

Over 30 million Saudis (about 90% of the population) are active internet users, but access is heavily filtered and censored.<sup>147</sup> The government prohibits the viewing of pornography, non-recognized Islamic movements, and political sites. Citizens and journalists who post online are watched closely and can be tried under the country's cybercrime or counterterrorism laws.<sup>148</sup>

Social media plays an important role in the daily life of Saudis. Over 75% of Saudis have active social media accounts. About 10% of Facebook users in Arab countries are from Saudi Arabia. In addition, Saudi Arabia has the highest per capita YouTube users of any country in the world. Millions of Saudis use Twitter, Instagram, and social chat applications such as WhatsApp, Messenger, Skype, and Snapchat. In 2011, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, who owns the Rotana media empire, invested USD 300 million in Twitter.<sup>149, 150</sup>



*Saudi Arabian Oil Company (Aramco) headquarters in  
Dhahran  
Flickr / Eagleamn*

## Economy



*King Abdullah Financial Center  
Wikimedia / B.alotaby*

The World Bank classifies Saudi Arabia as a high-income country. The country is a member of the G-20 and the world's biggest oil exporter. Oil exports have driven economic growth for decades - 90% of the country's GDP and 60% of fiscal revenues come from oil. Affluent Saudis established the country as a large importer of consumer goods and services. Until recently, Saudi Arabia was called a “nanny state” as Saudis enjoyed free health care and education through college, cheap utilities and gasoline, access to well-paying government jobs, and no taxes.<sup>151, 152</sup>

A plunge in oil prices starting in 2014 and a rapidly growing population have eroded the kingdom's healthy trade surplus and forced the Saudis to find new ways to reduce their reliance on income from crude exports.<sup>153, 154</sup>

### *Vision 2030*

In April 2016, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman announced Vision 2030, a plan to diversify Saudi Arabia's economy and end its dependence on oil. The plan aimed at shrinking the public sector and building a strong private sector, which would become the main employer in the country and a vehicle for economic growth. The second part of Vision 2030 was a plan to create a large sovereign wealth fund by selling a 5% stake in Saudi Aramco, the giant state oil company. The move would be the world's biggest initial public offering. The International Monetary Fund expressed doubts about the plan while mildly endorsing it.<sup>155, 156, 157</sup>

### *Foreign workers*

Saudi Arabia is the world's fourth largest labor market, home to 11 million foreign workers from more than a hundred countries. Foreign workers are employed primarily in manual labor, accounting, service, and domestic work. 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.<sup>158, 159, 160</sup>



*Blacksmith shops in Gateef, Eastern Province  
Flickr / Waleed Alzuhair*

## Employment



*A dates merchant at the Janadriah  
Flickr / Waleed Alzuhair*

The unemployment rate among Saudi citizens climbed to a record 12.9% in 2018. Tax hikes and austerity measures aimed at reducing the country's budget deficit hurt private sector employers and slowed down job creation. Most of the country's job seekers are young adults, who make up about half of the population.<sup>161, 162, 163</sup> 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. The measure aims to increase female participation in the workforce to 30%.<sup>164, 165</sup>

## Outlook

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. Non-oil GDP is expected to expand about 3% a year. The fiscal deficit is expected to narrow only slightly. Inflation is projected to be volatile, but not higher than 5%. 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.<sup>166, 167</sup>

## Ethnic Groups



Arab man with his donkey in Janadriah  
Flickr / Waleed Alzuhair

The tribes of Saudi Arabia consider themselves pure “Arabs” based on their ancestry in the indigenous peoples of the peninsula. Over the centuries, other ethnic groups have migrated to the peninsula and settled there. Estimates of ethnicity are 90% Arab and 10% Afro-Asian.<sup>168, 169</sup>

Regionalism plays an important role in Saudi culture. Some people in the Hejaz region are the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad and referred to as Ashraf. Some groups trace their lineage to ancient Arab tribes while other people of Arabic

origins came from beyond the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>170</sup>

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 mostly domestic workers. Pakistanis, Filipinos, Bangladeshis, Egyptians, and Yemenites came to Saudi Arabia as foreign workers and remained there.<sup>171</sup>



Arab man wearing thobe and gutra in Al  
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Flickr / Charles Roffey

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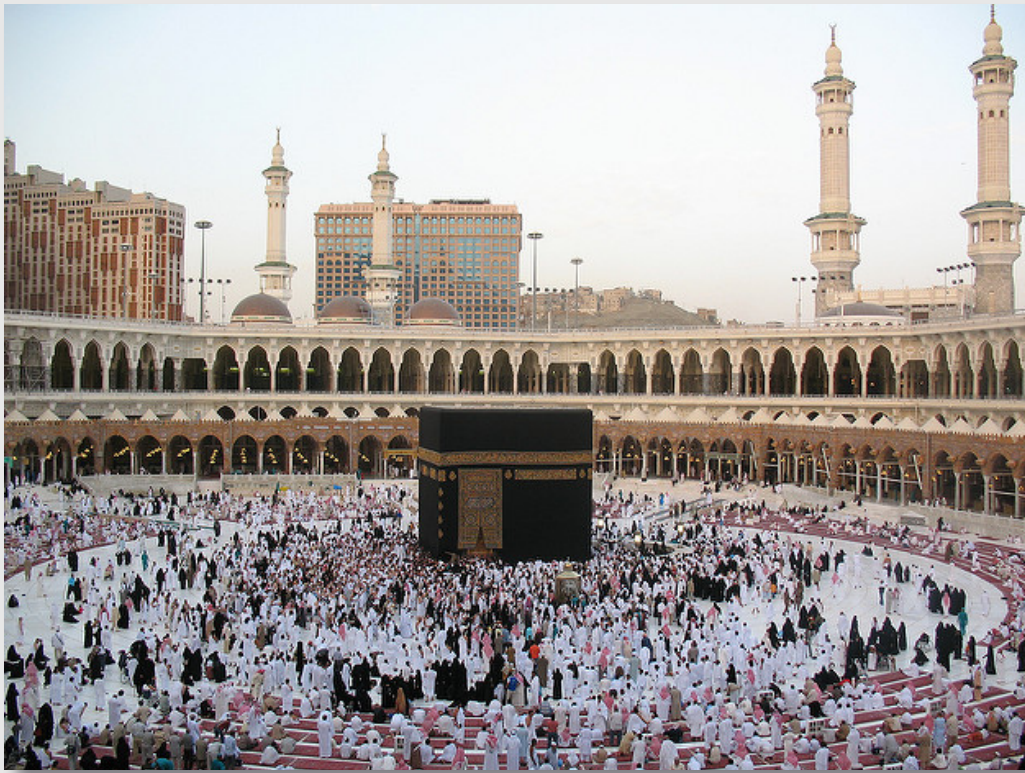
# Arabic-Saudi Cultural Orientation

## Chapter 1 | Profile

### Assessment

1. The Persian Gulf forms the western border of Saudi Arabia.
2. Women can serve on the Majlis al-Shura, or consultative council.
3. Vision 2030 is a comprehensive reform initiative of Saudi Arabia.
4. The “Sudairi Seven” are the seven minarets that encircle the Great Mosque of Mecca.
5. Rub al-Khali is a sacred mountain where Muslim pilgrims commemorate the birth of Abraham.

*Assessment Answers: 1. False; 2. True; 3. True; 4. False; 5. False*



*Great Mosque of Mecca  
Flickr / marviikad*

## Chapter 2 | Arabic-Saudi Cultural Orientation

# Religion

## Introduction

The Saudi constitution, which was adopted by a royal decree in 1992, states that Saudi Arabia is an Arab Islamic state with Islam as its religion. The government derives its power from the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. The king carries the secondary title of khadam al-haramain al-sharifain or Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques.<sup>1, 2, 3</sup>

Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad and of Islam and is home to Islam's two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina. About 93% of the population is

Muslim, with a majority of Sunni Muslims and an estimated 10% to 15% Shia minority. Most Saudis are followers of the ultraconservative Wahhabi interpretation of the Quran. The influence of religion on the nation and on daily life is sweeping. From the opening words of all government documents to dress codes and daily interactions, the influence of Islam is always present. Islam is the only religion that can be practiced openly in the country.<sup>4, 5</sup>



Muslims gathered in the Grand Mosque in Mecca  
Flickr / Thamer Al-Hassan

## Islam



Muslims facing the Kaaba when performing salat  
Flickr / Farid Iqbal Ibrahim

Islam is the second-largest religion in the world after Christianity, with about 1.8 billion followers, roughly 24% of the global population.<sup>6</sup> The Sunni branch of Islam is the dominant majority, but approximately 15% of the world's Muslims count themselves as Shiites, adherents of Shia Islam.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

All Saudi nationals are Muslims.<sup>9</sup> The majority are Sunnis, but a significant minority are Shiites, most of whom are located in the eastern regions.<sup>10</sup> Relations between Sunnis and Shiites are tense and have sometimes escalated into violence.<sup>11, 12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>



Mosque of the Response  
Flickr / Omar A.

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 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.<sup>14, 15</sup>

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 clean cloth and then buried where people cannot walk over it.<sup>16, 17</sup>

### *Sunni and Shia Islam*

After Muhammad’s death, political disagreements about who would succeed him led to divisions that persist until today. His closest companions wanted his successor to come from their circle, but others believed that only a family member could be the legitimate leader of Islam. A third group called the Umayyads, the leaders of Muhammad’s tribe, sought to be the only determiners of his successor.<sup>18,</sup>

<sup>19, 20</sup>



Praying for forgiveness, Mecca  
Flickr / Al Jazeera English

Muhammad’s associates were able to choose his advisor, Abu Bakr, as the first caliph, or successor. Those who favored Ali, a cousin to Muhammad 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. His passivity propelled disappointed



Muslims praying at the Maqam Ibrahim's crystal dome  
Flickr / Moataz1997

followers to murder 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 in an event of ritualistic self-flagellation and mourning called Ashura.<sup>21, 22</sup> Beliefs about succession later developed into religious rather than political differences, expanding the gap between Sunni and Shia Islam.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24, 25</sup>

## Islam in Saudi Arabia

The form of Islam embraced by Sunnis in Saudi Arabia and by the government is Wahhabism.

Wahhabism demands a literal interpretation of the Quran. Strict Wahhabists consider followers of all other religions, including other forms of Islam, as heathens and enemies of Islam. The movement grew from the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, 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.<sup>26,</sup>

<sup>27, 28</sup>

Facing opposition to Wahhabism, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab aligned with the house of Saud, which



Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien Mosque  
Flickr / Bernard Spragg. NZ





*Conservative Muslims at the mosque*  
Flickr / Omar A.

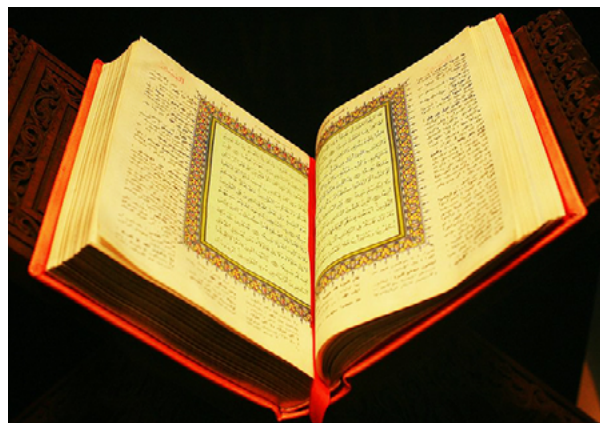
Islam throughout the Middle East.<sup>30, 31</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup>

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. 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.<sup>33, 34</sup>

## Religion and Government

Saudi Arabia is a theocracy with no separation of church and state. The Quran and Sunna (traditions and practices based on the life of the Prophet Muhammad) serve as the nation's constitution, and religion is evident in all government regulations and practices. The government prohibits buildings of worship for any other forms of religion and requires the inclusion of Islamic teachings in the school curriculum at all levels.<sup>35</sup>



*The Quran serves as the nation's constitution*  
Wikimedia / Cezary Piwowarski



*Saudi women following a strict dress code  
Flickr / Tribes of the World*

The government rejects Shia and Sufi interpretations of Islam in public statements, and clerics are required to espouse only government interpretation of Sunni Islam. Furthermore, public worship by adherents of other religions is not allowed, and the religious authorities systematically discriminate against religious minorities, such as Twelver Shia and Ismailis, in public education, the justice system, and employment.<sup>36</sup>

The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) or mutaween, often referred to by westerners as “religious police,” enforces standards of public religious observance and gender segregation norms. The commission acts in cooperation with security forces.<sup>37</sup> In 2016, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced measures to reform the most intrusive practices of the mutaween and make the kingdom more tolerant.<sup>38</sup>

Women routinely face government-sanctioned discrimination. Although the government pledged to review the rules of the male guardian system and loosen some of the restrictions, women’s access to government services can still be jeopardized without a male guardian’s consent.<sup>39, 40</sup>

Women’s ability to marry, travel, have a fair trial, receive medical care, open a savings account, and enroll in school conform to a strict interpretation of Islamic laws and require the consent of a male guardian such as father, husband, son, or uncle. Women must also follow a strict dress code.<sup>41, 42</sup>

The U.S. Department of State has designated Saudi Arabia a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) since 2004 for its systematic violations of religious freedom.<sup>43, 44</sup>



*Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman  
Flickr / U.S. Secretary of Defense*

## Influence of Religion on Daily Life



*Men-only rest area in Grand Mosque in Medina  
Flickr / Citizen59*

Saudi Arabia is the most gender-segregated country in the world, and religion permeates every aspect of social life in the kingdom. Public buildings such as offices, banks and universities have separate entrances for women. Public transportation, beaches, and amusement parks are also segregated. Unlawful mixing can lead to criminal charges and women usually face harsher punishment than men.<sup>45</sup>

Since men and women do not socialize in public, nightlife consists of family strolls, dining out in restaurants and hotels, shopping, playing cards in coffee shops, and bowling in men-only bowling halls. Alcohol is prohibited, and western style bars, nightclubs, or discos are nonexistent. Mixed dance and birthday parties, as well as live music shows, are conducted in closed-door venues and by invitation only. In 2018, the kingdom lifted the ban on cinemas and opened its first movie theater in 35 years. Movie theaters are not to be segregated by gender.<sup>46, 47</sup>

Dining establishments are strictly segregated, and women who attempt to enter a restaurant or other eating establishment are often turned away. Some shopping centers prohibit men from entering certain floors reserved for women.<sup>48, 49, 50</sup>

The choice of clothing is regulated by the government interpretation of Islamic law. Women are required to wear veils and abayas (long, flowing black garments covering everything but the hands and feet). The most traditional women wear the niqab, a garment that covers the entire face except for the eyes. Less conservative women wear the hijab, a headscarf that covers the hair.<sup>51, 52</sup> Men are prohibited from wearing shorts, tight pants, or transparent clothing. Even the



*Women wearing niqab and hijab, Al Balad, Jeddah  
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

choice of underwear is prescribed. Although specific garments may vary, underpants must be loose fitting and extend from the navel to the middle of the thigh or calf. Men are required to wear a t-shirt and loose fitting trousers called sirwal under the traditional long white robe (thoub or thobe).<sup>53, 54</sup>

Daily activities in Saudi Arabia are regulated by the five daily calls to prayer when everything comes to a halt and the faithful face Mecca and pray.<sup>55</sup> All shops, restaurants, and places of business must close for approximately half an hour during each call to prayer.<sup>56, 57</sup> Prayers take place around dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and mid-evening. Exact prayer times are published on television or on the internet for the convenience of Muslims and the guidance of foreigners.<sup>58</sup>

## Religious Convention and Gender Roles



*Only men working in this office, Riyadh  
Flickr / Mohd Azli Abdul Malek*

Gender segregation laws prevent 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, some restrictions are still in place. For example, drug stores and optics shops employ women, but they have to be separated from male workers and customers, and 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.<sup>59, 60</sup>

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. That same year, when the ban on women drivers was removed, Uber and Careem, the ride-hailing apps began hiring women as professional drivers (captinahs).<sup>62, 63, 64</sup> Male drivers who work in ride-sharing companies serve female customers without getting in serious trouble with the religious police.<sup>65</sup>

The mutaween or religious police patrol the streets and the malls to enforce the strict interpretation of Islamic law, and until recently had arrest powers. Known for their zeal to enforce 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 fifty were injured in the fire.<sup>66, 67</sup>



Women's section of the Masjid Nabawi  
Flickr / Samira

## Religious Holidays

### *Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha*



Saudi sheep for Eid al-Adha, the feast of slaughter, Mecca  
Flickr / Charles Roffey

Saudi Arabia recognizes two Islamic holidays: the Eid al-Fitr (Festival of Breaking Fast) and the Eid al-Adha (Feast of Sacrifice). Eid al-Fitr marks the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. Eid al-Adha is the feast of slaughter that celebrates the end of the pilgrimage season. The official calendar of the country is the Islamic lunar calendar, which is 13 days shorter than the Western solar calendar. Thus, these festivals occur at different times each year, and the timing of each depends on the moon phases.<sup>68, 69</sup>

▶ Will you be celebrating Eid al-Fitr?		
Soldier:	raaH tiHtafloon b'eed il fuTir?	Will you be celebrating Eid al-Fitr?
Local:	na'am!	Yes!

Exchange 1

## Hijri New Year



*Prophet Muhammad and his followers migrated from Mecca to Medina  
Flickr / khadim-un-nabi Rao*

New Year's Day is celebrated on the first day of the month of Muharram, which is the first month on the Islamic lunar calendar. Hijri refers to the Arabic word hijrah, which means migration and commemorates the migration of the Prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina. The year 2018 was equivalent to the year 1440 on the Islamic calendar.<sup>70</sup>

The nation's Shia Muslims observe the new year with ten days of mourning in honor of the prophet's first cousin Ali and his grandson Imam Hussein Ibn Ali, whom they consider the rightful successors of the Prophet Muhammad. For Sunnis, it is a low key holiday, spent with family commemorating the anniversary of the death of the first Caliph, Abu Bakr. For everyone, it is a time of renewal. Many Saudis exchange gifts and cards on this day.<sup>71</sup>

## Ramadan

Ramadan, the ninth month on the Islamic calendar, is the holiest month. It is a time when Muslims fast and abstain from eating, drinking, and smoking from sunrise to sundown.<sup>72</sup> Children, pregnant women, and those who are sick are exempt from fasting. Ramadan is a time of spiritual reflection, self-restraint, and the practice of generosity. Additional prayers, known as tarawih, are offered during Ramadan. At the end of Ramadan, Muslims give alms to the poor as required by the zakat. Shops and banks usually have shorter hours during the day. In Saudi Arabia, many malls open at night to large crowds. After sunset, Saudis celebrate by shopping and dining at restaurants. Many reportedly gain weight during Ramadan. Foreigners and non-Muslims are required to observe all the regulations of Ramadan as well.<sup>73, 74, 75</sup>



*Ramadan Prayer, Riyadh Mecca to Medina  
Flickr / Thamer Al-Hassan*

## Hajj

All Muslims who are able to are required to make the hajj at least once. The purpose of the hajj, which takes place between the 8th and 13th days of the Arabic month of Hajj (dhul hannah), is to create unity among the world's Muslims. Each year nearly 2.5 million Muslims travel to the holy city of Mecca, where they put on simple white garments, erasing all signs of wealth and status. For five days, pilgrims perform a series of specified rituals. One ritual consists of throwing seven stones at pillars called Jamarat, which represent Satan, who is believed to have tempted the prophet Abraham not to sacrifice his son.<sup>76, 77</sup>



*Pilgrims during hajj in Mecca*  
Wikimedia / Ali Imran

In the last three decades, hundreds of pilgrims have died in disasters during hajj. The worst incident occurred in 2015 when 717 people were killed and more than 800 injured in a stampede near Mina, a large valley about 5 km (3 mi) from Mecca. Two weeks prior, 109 people died when a crane collapsed at the Grand Mosque.<sup>78, 79</sup>

## Places of Worship



*Masjid an-Nabawi, the Prophet's Mosque in Medina*  
Wikimedia / Muhammad Mahdi Karim

Construction of churches, synagogues, or other non-Muslim places of worship is not permitted in Saudi Arabia. Mosques are the only place of worship for Muslims. The most sacred mosque in the Muslim world, the Masjid al Haram, is located in Mecca. In the center of the mosque is the Kaaba, a small building covered in black cloth. Muslims circle this building seven times during the hajj.<sup>80</sup> The second-most sacred mosque, Masjid al Nabawi (the Prophet's Mosque), is located in Medina.

Only Muslims are permitted to enter these mosques in Mecca and Medina.<sup>81, 82</sup>



*The Kaaba in Mecca  
Flickr / Omar A.*

A non-Muslim should not attempt to enter or peer into mosques since mosques are not museums. It is not appropriate to take photographs inside a mosque. Both males and females are allowed to worship in mosques, but except for the Grand Mosque in Mecca, males and females have segregated prayer areas.<sup>83</sup> Foreigners can enter mosques, but they have to follow a strict protocol. They should not enter when the worshipers are at prayer and be respectful and quiet. Women must be

properly covered and their face free of makeup. Men should also dress modestly in long sleeve shirts and pants. Men and women should enter the mosque barefoot or wearing socks. For non-Muslim visitors, it is better to be accompanied by a Muslim when entering a mosque.<sup>84, 85</sup>

In 2016, the Saudi government opened four historical mosques in Jeddah to non-Muslims, including Al Rahma Mosque, known to locals as the “floating mosque” because its pillars are submerged under the Red Sea.<sup>86</sup>



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# Arabic-Saudi Cultural Orientation

## Chapter 2 | Religion

### Assessment

1. Most Muslims in Saudi Arabia are Shia.
2. One of the five pillars of Islam is jihad, the fight against the enemies of Islam.
3. The mutaween are Saudi Arabia's "religious police."
4. The Kaaba is the most sacred shrine on earth for all Muslims.
5. Saudi Arabia is designated as a Country of Particular Concern by the United States because it supports radical Islamist groups.

*Assessment Answers: 1. False; 2. False; 3. True; 4. True; 5. False*



*Nomad and camel  
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

## Chapter 3 | Arabic-Saudi Cultural Orientation

# Traditions

## Introduction

Saudis are the descendants of the fiercely independent nomadic tribes that once roamed the Arabian Peninsula. Tribalism is still central to life in the kingdom, and loyalties to family and tribe often trump national loyalty.<sup>1, 2, 3</sup> Family is the cornerstone of Saudi life. Much of the daily interaction takes place in the context of the family. Saudis guard their privacy and homes and, compared to other Arab peoples, have far fewer social spaces. Saudis are generally shy and more introverted than many of their Arab neighbors, perhaps as a result of centuries of the relative isolation of their nomadic ancestors.<sup>4, 5</sup>

Islam is a central feature of Saudi life and identity and permeates every aspect of life. Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad and of Islam. Most Saudis are pious Muslims, and many consider themselves the “true” Muslims. The conservative Wahhabi form of Sunni Islam is not only the national religion but also the country’s ideological foundation. There is strict segregation of the sexes, particularly in the capital of Riyadh. Alcohol is prohibited, polygyny permitted, and penalties for crimes are severe - and sometimes performed in public.<sup>6, 7</sup>



*Taif camel caravan  
Flickr / Linda Polik*

## Honor and Values

Honor is a central value and affronts to honor are taken seriously. Honor killings still occur in Saudi Arabia. Respect and the preservation of “face” are central in the lives of most Saudis.<sup>9, 10</sup>



*Meeting Prince Nawaf of the KSA  
Flickr / Curtis Palmer*

In spite of the Islamic duty to be gracious hosts, Saudis have a cautious attitude toward foreigners. This tendency for privacy and the need to protect the purity of Islam often compete with obligations for hospitality. Westerners, especially Americans, are likely to be treated with respect. While some people still view the United States as the “Great Satan,” they are careful to make distinctions between individuals and the government. Many Saudis often disrespect Asian and African foreign workers and do not regard them as their equals.<sup>11, 12, 13</sup>

## Greetings and Introductions

Between Saudis, a firm handshake along with the phrase, “*al-salam alaykum*” (peace be upon you) is the most common form of greeting. The proper response is, “*Wa alaykum al-salam*” (and upon you, peace). Greetings often include asking about a person’s family and health. Males who know each other well commonly follow the handshake by extending the left hand to the other’s right shoulder and kissing the right and left cheeks.<sup>14, 15</sup> Women follow a similar protocol when meeting other women. One to three kisses on the cheek are common. People alternate cheeks beginning with the left.<sup>16</sup> Western men should not offer their hand to women.<sup>17, 18</sup>

### ▶ How are you?

Soldier:	wish lonak?	How are you?
Local:	bKhayr, Tayib.	Fine, very well.

Exchange 2

### ▶ Hi, Mr. Mohammed.

Soldier:	marHaba aKh imHamad.	Hi, Mr. Mohammed.
Local:	ahlayn!	Hello!
Soldier:	‘asaak ibKhayr?	Are you doing well?
Local:	ee wal laa.	Yes, by God.

Exchange 3

Using first names in Saudi Arabia connotes a greater level of familiarity and intimacy than in the West. Lacking a term equivalent to “mister,” Saudis often use titles such as doctor, sheikh (chieftain), *mohandas* (engineer), and *ustadh* (professor). The title “sheikh” should only be used with first names and never with family or last names.<sup>19</sup>

### ▶ Good morning.

Soldier:	SabaHk al laa bil Khayr.	Good morning.
Local:	SabaHk al laa bin noor.	Good morning.

Exchange 4

Direct eye contact is appropriate between members of the same sex. Between members of the opposite sex, however, eye contact should be avoided.<sup>20</sup>

<b>▶ Good afternoon.</b>		
Soldier:	masaak al laa bil Khayr.	Good afternoon.
Local:	masaak al laa bin noor.	Good afternoon.

*Exchange 5*

<b>▶ Good evening!</b>		
Soldier:	masaak al laa bil Khayr!	Good evening!
Local:	masaak al laa bin noor!	Good evening!

*Exchange 6*

Saudis are comfortable with less personal space than Americans and commonly stand slightly less than an arm’s length apart. Men walk holding hands. Space between men and women, however, is generally much greater.<sup>21, 22</sup>

<b>▶ How is your family?</b>		
Soldier:	shlon ahalk?	How is your family?
Local:	maa ‘aleyhum, Taybeen.	They are doing fine, thank you.

*Exchange 7*

<b>▶ Good night!</b>		
Soldier:	tiSbiH ‘ala Khayr!	Good night!
Local:	tiSbiH ‘ala Khayr!	Good night!

*Exchange 8*



## Male/Female Interaction

The laws of Saudi Arabia provide for strict segregation by sex. Unrelated males and females should not interact with each other in either individual or group settings. Sitting next to or speaking with a man who is unrelated can potentially be seen as violating a woman's honor, leading to severe consequences, regardless of age. Even chatting on social media can cause serious harm to women.<sup>24, 25, 26</sup>



*An event that only men are allowed to attend in Riyadh  
Flickr / Eugene Kaspersky*

Public interaction between male and female family members is also restricted. Any public display of affection is inappropriate, even for married couples. Although some Saudi women are employed outside the home, most are employed in settings where their interactions are limited to other women.<sup>27</sup>

## Hospitality and Gifts



*Socializing in Najd Village Restaurant, Riyadh  
Flickr / Mohd Azli Abdul Malek*

Because Saudis value and protect the privacy of their homes and families, most socializing is done in restaurants, particularly when entertaining foreign guests. In most cases, males and females dine in separate rooms.<sup>28</sup>

When invited to a Saudi house, arrive on time and remove your shoes. If sitting cross-legged on the floor, it is considered a great offence to show the soles of the shoes or feet. Always allow the oldest members to enter the dining room before you do. Usually, guests are seated after the host, or oldest male takes his seat. The left hand is never used for drinking or eating. Rejecting refreshment when it is offered can offend the host. Speaking about politics is inappropriate, especially about the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>30, 31, 32</sup>



Giving a gift  
Flickr / UCL Institute of Education (IOE)

Do not show excessive admiration or interest in something belonging to someone else, because the host may feel obligated to give it to you and will likely be offended if the offer is refused.<sup>33</sup>

Gifts are not commonly given in Saudi culture and are normally reserved only for close friends. If you are invited to a Saudi home, it is appropriate to bring a small thank you gift such as dates, cakes, and sweets. In a business environment, gifts such as pens and prayer beads are standard.

Avoid gold jewelry or silk clothing for men because both are seen as effeminate. Platinum is acceptable, but silver is a safer gift. Make sure that the silver is marked by a government authority. Women can give flowers to their hostess. Alcohol is not acceptable as it is a violation of Muslim traditions. Gifts are not normally opened in front of the giver.<sup>34, 35, 36</sup>

▶ This gift is for you.		
Soldier:	haaThee hadeeya lik.	This gift is for you.
Local:	magdar aaKhiTh haa.	I cannot accept this.

Exchange 9

▶ I really appreciate your hospitality.		
Soldier:	mashkoor ‘ala iDh Dhiyaafa.	I really appreciate your hospitality.
Local:	wajibkum.	It is nothing.

Exchange 10

Saudi hospitality usually means that the meal offered to guests will be large, with more food than it is possible to eat. Hosts may press guests to eat more, but it is acceptable to decline. There is little after-dinner conversation, so once the dishes have been removed, it is time to leave.<sup>37</sup>

## Eating and Types of Food

### Cuisine

Saudis generally eat three meals a day. A light breakfast is eaten around 8 a.m. and often consists of cheese, yogurt, eggs, jam, and bread. The midday meal, eaten around 2:30, may consist of mutton or chicken and rice dishes, with a variety of side vegetables, salads, and fresh fruit.<sup>38, 39</sup> The evening meal is eaten after 8 p.m.<sup>40, 41</sup>

A common dinner begins with soup and a green salad, followed by rice, vegetable dishes, meat, and fruit or dessert.<sup>42</sup> According to Muslim tradition, Saudis do not eat pork or drink alcohol.<sup>43, 44</sup>



Lunch plate  
Flickr / Waleed Alzuhair

#### ▶ The food tastes so good.

Soldier:	al-akil Tayib.	The food tastes so good.
Local:	mashkoor.	Thank you.

Exchange 11



mulukhiyyah: Chicken or meat in a soup-like mix served with bread or rice  
Wikimedia / Basel15

Food varies by region, reflecting tradition and history. Dishes in the Eastern Province tend to have a wider variety of spices, including 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.<sup>45</sup>

▶ This food is very good.		
Soldier:	haaTha al-akil Tayib.	This food is very good.
Local:	haaThee ‘aSeeda.	It’s Aseeda.

Exchange 12

Meccan food, from the area just east of Jeddah on the Red Sea Coast, 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).<sup>46</sup> Other common dishes include *shikamba* (a creamy lamb meatball soup), *kufteh* (ground meat patties), *kabsa* (a chicken and rice dish flavored with tomato paste), and *waraq unab* (stuffed grape leaves).<sup>47, 48</sup>

▶ What is the name of this dish?		
Soldier:	wish isim hal akla?	What is the name of this dish?
Local:	haaThee ismaha <i>kabsa</i> .	This is <i>kabsa</i> .

Exchange 13

▶ What ingredients are used to make <i>kabsa</i> ?		
Soldier:	wishee mukaweynaat al <i>kabsa</i> ?	What ingredients are used to make <i>kabsa</i> ?
Local:	laHam ghanam wu riz ma’ SaLSat TamaaTim wu ibharaat imKhalaTa.	Lamb meat, rice, tomato paste, and mixed spices.

Exchange 14

Common drinks are sweet black or mint tea, fruit juices, and soft drinks.<sup>49, 50</sup> Coffee is more than a beverage in Saudi Arabia, playing an important role in social interaction. The coffee ceremony (*gahwa*) 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 accept no more than



Lunch plate  
Flickr / Waleed Alzuhair

three cups. Shaking the cup from side to side means you have had enough.<sup>51</sup> Inviting someone to coffee or tea is a great compliment. Refusing the invitation is an insult.<sup>52</sup>

## Dining Etiquette



*Saudi dining etiquette*  
Flickr / Stephen Downes

Much of the dining etiquette in Saudi Arabia differs from that in the United States. It is common to offer a toast as the food is served. Guests should offer the Saudi equivalent of “bon appetit” by saying, “*sahtain*,” or “*bismillah*.” After the meal, guests should say, “*daimah*” (may you always have plenty at your table).<sup>53</sup>

Saudis often eat with their hands. Be sure to wash your hands before sitting to eat. Many restaurants have special sinks for this

purpose. Always use the right hand to pick up, pass, and eat food. Never use the left hand - it is regarded as unclean. Keep your left hand at your side and never rest it on the table. Men and women usually dine separately, but if dining together, women should avoid directly touching any food being served to a Muslim male other than her immediate relatives.<sup>54</sup>

When using utensils, the spoon is more important than the fork. Keep the spoon in the right hand, putting it down to switch to the fork when needed. Never use the left hand, even when using utensils. Left-handed people should eat with their right hands.<sup>55</sup>



*Having coffee and tea at the desert*  
Flickr / Samira

Etiquette normally requires that the most honored person sits at the middle of the table. The next most honored person is commonly seated at the head of the table.<sup>56</sup> It is considered rude to stare at others while they are eating; the safest way to avoid offense is to look at your own plate while eating.<sup>57</sup>

## Dress Code

Though many Saudi men wear western-style clothing, traditional garb is common. The *thobe* (also called *kandoora* or *dishdasha*) is the national dress for men in the Gulf region. A thobe is an ankle-length cover that looks like a robe. Thobes come in light colors such as white, off-white and light yellow, and during the winter they may have deeper shades. A headscarf, or *gutra*, is worn over a cap (*taiga*) and secured with one or two cords called *egals*. Together these represent the national dress for Saudi men. Footwear is generally sandals or open-back shoes with socks.<sup>59, 60</sup>



Saudi woman wearing more colorful abayas  
Flickr / Charles Roffey



Men wearing thobe and gutra  
Flickr / Tribes of the World

Saudi Arabia has no written legal dress code, but the police and the judiciary enforce a strict, modest dress code for women. In public, Saudi women must wear an *abaya*, a loose-fitting, full-length robe that is typically black, or a long, loose-fitting dress. Anything may be worn under the abaya, including tailored dresses or jeans and T-shirts. 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. The material from which the abaya is made often indicates a woman's social status.<sup>61, 62</sup>

### ▶ How should I dress?

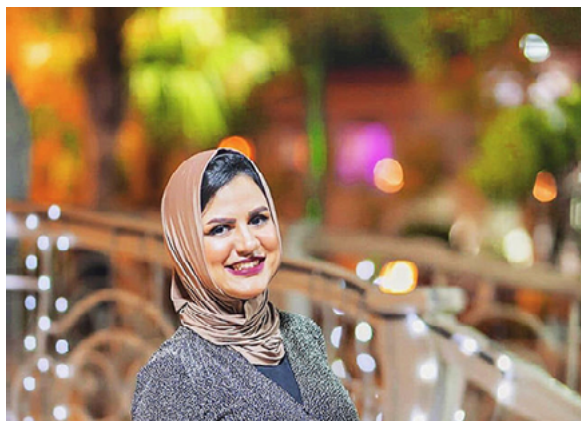
Soldier:	wish albas?	How should I dress?
Local:	ilbas malaabis fiDhfaaDha tighaTee jismak.	Wear loose fitting clothes which cover your body.

Exchange 15

► Is this acceptable to wear?

Soldier:	haaTha magbool libsa?	Is this acceptable to wear?
Local:	na'am.	Yes.

Exchange 16



A woman with scraf  
Flickr / Mojack Jutaily

In most of the country, women must cover their hair and faces when they are in public. Very conservative Muslim women wear a veil (*niqab*) covering the entire face except for the eyes.<sup>63</sup> Others, particularly in more relaxed Jeddah, may 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.<sup>64</sup>

In recent years, Saudi women began wearing more colorful abayas and open abayas over long skirts or jeans. In 2018, women began protesting against wearing the niqab. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said the women only needed to wear decent, respectful clothing and were not required to wear abayas. Women have been jailed for not covering themselves in public.<sup>65</sup>

Dress codes for both men and women are most strictly observed in the conservative capital of Riyadh. Western women in the more conservative regions of the country should wear an abaya and at least a scarf covering their hair.<sup>66</sup> In many places, foreign women are not required to cover themselves completely.<sup>67</sup>

Foreign men are expected to dress in clothing appropriate to their home countries. In most cases, those working in offices should wear suits. Although most Saudis wear sandals, foreigners are not required to do so.<sup>68</sup> It is inappropriate to wear tight pants, short sleeves, or shorts.<sup>69</sup>



Three boys wearing thobe and gutra in the Al Ardha  
Flickr / Tribes of the World

## Non-Religious Holidays and Celebrations

### *National Day (Al-Yaom al-Watany)*

National Day is celebrated on 23 September, the day in 1932 that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded. It is a celebration of unity and progress. The day is usually spent with family though the holiday itself is centered on national pride. Some young men paint their cars green or wave the Saudi flag while driving around honking.<sup>70</sup>



*Camel races  
Flickr / kintekobo*

### *Janadriyah National Heritage and Culture Festival*



*Janadriya Festival 2014  
Flickr / Torsten Matzak*

The Janadriyah National Heritage and Culture Festival is the country's only non-religious festival. It is held annually in Mecca. The two-week celebration is organized by the National Guard under the patronage of the king, it features camel races, folk dancing, poetry readings, symposia on Arabic literature, and food. The festival represents national pride, strength, and cohesion.<sup>71, 72, 73</sup>



## Dos and Don'ts <sup>74, 75</sup>

### *Dos*

- Respect Saudi Arabia's strict rules of gender segregation.
- Remove your shoes when you enter a Saudi home.
- Remember that Saudis do not refer to their own religion as Wahhabism; instead, they refer to themselves as Muslims.
- Dress modestly.
- Greet elders first and stand up when they enter a room.
- Eat only with the right hand as the left is considered unclean.
- Wash hands before and after meals.

### *Don'ts*

- Don't show the soles of your shoes or feet to another, especially while sitting or when crossing your legs.
- Don't use your left hand for any public activity, especially eating and drinking.
- Don't make eye contact with women or stare at them.
- Don't photograph mosques, government buildings, or local people.
- Don't show affection to the opposite sex in public.
- Don't say anything critical of the royal family, Islam, or a person's family.
- Don't refuse an invitation to tea or coffee. Refusing is likely to be perceived as an insult.
- Don't smoke in public unless you are a male.
- Don't display anger.

## Endnotes for Chapter 3: Traditions

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- <sup>2</sup> Nicolas Buchele, Culture Smart! The Essential Guide to Customs and Culture: Saudi Arabia (London: Kuperard, 2010), 57-58.
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- <sup>17</sup> Nicolas Buchele, Culture Smart! The Essential Guide to Customs and Culture: Saudi Arabia (London: Kuperard, 2010), 98.
- <sup>18</sup> Just Landed, "Saudi Arabia Social Customs," n.d., <https://www.justlanded.com/english/Saudi-Arabia/Saudi-Arabia-Guide/Culture/Social-Customs>
- <sup>19</sup> Commisceo Global, "Saudi Arabia Guide," n.d., <https://www.commisceo-global.com/resources/country-guides/saudi-arabia-guide#C4>
- <sup>20</sup> Commisceo Global, "Saudi Arabia Guide," n.d., <https://www.commisceo-global.com/resources/country-guides/saudi-arabia-guide#C4>
- <sup>21</sup> Culture Crossing, "Saudi Arabia: Personal Space and Touching," n.d., [http://guide.culturecrossing.net/basics\\_business\\_student\\_details.php?id=9&CID=178](http://guide.culturecrossing.net/basics_business_student_details.php?id=9&CID=178)
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## Cultural Orientation | Arabic-Saudi

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## Cultural Orientation | Arabic-Saudi

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# Arabic-Saudi Cultural Orientation

## Chapter 3 | Traditions

### Assessment

1. Saudi men who hold hands or kiss each other on the cheek in public may risk imprisonment.
2. Educated Saudis enjoy lively debates, especially about the politics of the Middle East.
3. Coffee preparation is an elaborate ritual in Saudi Arabia.
4. People in Saudi Arabia use only the right hand to pick up, pass, and eat food.
5. According to the Saudi legal dress code, all women must wear a black abaya over their clothes in public.

*Assessment Answers: 1. False; 2. False; 3. True; 4. True; 5. False*



*Urban sprawl of Riyadh  
Flickr / sören2013*

## Chapter 4 | Arabic-Saudi Cultural Orientation

# Urban Life

## Introduction

Saudi Arabia transitioned from a mainly rural tribal society to a predominantly urban one within a few decades. In 1936 there were 58 cities in the kingdom; this number climbed to 285 in 2015. Almost 84% of Saudis and 90% of the non-Saudi population live in urban areas. Urbanization is expected to continue and reach 97% by 2030. Most of the population lives in the five largest cities: Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam, Mecca, and Medina. The population of Riyadh is expected to reach 8.2 million people by 2030, 75% of whom will be Saudis.<sup>1, 2, 3</sup>



*Construction for luxury condos and office buildings in King Abdullah Financial District in Riyadh  
Flickr / sören2013*

As recently as 1960, Riyadh was a mud-brick dwelling community of fewer than 60,000 people. Today, over 4.5 million Saudis and more than 2 million non-Saudis live in Riyadh, making it one of the fastest-growing metropolitan areas in the world.<sup>4, 5, 6</sup>

The traditional nomadic lifestyle has mostly been replaced by a settled urban lifestyle. Some of the massive urban growth is due to the influx of the more than 11 million foreign workers into the kingdom from 100 different countries, making up about

one-third of the population as of 2016.<sup>7</sup>

Saudi Arabia has attempted to change the face of its urban spaces and manage urban growth by building six economic cities throughout the nation. King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC) on the Red Sea Coast in Rabigh is the largest of the six cities. The other cities include Prince Abdulaziz bin Musaid Economic City in Hael, the Knowledge Economic City in Medina, and Jazan Economic City in the southwestern part of the country (JEC). Two more cities are planned for Eastern Province and Tabouk.<sup>8</sup> These cities were designed to help diversify the economy, attract foreign investment, provide employment for the growing number of young people entering the labor force, and help distribute development and services.<sup>9, 10</sup>



*Urban sprawl of Riyadh  
Flickr / Mohd Azli Abdul Malek*

Projections of continued rapid population growth and the young age of its population are strong motivators as Saudi Arabia works to promote sustainable urban growth. The unprecedented growth has put a strain on national resources and the environment, particularly on water resources.<sup>11</sup>

## Urban Problems

Water scarcity, pollution, inadequate solid waste management, and poverty are some of the problems that plague the kingdom due to rapid urbanization. The increased demand for quality public services and a housing shortage put additional pressure on municipal authorities.<sup>12</sup>



*Polluted Riyadh  
Flickr / Paul Cowie*

### *Air Pollution*

Air pollution is a growing problem. Saudi Arabia is one of the most polluted nations in the world. In 2016, the World Health Organization ranked the city of Jubail, an oil refining center on the Persian Gulf Coast and an important producer of aluminum, as the fifth most polluted city in the world. Battered by severe sandstorms, and choking on vehicle emissions and industrial pollution, Riyadh was ranked as the fourth most polluted city in the world. Dammam ranked thirteenth.<sup>13, 14, 15</sup> Poor air quality is mainly the result of pollutants from the oil refineries operating near urban areas. Desalination plants also contribute to diminished air and water quality.<sup>16, 17, 18</sup>

### *Wastewater Management and Water Pollution*



*Water pollution in Tabouk  
Flickr / ADEL AL-OMRANI*

Urban water and wastewater management cannot keep pace with population expansion. In Jeddah, where the population is nearing 3.5 million, solid waste management is a huge problem. Waste is sent to transfer stations, from where it goes to the dumping site at Buraiman Lake. The sewage lake has contaminated wells in Jeddah due to raw sewage leaking into aquifers.<sup>19, 20</sup> Sewage spills caused by uncontrolled flooding near Jeddah killed more than 120 people during the 2009 hajj.<sup>21</sup>



Water supplies from desalination plants also become contaminated when they mix with ground water or due to damage to pipelines. Efforts are underway to build more sewage treatment plants to treat nearly 3 billion cubic meters of sewage from households.<sup>22</sup>

## Poverty



Poverty in Old Jeddah  
Flickr / Charles Roffey

Until 2002, poverty was a taboo subject in Saudi Arabia. Today, poverty is a growing urban problem. Although the World Bank states that Saudi Arabia has the tenth lowest poverty rate in the world (12.7%) and the lowest poverty rate in the Arab world, between 2 and 4 million native Saudis live in destitution.<sup>23, 24</sup> Poor Saudis are concentrated in so-called unplanned settlements (slums and shanty towns) that have sprung up on the fringes of urban centers. In 2012, 25% of Mecca consisted of slums.<sup>25, 26</sup> Many of the poorest families are headed by widows or unmarried women, as Islamic law and Saudi culture make it hard for women to work outside the home. Many Saudi street beggars are women.<sup>27, 28</sup> A shortage of available housing is another problem. An estimated 60% of Saudis do not own their homes, and a third of young Saudis cannot afford to buy a home in urban areas.<sup>29, 30</sup>

## Employment and the Demographic Challenge

In 2018, unemployment among Saudi citizens stood at 12.9%. Unemployment among Saudi women was 31% and among men 7.6%. Toward the end of the year, the number of foreign workers decreased to 9.89 million from 11 million as foreign workers began leaving the kingdom after the government imposed restrictions on certain jobs, mainly in the retail sector, and started penalizing private companies that hired more foreigners than Saudis.<sup>31,</sup>

32, 33



Workers at a bottling plant  
Flickr / Al Jazeera English

In 2017, around 25% of Saudis between the ages of 15 and 24 were unemployed.<sup>34, 35</sup> Approximately two-thirds of the Saudi population is under the age of 30, and 37% are 14 years-old or younger, which means that Saudi Arabia needs to create at least 3 million new jobs by 2020.<sup>36, 37, 38</sup>

For years, government jobs in public administration have been the Saudi ideal. Such jobs are now in short supply. At the same time, many technical jobs in the private sector cannot be filled by Saudis because most lack the necessary skills. The government is worried that unemployment among university graduates will continue to grow, especially among young urban workers with limited skills.<sup>39, 40, 41</sup>



*Trash on the streets of Mecca  
Flickr / Al Jazeera English*

Young urban Saudis live in a prosperous nation with the manifestations of wealth all around them. Angry at not receiving what they perceive as their fair share, many will not take available jobs because such jobs do not pay enough or are not prestigious enough. Expectations about work and pay are not always in line with job prospects. While most Saudis are currently employed in the public sector, the most lucrative prospects are in private industry, where few Saudis are employed or have the skills to gain employment.<sup>42, 43</sup>



*Workers at a bottling plant  
Flickr / Al Jazeera English*

The rising unemployment among young urban workers represents a potential threat to stability as dissatisfaction and frustration rise.<sup>44, 45</sup> To increase the number of jobs available for Saudi nationals, the government has instituted a series of measures designed to “Saudize” the workforce. Some of the measures require that Saudis must hold 70% of sales jobs at outlets selling 12 or more different types of items, that foreign workers pay a fee of 100 riyals a month for each dependent member of their family, and that businesses pay a monthly fee of 300 or 400 riyals for each foreign worker they employ.<sup>46, 47</sup>

## Healthcare



Doctors care for twins at King Abdulaziz Medical City  
Wikimedia / Doda1110

According to the World Health Organization, the Saudi healthcare system ranked 26th in the world, placing it ahead of Canada, Denmark, and the United States. The report examined care, access to health care, administrative efficiency, equity, and outcome of care. On the 2018 Future Health Index (FHI) Saudi Arabia scored among the highest on efficiency. However, the data showed that healthcare professionals were more satisfied with the level of care they provided than the general population was with the care they received.<sup>48, 49, 50</sup>

The Saudi health ministry manages a two-tier health care system. The first tier consists of a network of primary care centers and clinics that provide preventive, prenatal, emergency, and basic services. Mobile clinics provide remote rural areas with services such as vaccinations and basic medical care. The second tier consists of advanced hospitals and specialized-care facilities located primarily in urban areas. These hospitals are supplemented by private facilities and operators. The government subsidizes medications, which are available to Saudis at a low cost. Nearly 75% of all healthcare is driven by public expenditure, while the remaining 25% by the private sector.<sup>51, 52</sup>

Public hospitals are available only to Saudi nationals. Expatriates do not have access to public hospitals and must rely on private healthcare facilities. In certain emergency situations where private hospitals are not available, non-Saudis can get access to public facilities. Private facilities, which often have more luxurious conditions and shorter wait times, are available to anyone able to pay the cost.<sup>53, 54</sup>



Main hospital hall of King Fahd Medical City, Riyadh  
Wikimedia / Creating Haitham alfalsh

In major cities, the standard of medical care is generally high, in both public and private facilities. In Mecca and Medina, private healthcare facilities are basic and in



*Dammam Medical Complex  
Wikimedia / Abhijitvarghese*

need of improvement. The commercial cities offer better healthcare than the rest of the country. Many doctors, especially in private facilities, are foreigners who do not speak Arabic. English is the operating language in hospitals throughout the nation, and Arabic translators are available. Most of the nation's private hospitals, clinics, and pharmacies are located in urban areas.<sup>55, 56</sup>

There is a critical shortage of Saudi physicians, especially in government hospitals, affecting the quality of medical service and increasing reliance on foreign professionals. Currently, one doctor serves 358 patients. The government is planning to privatize all government-run hospitals. Currently, there are 312 public hospitals and 141 private hospitals in the country.<sup>57</sup>

## Education

The education ministry sets education standards and oversees special education for those disabled or impaired. Education accounts for nearly 25% of the annual budget of Saudi Arabia. About 6 million children are enrolled in K through 12 schools. There are 30,000 public schools in the country, employing more than half a million teachers. The student to teacher ratio in Saudi Arabia is 12.5 to 1, one of the lowest in the world. The total literacy rate is 94.7%, with 99% for Saudis aged 15-24 (up from 70% in the early 1990s). The literacy rate of older Saudis is much lower, averaging 51%.<sup>58, 59, 60</sup>



*King Saud University, Riyadh  
Flickr / Mohd Azli Abdul Malek*

Education is a requirement for every child, both male and female. The state provides free education through the undergraduate level, including books and health care. Over half of the student population currently enrolled in schools and universities is female. There are 25 major public universities in the kingdom, the largest of which is King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah.<sup>61, 62</sup>



King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST)  
Wikimedia / ServiceAT

General education consists of kindergarten, six years of primary school, and three years of intermediate school. After completing intermediate school, students can choose between attending a three-year high school with programs in commerce, the arts, and sciences, or a vocational school. Islam is a core subject in schools, but art and science are also taught.<sup>63</sup>

Education is strictly segregated. Women attend all major universities and attend segregated classrooms. They also attend all-female colleges and private women’s universities. Popular fields of study for women are architecture and design. The government also operates public schools for the blind, deaf, and physically and mentally impaired. There are also special schools for elderly disabled adults.<sup>64, 65</sup>

▶ Is there a school nearby?		
Soldier:	fee madrasa gareeba min hina?	Is there a school nearby?
Local:	na’am	Yes.

Exchange 17

▶ Do your children go to school?		
Soldier:	‘indik ‘eeyaal bil madrasa?	Do your children go to school?
Local:	na’am	Yes.

Exchange 18

In 2016, the Saudi government launched Vision 2030, which included comprehensive education reform.<sup>66</sup> The new curriculum will promote a more moderate form of Islam and ban textbooks and instructors that espouse extreme ideologies. In order to prepare graduates for the demands of the new job market, the reforms will also introduce new teaching methods that promote critical thinking over rote learning.<sup>67, 68, 69</sup>



Children reading Koran at the school, Janadriah  
Flickr / Waleed Alzuhair

## Restaurants



Single men gathering at the Arabian restaurant in Riyadh  
Flickr / Stephen Downes

Major Saudi cities have all manner of trendy restaurants serving a variety of international cuisine. Dinner is served late in the evening around 10 p.m. Dining establishments enforce strict rules of gender segregation. This does not mean a family cannot dine together in public. While single men must go to the men’s section, married men may dine with their wives and children in the family section. Women who enter a restaurant unaccompanied by a male relative are often denied admittance.<sup>70, 71</sup>

### ▶ I’d like some hot soup.

Soldier:	mumkin shoraba	I’d like some hot soup.
Local:	Tayib	Sure.

Exchange 19

### ▶ Are you still serving breakfast?

Soldier:	baagee itgadmoon fuToor?	Are you still serving breakfast?
Local:	na’am	Yes.

Exchange 20

Restaurants close during prayer times. According to Saudi law, during the prayer call, all businesses have 5 minutes to close their doors. In the case of a restaurant, this means that new guests cannot be admitted until prayer has finished (usually about 20-30 minutes). Guests must wait until prayer is finished before they can leave. Hospitals, airports, and public transport does not close during prayer time. The police patrol the street and send people to the nearest mosque.<sup>72, 73</sup>



Restaurants close during prayer times, Al Bustan Restaurant in Riyadh  
Flickr / Dexter Panganiban

<b>▶ May I have a glass of water?</b>		
Soldier:	mumkin ti'Teenee kaas maya?	May I have a glass of water?
Local:	hal Heen ajeeba	Yes, right away.

Exchange 21

<b>▶ Do you have a dessert?</b>		
Soldier:	'indikum Hala?	Do you have a dessert?
Local:	ee, 'indana ilgeymaat	Yes, we have lokmat.

Exchange 22

Saudi women normally eat while sitting with their faces to the wall. Men sit with their backs to the wall. Some tables in the family section may be sectioned off with curtains to ensure privacy.

<b>▶ Can I have my total bill, please?</b>		
Soldier:	mumkin ta'Teenee il iHsaab?	Can I have my total bill, please?
Local:	ee, Tab'an	Yes, of course.

Exchange 23

▶ **Where is your restroom?**

Soldier:	wayn al Hamaam?	Where is your restroom?
Local:	al ghurfa ilee ‘ala yisaarak, hnaak	That room to your left, over there.

*Exchange 24*

Typically, the person who issued the invitation pays the bill.<sup>75</sup> Tipping is neither required nor expected in most restaurants because most restaurant bills include a service charge.<sup>76</sup> If you decide to tip, 10% is accepted throughout the Arab world.<sup>77</sup>

▶ **I would like coffee or tea.**

Soldier:	abee shaay aw ig-hawa.	I would like coffee or tea.
Local:	Tayib	Sure.

*Exchange 25*

▶ **Put this all in one bill.**

Soldier:	Khalaha kilaha ‘ala iHsaab waaHid.	Put this all in one bill.
Local:	Tayib	Okay.

*Exchange 26*



*Saudi men eat while sitting with their backs to the walls, Riyadh  
Flickr / Stephen Downes*



## Marketplace and Shopping



Shopping mall in Jeddah  
Flickr / sören2013

Saudi Arabia has a variety of shopping options including modern malls, Western supermarkets, and traditional marketplaces (suqs and bazaars) where the price of nearly everything is negotiable.<sup>78</sup> Shopping malls are a popular destination for young men and women. In some shopping centers, such as the Kingdom Shopping Centre in the capital, men are barred from entering certain floors reserved exclusively for women.<sup>79, 80</sup>

In 2018, the government recommended the legalization of some gender mixing and an end to mandatory prayer closures for businesses. The ban on cinemas, women driving, and mixed-gender audiences in music concerts were lifted that same year.<sup>81</sup>

### ▶ Is the market nearby?

Soldier: as soog igrayib min hina?

Is the market nearby?

Local: ee, ‘ala il yimeen

Yes, over there on the right.

*Exchange 27*

### ▶ How much longer will you be here?

Soldier: ilmita raayiH tabga hina?

How much longer will you be here?

Local: il thalath saa’aat

Three more hours.

*Exchange 28*

Malls usually open at 9 a.m. and close around 1 p.m. They usually reopen around 4 or 5 p.m. Malls close for approximately half an hour during prayer times.<sup>82</sup> In the private sector, employees work 8 hours a day or 40 hours a week and no more than 48 hours a week. During Ramadan, Muslims work 6 hours a day or 36 hours a week.<sup>83, 84</sup>

▶ Please, buy something from me.

Soldier:	takfa, ishir minee.	Please, buy something from me.
Local:	mit-asif, maa biga me'ee floos	Sorry, I have no money left.

Exchange 29

▶ Do you sell shomaghs?

Soldier:	tbee' shamugh?	Do you sell shomaghs?
Local:	na'am	Yes.

Exchange 30

Bargaining has a long tradition and is considered an honorable way of doing business. Serious bargaining is time consuming and must follow certain rituals, including refusing the merchant's "lowest offer" at least a couple of times.<sup>85</sup>



Public markets in Gateef, Eastern Province  
Flickr / Waleed Alzuhair

▶ Can I buy a carpet with this much money?

Soldier:	agdar ashtiree sijaada ibhal mablagh?	Can I buy a carpet with this much money?
Local:	laa	No.

Exchange 31

▶ Do you have any more of these?

Soldier:	buga 'indik min haThayn?	Do you have any more of these?
Local:	na'am	Yes.

Exchange 32

▶ Do you have any more of these?

Soldier: buga ‘indik min haThayn?

Do you have any more of these?

Local: na’am

Yes.

Exchange 33

▶ May I examine this close up?

Soldier: mumkin ashooof Thee?

May I examine this close up?

Local: Tab’an

Sure.

Exchange 34

## Money and Credit Cards

Purchases are transacted in the national currency, the Saudi riyal. Modern shopping centers, boutiques, shops, and hotels accept major credit cards. Vendors in traditional markets prefer cash and usually do not accept credit cards.<sup>86</sup>

▶ Do you accept U.S. currency?

Soldier: taaKhThoon floos amreekeya?

Do you accept U.S. currency?

Local: laa maa naKhiTh ilaa reeyalaat su’oodeeya.

No, we only accept Saudi riyals.

Exchange 35

Exchanging currency is relatively easy. Most commercial banks have exchange counters. Banks are open from Saturday to Wednesday from 8 a.m. to noon and 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. Some banks have special branches dedicated to serving only women, staffed by female employees. Women hold 20% of the funds in Saudi banks.<sup>87, 88, 89</sup>



Public markets in Gateef, Eastern Province  
Flickr / Waleed Alzuhair

▶ Can you give me change for this?

Soldier: tagdar ta'Teenee faka il Thee?

Can you give me change for this?

Local: laa

No.

Exchange 36

## Transportation

Drivers in Saudi Arabia enjoy the world's lowest gas prices and a modern road infrastructure. The road system covers more than 68,000 km (42,250 mi). In road quality, Saudi Arabia ranks higher than the United States and the United Kingdom. In the Middle East, Saudi Arabia has the second best roads after Qatar. Eight-lane highways link the large cities and are well maintained. The roads along the coast are built to resist high heat. Sandstorms occasionally decrease visibility.<sup>90, 91, 92</sup>



Bazaar right outside the gates of masjid nabawi in Madinah  
Flickr / Samira

▶ Is there a gas station nearby?

Soldier: Holakum maHaTat banzeen?

Is there a gas station nearby?

Local: na'am

Yes.

Exchange 37



Well maintained Northern Ring Road, Riyadh  
Flickr / Waleed Alzuhair

Traffic laws in Saudi Arabia are similar to those in the United States. However, the standard of driving is low, and police enforcement is sporadic. Drivers talk on their mobile phones, exceed the speed limit, change lanes erratically, ignore red lights, and disrespect the rules and other drivers.<sup>93</sup>

Saudi Arabia has one of the world's highest rates of traffic accidents and fatalities. About 20 people die on the roads each day.

Road accidents cause SR 4.4 billion (over USD 1.18 billion) in material losses every year.<sup>94, 95, 96</sup>

To improve travel safety in major cities, the government has implemented an automated traffic control system (saher) consisting of digital cameras that monitor traffic accidents and violations. In 2018, the transport ministry announced the launch of several new road safety projects at the cost of SR 2.2 billion (USD 594 million) aimed at reducing the number of accidents and fatalities.<sup>97, 98, 99</sup>



King Fahad Road  
Wikimedia / Ammar shaker

Temporary visitors to the country can drive with a U.S. driver’s license or an international driving permit. People who are employed in the country and hold a resident permit (iqama) are required to obtain a Saudi driver’s license. All parties involved in a vehicle accident may be taken to the police station and can be held for several days pending a determination of responsibility. The police make a decision about which party is responsible for the accident. Once reparations have been paid, the responsible party can be released.<sup>100</sup>

▶ Where can I rent a car?		
Soldier:	wayn agdar asta-jir sayaara?	Where can I rent a car?
Local:	wasT al madeena	Downtown.

Exchange 38

▶ Is there a good auto mechanic nearby?		
Soldier:	Holakum mekaneek zayn?	Is there a good auto mechanic nearby?
Local:	na’am	Yes.

Exchange 39

Taxis are the most convenient way of getting around in the cities. Since meters are not used in taxis, fares should be negotiated beforehand. Taxis are white and are hard to miss. All taxis have to be booked in advance. It is advisable to use a registered taxi and arrange a trip through the hotel. Ride-sharing services are an alternative to taxis. Women cannot ride in a taxi unaccompanied by a man.<sup>101, 102, 103</sup>

► **Where can I get a cab?**

Soldier: wayn alga sayaarat ijra?

Where can I get a cab?

Local: hnaak

Over there.

*Exchange 40*

A planned subway in Riyadh will reduce congestion and pollution in the near future. The system will carry 1.16 million passengers every day at the initial phase, and 3.6 million at its highest capacity.<sup>104</sup> Four metro lines are planned for Mecca, Medina, Jeddah, and Dammam.<sup>105</sup>

► **Can you take me there?**

Soldier: tagdar twadeenee hnaak?

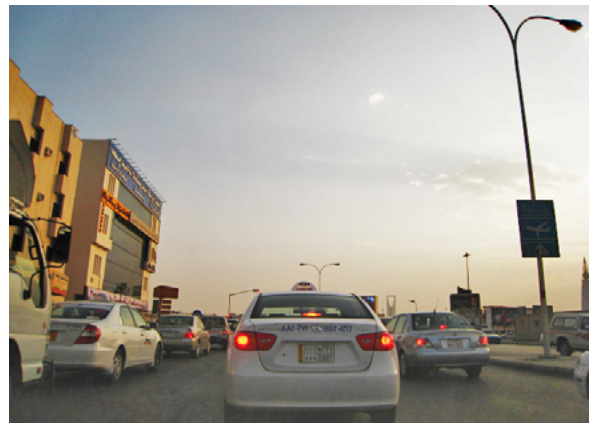
Can you take me there?

Local: ee, agdar

Yes, I can.

*Exchange 41*

The Saudi Arabia Public Transport Company operates a large fleet of comfortable, air-conditioned buses that connect all major cities. Buses have toilets on board and some offer refreshments and food. The bus company also has international routes. A VIP bus service runs between Riyadh and Al Khobar. The service is punctual, efficient, and inexpensive. The front two rows on busses are reserved for women and children. Foreign travelers rarely use local bus services. Foreign women may travel on intercity buses if they have a residence permit or a passport.<sup>106, 107</sup>



*Taxis in traffic  
Flickr / Andrew A Shenouda*

► **Will the bus be here soon?**

Soldier: al baaS beyeejee gareeb?

Will the bus be here soon?

Local: na'am

Yes.

*Exchange 42*

The Saudi Arabian Railways Organization operates passenger trains along the 449 km (279 mi) route connecting Dammam, Hofuf, Abqaiq, and Riyadh. Women ride in separate compartments segregated from men.<sup>108, 109</sup>

▶ Is there a train station nearby?	
Soldier:	fee maHaTat giTaar gareeba min hina? Is there a train station nearby?
Local:	laa No.

Exchange 43



Amenaza chaparrón, Abu Rubayq, Madinah  
Flickr / migue\_lezl

Approximately 90% of the population lives within two-hours’ drive of an airport, making air travel a popular option. Saudi Arabia has 28 airports: 6 international, 9 regional, and 13 domestic. The Jeddah, Riyadh, Dammam, and Medina airports account for more than 80% of the passenger traffic. Saudi Arabian Airlines, or Saudia, is the major national airline. Service between cities is regular and reliable. However, only travelers with a passport or iqama (national residence permit) are permitted on board an airplane. During the

month of Ramadan, airlines change food service to accommodate non-Muslim and Muslim travelers. Alcohol is not served on flights to Saudi Arabia.<sup>110, 111, 112</sup>



Riyadh Metro Line 3  
Flickr / mwmbwls

▶ Which road leads to the airport?

Soldier:	ay Tareeg yewadee ‘al maTaar?	Which road leads to the airport?
Local:	aT Tareeg alee raayiH sharg	The road heading east.

Exchange 44

▶ Is there a hospital nearby?

Soldier:	fee mistashfa gareeba min hina?	Is there a hospital nearby?
Local:	ee, fee wasT al madeena	Yes, in the center of town.

Exchange 45

## Crime and Solicitation

Crime rates are low in the country due to strict law enforcement. Capital punishments and corporal punishment are handed down for a variety of crimes such as murder, rape, drug trafficking, armed robbery, incest, adultery, terrorism, and apostasy. Some executions take place in public during the morning hours. Saudi Arabia has one of the highest rates of capital punishment in the world.<sup>113, 114</sup>



Saudi Arabia Police vehicle, Mecca  
Flickr / Mohamad Fasil

The U.S. State Department calls U.S. citizens to exercise extreme caution while

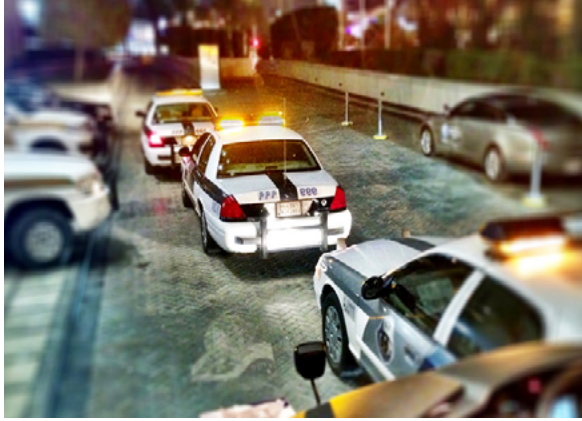


Street beggar at Arafat  
Flickr / Waleed Alzuhair

in Saudi Arabia mainly because of the threat of terrorism and kidnapping of Westerners. The crime threat, however, is considered low. Pickpocketing incidents are on the rise, with female pickpockets becoming more involved in this petty crime, especially during hajj.<sup>115, 116</sup>

New laws that criminalize sexual harassment came into effect in 2018. These laws are supposed to combat sexual harassment





Saudi Arabia Police vehicle, Mecca  
Flickr / Ewan McIntosh

and protect women who enter the job market. The most severe punishment will be handed down to those who harass adults and children with special needs.<sup>117</sup>

▶ **Did these people threaten you?**

Soldier:	haThoola an naas yehadidoonak?	Did these people threaten you?
Local:	laa	No.

*Exchange 46*

Begging, unheard of a generation ago, is now common. Many beggars, including women and children, are professionals. Others are people who overstay the hajj visa or undocumented workers who entered the country illegally. The number of beggars increases during the holy month of Ramadan because expectations of charity, in accordance with Islamic tennets, are higher. Jeddah has the largest number of beggars, followed by Mecca and Riyadh.<sup>118, 119, 120</sup>

▶ **Did these people threaten you?**

Soldier:	haThoola an naas yehadidoonak?	Did these people threaten you?
Local:	laa	No.

*Exchange 47*

▶ **Give me money.**

Soldier:	‘aTnee floos	Give me money.
Local:	maa ‘indee shay	I don’t have any.

*Exchange 48*

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## Cultural Orientation | Saudi-Arabian

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# Saudi-Arabian Cultural Orientation

## Chapter 4 | Urban Life

### Assessment

1. Saudi Arabia is one of the most polluted nations in the world.
2. Restaurants in Saudi Arabia close during prayer times.
3. Unlike other Middle Eastern countries, large Saudi cities are free of slums.
4. Saudi Arabia's wastewater management system is in dire need of improvement.
5. Saudi Arabia has an extremely low rate of traffic accidents and fatalities owing to its spectacular highways.

*Assessment Answers: 1. True; 2. True; 3. True; 4. True; 5. False*



*Shepherd riding a donkey, Mecca  
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

## Chapter 5 | Arabic-Saudi Cultural Orientation

# Rural Life

## Introduction

Once a largely rural society divided into tribal groups, only about 16% of today's Saudis live in rural areas. Following the discovery of oil, many Saudis migrated to urban centers during the 1970s. This migration led to major changes within society, including a severe reduction in the number of Saudis employed in agriculture, an increase in literacy, and a decrease in tribal influence.<sup>3, 4, 5</sup> The nation's few remaining desert dwellers fall into two basic groups: the authentic Bedouin (inhabitants of the desert), who continue to live in ever-shrinking numbers as nomadic shepherds; and the Fellahin (subsistence farmers), who lead a settled life year round on the edge of the desert. The Bedouin nomads, unlike the Fellahin, take up residence in the desert



during the rainy seasons and then migrate back to the desert's edge during the hotter months.<sup>6, 7</sup>

## Tribal Distribution

The largely urban society of contemporary Saudi Arabia retains strong ties to its tribal roots, although tribal autonomy and structures have eroded since nationhood in 1932. In the cities, residents in many neighborhoods and quarters are divided according to their regional and tribal backgrounds.<sup>8, 9, 10</sup> In the past, there was also a division between badw (nomadic) and hadhar (settled) tribes, but these distinctions disappeared along with most pastoral nomadism.<sup>11</sup>



*Ancient tribal village in Shagra  
Flickr / Jun Gomez*

Tribal affiliation can define relations between individuals and the government. For example, the government designates tribal leaders to represent communities in interactions with governors and other officials. In some cases, tribal affiliation determines access to entities such as the National Guard or Aramco, the state oil company. Most tribes have some affiliation with the ruling house of Saud through marriage.<sup>12, 13, 14</sup>

Today, there are over a hundred tribes and sub-tribes of different size, origin, and influence in Saudi Arabia. There are fewer tribes in the North than in the South, but these tribes have a larger membership than those in the South. The largest tribal confederation is Anazeh, from which the ruling house of Saud is descended. This tribe extends into neighboring Jordan, Iraq, and Syria. The largest tribe that resides exclusively in the kingdom is Utaybah.<sup>15</sup>

Other important tribes include al-Dawaser, Hail, Harb, Mutair, and Qahtan, all of whom are located mainly in the Najd region.<sup>16, 17</sup> Also from Najd are the nomadic Utaybah, reputed to have the strongest tribal bonds, and the Shammar, rulers of Arabia before King Abdul Aziz. Historical feuds and disagreements between the ruling Saud family and the Shammar, Mutair, and al-Aidh tribes continue to this day. As a result, members of Shammar have difficulties finding employment with the government or getting promotions.<sup>18, 19</sup> The al-Murrah Bedouin tribe, with whom Ibn Saud, Saudi Arabia's first

monarch, found refuge when exiled during his youth, dwells in the desert regions of the Rub al-Khali.<sup>20, 21</sup>

## Land Distribution



Rural settlement  
Flickr / Charles Roffey

Historically, land ownership was secured through tribal affiliation. Each tribe claimed ownership over a territory, based on habitual use, that covered some oases and watering holes and was considered their homeland (dira). A royal decree ended the system of tribal ownership in the 1950s.<sup>22</sup> In 1968, the Public Lands Distribution Ordinance further eroded communal control of land. The government allocated between 5 and 100 hectares (12 to 247 acres) of free land to individuals,

up to 400 hectares (988 acres) to companies and organizations, and 4,000 hectares (9,884 acres) for special projects. The new owners assumed full title to the land if they developed 25% of it within a two- to five-year period. By 1989, more than 1.5 million hectares (3.7 million acres) of land had been redistributed, with the bulk of it (57%) going to agricultural projects.<sup>23</sup>

▶ Do you own this land?	
Soldier:	hal arDh milkik?
Local:	na'am

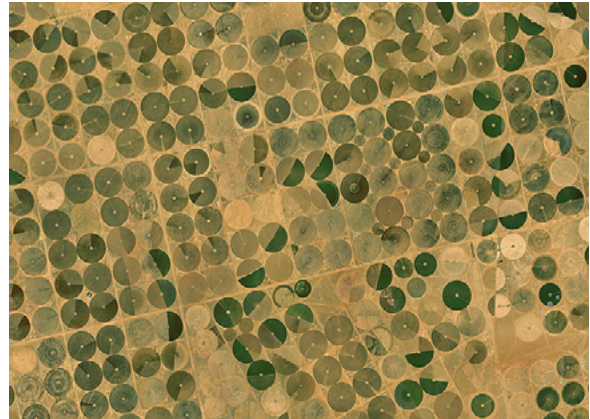
Do you own this land?
Yes.

Exchange 49

Saudi Arabia's vast oil fields are managed by Saudi Aramco, the state-owned oil company.<sup>24</sup> The government also grants foreigners the right to own property in the kingdom.<sup>25, 26</sup>

## Rural Economy

Approximately 6.7% of the workforce is employed in agriculture, which accounted for only 2.6% of the GDP in 2017. Only 1.5% of the nation's land is arable.<sup>27</sup> Approximately half of the cultivated land relies solely on rainfall, while 30-40% uses irrigation, often from underground water sources. The irrigated areas are concentrated in the Riyadh and al-Qasim districts and al-Sharqiyyah province.<sup>28</sup> Major crops include grains such as wheat, barley, sorghum, and millet, vegetables such as tomatoes, squash and onions, and fruits such as melons, citrus, dates, watermelon, and grapes. A large portion of the date production is dedicated to international humanitarian aid. Saudi Arabia has a large livestock industry and produces mutton, chicken, milk, and eggs. The country is self-sufficient in meat, milk, and eggs, and has some of the largest dairy farms in the Middle East.<sup>29, 30</sup>



*Agriculture land using center-pivot irrigation, Arabian peninsula  
Flickr / UltraLeft*



*Date palms on a farm  
Flickr / Ahmed Rabea*

Historically, agriculture was based on subsistence farming and was limited mostly to date farming and small-scale vegetable plots. In order to stimulate the rural economy, the government subsidized rural development programs, built rural roads, irrigation networks, dams, and export facilities. The Saudi Arabian Agricultural Bank granted interest free-loans and subsidies to farmers and other organizations that purchased and stored wheat, constructed flour mills and produced animal feed. Today, Saudi Arabia exports wheat, dates, dairy products, eggs, fish, poultry, fruits, vegetables, and flowers to markets around the world.<sup>31</sup>

▶ **Where do you work, sir?**

Soldier:	wayn tishtighil?	Where do you work, sir?
Local:	anaa imzaari'	I am a farmer, sir.

*Exchange 50*

In 1980, as the fresh water supply decreased and put pressure on traditional agriculture, the government encouraged the private sector to invest in aquaculture projects along the coast of the Red Sea.<sup>32</sup> Today, the National Aquaculture Group employs 3,000 people from 32 countries, with 21% of its staff from Saudi Arabia. They oversee the largest aquaculture operation in the Middle East. The country's large marine farms sell marine aquaculture products all over the world.<sup>33</sup> The government is also developing an organic agriculture industry and investing more in the poultry sector.<sup>34, 35, 36</sup>

## Rural Transportation

In 1932, Saudi Arabia had about 48 km (30 mi) of paved roads. Today the kingdom has one of the largest road networks in the world, covering more than 200,000 km (124,274 mi), including 66,000 km (41,000 mi) of roadways connecting major cities and providing access to railways, ports, and airports.<sup>37</sup> Spectacular highways cut through mountains featuring tunnels and 6,000 km (3,730 mi) of bridges that reduce travel time between cities. The most famous road in Saudi Arabia is the King Fahd Causeway, which links Saudi Arabia with Bahrain over the Persian Gulf's shallow water. It is the second largest causeway in the world, stretching along 25 km (15.5 mi). Creation of a second causeway that will connect Saudi Arabia with Egypt's Sinai Peninsula is under consideration.<sup>38</sup>



*Camels crossing the road, Eastern  
Flickr / Leonid Yaitskiy*

The risk of being involved in a fatal accident in Saudi Arabia is among the highest in the world. Collisions with camels are common, with over 600 collisions every year, most of which occur on rural roads at night. Livestock wandering onto highways also pose dangers for drivers.<sup>39</sup>

Seatbelt laws and those mandating the use of motorcycle helmets are in effect, but enforcement is poor.<sup>40, 41</sup> The U.S. Center for Disease Control determined that road injuries are the leading cause of death in Saudi Arabia.<sup>42</sup>

▶ Is there lodging nearby?		
Soldier:	fee findig gareeb min hina?	Is there lodging nearby?
Local:	na'am	Yes.

*Exchange 51*



*Al Haramain Railway passing through the desert  
Flickr / mwmbwls*

Bus service is generally reliable and safe, including in rural locations. Buses have separate sections for female passengers, usually located at the front. Women are not allowed to board intercity buses unless they are accompanied by a male relative.<sup>43, 44</sup>

The Saudi Railway Organization is a state-owned public railway entity under the Ministry of Transport. It operates a railway network with a total length of

approximately 1,400 km (870 mi) between Dammam in the Eastern Province and Riyadh.<sup>45</sup>

The Saudi government is investing USD 25 billion in three mega projects as part of a combined 3,<sup>900</sup>-kilometer rail expansion. The North-South Rail Project will be the largest, connecting Riyadh with Al-Haditha, near the border with Jordan.<sup>46</sup>

## Education

Saudi Arabia invests vast resources in providing rural residents with education and health care. Schooling is free and primary education is compulsory for children between the ages of 6 and 15. The Ministry of Education has made efforts to increase access to basic education through the secondary level for rural students.<sup>47, 48</sup>



Gate Department of Education Stadium (Unaizah), Unaizah, Al Qaseem  
Flickr / Suliman Alkurishan

Women in rural areas have a higher rate of illiteracy and lower levels of educational attainment, mainly because women tend to get married young and leave school earlier.<sup>49, 50</sup> Efforts to improve women’s education include revising the curriculum and training teachers.<sup>51, 52</sup>

Rural schools lag behind their urban counterparts in terms of materials and facilities, such as computers and science labs. Teachers are sometimes required to teach subjects they know little about, potentially leading to a lower quality of education for rural students.<sup>53</sup>

## Healthcare

Rural healthcare facilities provide vaccinations and routine procedures, but patients have to seek care in hospitals located in major cities for more serious conditions. Private facilities require payment upfront. Rural residents often have to wait longer for healthcare than those who live in urban areas, especially the elderly, adolescents, and people with special needs. Facilities in remote rural regions and along the border areas are particularly sparse.<sup>54, 55</sup>

▶ Is there a medical clinic nearby?		
Soldier:	fee ‘iyaada gareeba min hina?	Is there a medical clinic nearby?
Local:	ee, hnaak	Yes, over there.

Exchange 52

Getting to a distant clinic in rural areas is a particular problem for women who must rely on male relatives for transportation. In addition, home care for women with high-risk pregnancies and services for the elderly and the mentally disabled are limited. A male guardian's permission is required for women to be admitted to a hospital, and women cannot give consent for some medical procedures.<sup>56, 57</sup>



Patients are sleeping in the waiting room of the hospital  
Flickr / Waleed Alzuhair

▶ **Is Dr. Khalid in, sir?**

Soldier:	ad diktør Khalid mawjood?	Is Dr. Khalid in, sir?
Local:	laa	No.

Exchange 53

To improve access to healthcare, the government has established a system of mobile clinics that have enough working space for a doctor, nurse, basic clinical equipment, and a lab for routine tests.<sup>58, 59</sup>

▶ **My arm is broken, can you help me?**

Soldier:	eedee maksoora tigdar itsaa'idnee?	My arm is broken, can you help me?
Local:	ee, agdar asaa'idk	Yes, I can help you.

Exchange 54

## Who is in Charge?

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is divided into 13 provinces (mintaqat), each ruled by a governor appointed by the king, with a deputy governor and a provincial council. Most of the governors are members of the ruling house of Saud. The provincial council system was established by King Fahd in 1992. These councils deliberate on the needs of their province, develop the budget and future projects and oversee ongoing projects. Half of the members of each of the 178 municipal councils are elected by a popular vote, and the remaining half are appointed.<sup>60</sup>



Majlis meeting, Riyadh  
Flickr / Mohd Azli Abdul Malek

The provincial council reports to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs under the auspices of the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs.<sup>61</sup>



Governor of Riyadh and Prince Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud arrives in the Maldives  
Flickr / Presidency Maldives

In 2015, women voted and ran as candidates in elections for the first time Saudi Arabia's history. Many candidates ran on platforms that addressed education and assistance for working mothers. Female candidates were not allowed to speak to male voters. Nearly 1,000 women ran as candidates and over 130,000 registered to vote in the election. A total of 17 women won seats in local municipal and provincial councils.<sup>62,</sup>

63, 64

▶ Do you know this area very well?		
Soldier:	ti'rif hal manTiga zayn?	Do you know this area very well?
Local:	na'am	Yes.

Exchange 55



Since the founding of the nation in 1932, tribalism has weakened somewhat but not disappeared.<sup>65</sup> Much of the influence wielded by tribes is evident when there is a conflict with national authorities. People still consult with their tribal chiefs to mediate on their behalf, particularly on issues related to moderating criminal penalties, securing work, or funding social projects such as hospitals.<sup>66, 67</sup>



*A tribal leader drinking tea at the event  
Flickr / Tribes of the World*

**▶ Does your leader live here?**

Soldier:	shayKhakum ye'eesh hina?	Does your leader live here?
Local:	na'am	Yes.

*Exchange 56*

**▶ Can you take me to your leader?**

Soldier:	tagdar twadeenee ilshayKhakum?	Can you take me to your leader?
Local:	na'am	Yes.

*Exchange 57*

The Saudi government has the right to designate tribal leaders who act on behalf of their tribe's members. The leaders work through district emirs (authority figures) and governors to deal with issues affecting their tribes. Political allegiances between the ruling house of Saud and the various tribes are consolidated through marriage.<sup>68</sup>

**▶ Respected leader, we need your help/advice/opinion.**

Soldier:	yaa Tuweel al 'umur, nabee musaa'adatkum/naSeeHatkum/raayakum	Respected leader, we need your help/advice/opinion.
Local:	na'am	Yes.

*Exchange 58*

## Nomadic Pastoralism on the Arabian Peninsula

When King Abdul Aziz unified territories in the first quarter of the 20th century, he changed the traditional system of tribal grazing and water rights. Consequently, tribal warfare, especially in border regions, slowly died down. By 1980, most nomads had adopted a settled lifestyle. Today, only a few semi-nomads remain in the northern deserts of the country, where they subsist on sheep ranching. However, even as the lifestyle has largely disappeared, the influence of Bedouin nomadic culture remains an important part of Saudi life.<sup>69, 70, 71</sup>



*Sheep grazing, Aseer  
Flickr / Charles Roffey*

The tribes still provide a bridge between ordinary Saudis and the authorities, and tribal chiefs often mediate on behalf of their tribesmen, although their political and military might are gone.<sup>72</sup>

## Border Crossings and Checkpoints



*The King Fahd Causeway connecting Saudi Arabia and  
Bahrain  
Flickr / Wajahat Mahmood*

Saudi Arabia has land border crossings with Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Yemen, Oman, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain, thanks to the King Fahd Causeway. Conditions at border crossings vary due to political activities and armed conflicts in the region.<sup>73</sup> Violence occasionally erupts in border areas and at some checkpoints.<sup>74, 75</sup> In the predominately Shia area of Qatif, several civilians were killed or wounded in 2012.<sup>76</sup>

▶ **Where is the nearest checkpoint?**

Soldier:	wayn agrab nigTit tafteesh?	Where is the nearest checkpoint?
Local:	ba’ad ithnayn keelo	It’s two kilometers.

*Exchange 59*



*Border between Saudi Arabia and Jordan  
Flickr / Jorge Lásca*

The al-Wadea land border crossing that connects Saudi Arabia with territories in eastern Yemen was closed during the blockade on Yemen. The Saudi-led military coalition reopened the border crossing in late 2017 to allow food and humanitarian supplies to enter Yemen.<sup>77, 78</sup> The U.S. government restricts travel for U.S. citizens to within 50 miles of the Saudi-Yemen border due to terrorism and armed conflict.

▶ **Please get out of the car.**

Soldier:	law simaHt inzil min is sayaara	Please get out of the car.
Local:	Tayib	OK.

*Exchange 60*

As relations with Iraq slowly improve, Saudi Arabia announced it would open the Al-Jadidah -Arar border crossing with Iraq in 2019. Saudi Arabia closed the Arar border post in 1990 after Saddam Hussain invaded Kuwait. Since then, the crossing opens once a year to allow pilgrims to travel to Mecca for the annual hajj.<sup>80, 81, 82</sup>



*Saudi border customs  
Flickr / b af*

► **Show us the car registration.**

Soldier:	warana istimart as sayaara	Show us the car registration.
Local:	Tayib	OK.

Exchange 61

In December 2017, Saudi Arabia closed its only official border crossing with Qatar, at Salwa. Saudi Arabia claims that Qatar interferes in its domestic affairs, supports terrorist groups and is too close politically to Iran. In 2018, a consortium of nine local firms proposed a plan to construct a water canal along the length of the Saudi-Qatari border and turn Qatar into an island. Riyadh has not approved the project, yet.<sup>83</sup>



Saudi-Kuwaiti border  
Flickr / nibaq

► **Is this all the ID you have?**

Soldier:	haaTha il-ithbaat al waHeed alee me'ik?	Is this all the ID you have?
Local:	na'am	Yes.

Exchange 62

Saudi Arabia shares three border crossings with Jordan. The busiest are the Haql border crossing, for people traveling from Jeddah, and the Al-Haditha border crossing, for travelers from Riyadh. The third crossing is Hallat Ammar in Tabuk.<sup>84, 85</sup>

► **Are you carrying any weapons?**

Soldier:	me'ik asliHa?	Are you carrying any weapons?
Local:	na'am	Yes.

Exchange 63

Before the Ramlat Khaliya border crossing was opened, the only route to Oman from Saudi Arabia was through the UAE. A new highway that runs through the southeastern desert (Rub Al-Khali) has connected Saudi Arabia to Oman since 2016.<sup>86, 87, 88</sup>

The Batha border crossing connects Saudi Arabia and the UAE. It is located on the world’s longest straight road, between the Saudi town of Haditha and the border crossing.<sup>89</sup>

Numerous checkpoints operate throughout Saudi Arabia where travelers are required to present identification papers. Saudi authorities routinely check traveler identification at checkpoints within cities and on intercity highways.<sup>90, 91</sup> Guards at highway checkpoints that lead to Mecca and Medina ask to see identification if they suspect that an individual is a non-Muslim. If an ID card shows that a person is non-Muslim, that person will not be permitted to pass.<sup>92</sup>

The General Directorate of Passports in Saudi Arabia recently began hiring women for roles at the airport and border crossings to facilitate the passage of women into the country.<sup>93</sup>

## Landmines

While Saudi Arabia is not a party to the Mine Ban Treaty and is not known to have produced cluster munitions, it has acquired and stockpiled them. In 2013, the United States authorized USD 641 million worth of the controversial weapons to be sent to Saudi Arabia, which has used them against militants in Yemen.<sup>94, 95</sup>

▶ Is this area mined?		
Soldier:	hal manTiga imlaghama?	Is this area mined?
Local:	na’am	Yes.

*Exchange 64*

Movement in border regions is particularly dangerous because of the existence of anti-personnel mines and other ordnance from the Gulf War era and earlier. During Operation Desert Storm in 1991, Saudi Arabia used cluster munitions in attacks against Iraqi forces, leaving significant numbers of unexploded ordnance in the battle area near al-Khafji and along the border with Kuwait.<sup>96</sup>

## Endnotes for Chapter 5: Rural Life

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# Arabic-Saudi Cultural Orientation

## Chapter 5 | Rural Life

### Assessment

1. Tribal affiliation sometimes determine access to government jobs and promotions.
2. King Fahd Causeway connects northern Saudi Arabia with Egypt's Sinai Peninsula.
3. One of the busiest border crossing in the Gulf region is between Saudi Arabia and Qatar.
4. Women can run and vote for provincial councils.
5. Scarcity of fresh water propelled Saudi Arabia to develop a vibrant aquaculture sector.

*Assessment Answers: 1. True; 2. True; 3. False; 4. True; 5. True*



*Saudi family on picnic, Riyadh  
Flickr / EVITAS WEBFOTOS*

## Chapter 6 | Arabic-Saudi Cultural Orientation

# Family Life

## Introduction

The family unit is the foundation of Islamic society and the most important social group in Saudi Arabia. It is the foundation of personal identity, a source of support, and the focus of loyalty.<sup>1, 2</sup> Saudis are more guarded about their families and homes than most Western societies. Saudi families prefer to live in self-contained residences, where members are protected from outside influence and contact with outsiders is limited. Relations among family members are often close.<sup>3, 4</sup>

Traditionally, marriages took place between cousins, and while this practice continues, it has fallen somewhat out of favor.<sup>5, 6</sup> Marriages are still arranged between families, but legally speaking no one is forced to marry; an individual may reject an intended spouse, although social pressures may override legal escapes.<sup>7, 8, 9</sup> Because of the centrality of family to Saudi culture, most people eventually marry.<sup>10</sup> Men are allowed by law to have as many as four wives at a time. In practice, however, few have more than one wife at a time.<sup>11, 12</sup> In spite of the value placed on family, the divorce rate in Saudi Arabia is one of the highest in the world.<sup>13, 14</sup>



*A man with his children  
Flickr / Tribes of the World*

Families are patriarchal, with men having the undisputed authority as head of the household and provider for the family's needs. Women are largely confined to the roles and duties of wife and mother.<sup>15</sup> Modern lifestyles have had a slight effect on these roles, though many men and women resist change and hold fast to traditional gender roles.<sup>16, 17</sup>

## Typical Household



*Generations of men  
Flickr / Pedronet*

Historically, households often included three or four generations living under one roof. However, this family structure is no longer the norm, especially in urban areas where young married couples prefer to move into their own homes. Although the total fertility rate of the country (2.09 children per woman) indicates modest population growth, the size of the average family has been declining in recent years. The average family size is now 5.9 people per household.<sup>19, 20, 21</sup>

The oldest male typically exercises authority over a household. Women have no formal decision-making authority, although they may wield some influence in certain matters. Saudi society is collectively oriented, with the needs and desires of the family trumping those of individuals.<sup>22</sup> Most social activity takes place within the family, often within the confines of the home.<sup>23, 24</sup>

▶ **Did you grow up here?**

Soldier:	tarabayt hina?	Did you grow up here?
Local:	na'am	Yes.

Exchange 65

Family members are obligated to take care of and support each other. Family loyalty is a source of great pride for Saudis.<sup>25</sup>

▶ **Do you have any brothers?**

Soldier:	'indik iKhwaan?	Do you have any brothers?
Local:	na'am	Yes.

Exchange 66

Since unmarried women are not permitted to live alone or without male protection, households generally include unmarried daughters.<sup>26</sup> Historically, it was unusual for Saudis to remain unmarried. However, a 2017 Saudi government report stated that 10.3% of women over the age of 32 were single. One reason for the relatively high number of unmarried women is that unemployment is causing young Saudi men to postpone marriage. Another reason is the housing shortage. In some cases, male guardians may refuse to allow marriages because the prospective husband is unsuitable, or they wish to retain the salaries of their employed female charges. Some women choose to remain single and pursue careers or other ambitions.<sup>27, 28, 29</sup>



Father with his kids  
Flickr / yasser zareaa

▶ **Does your family live here?**

Soldier:	ahlik ye'eeshoon hina?	Does your family live here?
Local:	na'am	Yes.

Exchange 67

▶ Are these people part of your family?

Soldier: haThoola min ahalk?

Are these people part of your family?

Local: laa

No.

Exchange 68

## Status of Women



A woman in downtown Jeddah  
Flickr / Nouf Kinani

Saudi Arabia is one of the least gender-equal nations in the world, ranking 141 out of 144 countries.<sup>30</sup> The law does not guarantee gender equality; males in the kingdom enjoy a higher status than women.<sup>31</sup> Women's activities are highly regulated and a strict segregation of the sexes is followed in everyday life.<sup>32, 33</sup> Women are treated as minors, requiring the permission of a male guardian or relative to travel, attend school, work, leave the home, or engage in many other daily activities. In legal proceedings, the testimony of a woman is worth only half that of a man. Women must generally have a male relative speak on their behalf.<sup>34, 35</sup>

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 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.<sup>36, 37</sup> 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.<sup>38, 39</sup> That same year, women were allowed to attend live sports events and concerts, although they had to enter stadiums through separate, specially designated entrances.<sup>40</sup>

Yet with the restrictive male guardianship system still in place, women’s newfound freedoms remain subject to the whims of their fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons. Furthermore, the government has been carefully stage-managing the rollout of reforms, to ensure it alone receives credit. 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.<sup>41, 42</sup>



*More women are working in mixed gender settings and in the private sector.  
Flickr / Bander AlMutlaq*

## Status of Elderly and Children



*Saudi boys  
Flickr / Pedronet*

With age comes respect in Saudi families, and the tradition of respect for age and seniority is strong.<sup>43</sup> Islamic principles specify that the duty to care for one’s parents is second only to the obligation of prayer. The obligation to care for and respect parents and the elderly means that there are no retirement or care homes for the elderly in the country.<sup>44</sup>

The oldest male in the household is owed respect and wields power in deciding the course of action for other family members.

The oldest woman, though without such authority, often wields informal influence, particularly on issues concerning marriage.<sup>45</sup> Elders do not relinquish their leadership roles as early as they did in the past. This means the most powerful authority figure for a young wife may not be her mother-in-law, but her husband’s grandmother. Consequently, a generation that has now come of age finds itself stymied in its pursuit of carving out an autonomous sphere within the multi-generational extended family.<sup>46</sup>

Children are highly regarded in Saudi society and can do no wrong in the eyes of adults.<sup>47, 48</sup> There still exists a clear preference for males. Males are breast fed longer and doted on by the women of the family. Once males reach the age of seven, they

enter the more disciplined world of their fathers. Females learn their roles and proper demeanor from an early age. They remain with the women, preparing for their futures as wives and mothers.<sup>49</sup>

## Marriage and Divorce

### Marriage

Saudi Arabia has some of the tightest controls on marriage in the world. The majority of marriages are arranged by family members and influenced by tribal affiliation. Marriage is not a sacrament but a civil contract.<sup>50</sup> Under Islamic law, the contract consists of two parts: the offer (ijab) and the acceptance (qabul), both of which occur in a single meeting. A woman is required to have a legal guardian conclude the contract for her.<sup>51</sup> Many marriages are arranged, but forced marriages are no longer legally permitted. Either party can reject an intended future spouse.<sup>52, 53, 54</sup> Saudi women are prohibited from marrying a non-Arab unless given special permission by the interior ministry.<sup>55</sup>



*A couple with their children  
Flickr / EVITAS WEBFOTOS*



*A couple at the Masjid al Bayyah  
Flickr / Omar A.*

Saudi nationals need special permission to marry non-Saudis. In 2014, Saudi Arabia banned marriages between Saudi men and women from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Myanmar, and Chad because the local population of expatriates from these countries exceeded 500,000, the limit set by authorities.<sup>56</sup> In 2018, new regulations for marriages between Saudis and foreigners were passed, which dictate that Saudi men must be between 40 and 65 years old to marry a foreign woman, and Saudi women must be between 30 and 50 to marry a foreigner. The permissible age difference between the spouses must not exceed 15 years, down from 30 years in the old requirements.



According to the justice ministry, about 10% of all married Saudi women are currently married to foreigners. Marriages between Saudi men and foreigners have become more common in the last 20 years.<sup>57</sup>

▶ Is this your wife?		
Soldier:	haaThee zojtik?	Is this your wife?
Local:	na'am	Yes.

Exchange 69

The specific rights and obligations of spouses are outlined by Sharia law. The husband is obligated to provide the wife with necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter, according to his financial status. (A Saudi man has to earn at least SR 3,000 (USD 800) a month and have an adequate home in order to get permission to marry a foreigner.)<sup>58</sup> The wife is expected to live in the home, which must be private and not include other relatives.<sup>59</sup>



Mom with her boy  
Flickr / marviikad

▶ Are you the only person in your family who has a job?		
Soldier:	int ash shaKhS al waHeed ib'aa-iltik ilee 'inda 'amal?	Are you the only person in your family who has a job?
Local:	laa	No.

Exchange 70

According to Islamic law, a man can take up to four wives. Each wife and family, however, must be treated equally.<sup>60, 61</sup> The financial obligations of supporting multiple households largely limit polygamous marriage to the wealthy.<sup>62, 63</sup>

▶ Are you married?		
Soldier:	int mitzawij?	Are you married?
Local:	laa	No.

Exchange 71

▶ **How many people live in this house?**

Soldier:	kam huma ilee ye'eeshoon ibhal bayt?	How many people live in this house?
Local:	'ashra.	Ten.

Exchange 72



A couple in Mecca  
Flickr / Al Jazeera English

There is no official minimum age for marriage in Saudi Arabia, and child marriages are not uncommon. Girls as young as eight years old have been married, often to men much older.<sup>64</sup> In 2018, authorities began considering regulations that would prohibit girls and boys under 15 from being married and require court approval for those under 18. However, not everyone supports a minimum age for marriage, arguing that early marriages prevent deviant behavior among adolescents.<sup>65, 66</sup>

▶ **Is this your entire family?**

Soldier:	haaThee 'eltik kilaha?	Is this your entire family?
Local:	na'am.	Yes.

Exchange 73

Consanguineous marriages, or marriages between blood relatives (usually first or second cousins), are still widely practiced among Saudi tribes. The practice is one way of limiting outsiders' access to family wealth. However, over time the practice can result in physical weaknesses in the offspring.<sup>67</sup> Estimates suggest that between 25% and 42% of marriages in Saudi Arabia are between cousins.<sup>68, 69</sup>

## Divorce

Divorce in Saudi Arabia is much easier for men than for women.<sup>70</sup> Under Sharia law, men have the right to divorce a wife by repudiation (*talaq*), which requires the utterance of the phrase, “I divorce you.” This procedure can be carried out either by the husband or his agent with power of attorney.<sup>71, 72</sup> *Talaq* does not require the wife’s consent, and women can find themselves divorced without their knowledge. A 2019 law requires that women be notified by text message when their husbands file for divorce and have online access to divorce documents.<sup>73, 74</sup>

Women have the right of divorce by *talaq* only if it was specifically included as a right in the marriage contract. The divorce may be revoked during a waiting period (*iddat*). Normally, the waiting period is approximately three months, during which time the wife is required to stay in the home. During *iddat*, a husband may require the woman to have sexual relations with him regardless of her consent.<sup>75</sup>



Young Saudi woman in the souq of Abha  
Flickr / Retlaw Snellac Photography



A sad Muslim woman  
Flickr / Al Jazeera English

Under the rules of mutual divorce (*khula*), a wife is required to compensate her husband. The *khula* requires two male witnesses, and the wife is required to follow the rules of the *iddat*.<sup>76</sup>

A third type of divorce, *tafriq*, is a judicial ruling following a court petition. Even if the divorce is granted, women must observe the *iddat*. Divorces obtained in secular courts and Islamic divorces granted outside of the country are not recognized in Saudi Arabia.<sup>77</sup>

Divorces are common in the kingdom, and each year there are approximately half as many divorces as there are marriages.<sup>78</sup> In the past, mothers faced lengthy legal

petition processes to gain custody of their children after a divorce. In 2018, the justice ministry decreed that mothers can retain custody of their children without filing a lawsuit if there is no dispute between the parents.<sup>79, 80</sup>

## Weddings

Before a wedding, the prospective groom must pay a bride price, or *mahr*, which becomes the sole property of the woman. In the case of divorce, the *mahr* remains the woman's property.<sup>81</sup> The *mahr* must be paid in full before the marriage takes place. Under certain conditions, payment can be delayed until a specified time following the marriage.<sup>82</sup>



Wedding celebration  
Flickr / Edward Musiak

Modern weddings are still sometimes held in the home, but more frequently they take place in hotels or wedding halls. Both the bride and groom wear white. The groom wears a long white covering, or *bisht*, and the traditional headscarf. Traditionally, the bride would wear a traditional *zaboun* dress and a face veil embroidered in silver thread (*yashmak*).<sup>83</sup> Wedding parties and the wedding ceremony itself, like all else in the country, are segregated. Some couples circumvent these restrictions by holding the festivities in neighboring countries like Bahrain or the United Arab Emirates.<sup>84, 85, 86</sup>

### ▶ Congratulations on your wedding!

Soldier:	mabrook iz zuwaaj!	Congratulations on your wedding!
Local:	sharaftana biHDhoorak.	We are honored you could attend.

Exchange 74

### ▶ I wish you both happiness.

Soldier:	atamanaalakum as sa'aada.	I wish you both happiness.
Local:	tisharafna.	We are honored.

Exchange 75



Wedding ceremony  
Flickr / sören2013

The party for the groom is generally celebrated with a lavish feast, including a whole roasted sheep or baby camel. After the meal, the groom and his family join the women’s party, which often involves singing and dancing to traditional music. When the groom arrives, around midnight, the bride and groom are led to a dais for more singing and dancing. The couple is then escorted to their new home, signaling the end of the wedding.

## Funerals

For strict Sunni Muslims, all people are considered equal in death.<sup>88</sup> Public displays of grief for the deceased and the visiting of graves are frowned upon. The body of the deceased is washed and placed in a shroud before being placed in a grave. No coffins are used and the body is carefully placed facing Mecca. By convention, the dead are buried before sunset of the day after death.<sup>89</sup> Women are not allowed to attend funerals, whether the deceased is male or female. To do otherwise would contravene the requirements of segregation between the sexes.<sup>90</sup>



Saudi cemetery  
Flickr / Omar A.

▶ I would like to give my condolences to you and your family.

Soldier: ‘aDham al laa ajrak.

I would like to give my condolences to you and your family.

Local: jizaak al laa Khayr.

May God preserve you.

Exchange 76

▶ Please be strong.

Soldier: towakal ‘ala al laa.

Please be strong.

Local: insha al laa.

God willing, we will try.

Exchange 77

## Naming Conventions



A father with his sons  
Flickr / Charles Roffey

It is common in Saudi Arabia to string together a long series of first names using the words “*bin*,” “*ibn*” (son of) or “*bint*” (daughter of). Saudis may choose to go back many generations resulting in very long names. Saudi prince Faysal bin Turki bin Abdallah bin Mohhamad bin Saud’s name extends back to his great-great-grandfather.<sup>91</sup>

Four-part names are common and consist of a child’s given name, the father’s name, the paternal grandfather’s name, and the name of their tribe. The tribal name (e.g., Harbi, Qahtani, Ghamdi) can be shared with as many as half a million people.<sup>92</sup> A representative male name is Ali bin Ahmed bin Saleh al-Ghamdi. He would be known as Ali to his close friends and family. He is the son of Ahmed who is the son of Saleh. Al-Ghamdi is his family name, reflecting membership in the tribe of Ghamd. His children would be given their own first name, followed by “bin Ali” or “bint Ali” (for males and females, respectively), followed by the paternal grandfather’s name and their tribal name.<sup>93, 94</sup> Ali’s son would be Hasan bin Ali bin Ahmed al-Ghamdi. His daughter might be Nadia bint Ali bin Ahmed al-Ghamdi. Names are sometimes shortened by leaving out “*bin/bint*.” In the example above, one might see Hasan Ali Ahmed al-Ghamdi. Women keep their names when they marry and do not adopt the name of the husband.<sup>95</sup>

▶ Are these your children?

Soldier:	haThoola ‘iyaalik?	Are these your children?
Local:	na’am.	Yes.

Exchange 78

Alternatively, Saudis may choose to reference future rather than past generations. A man may prefer to be known as the father of his son. Persons using this convention are often referred to as “abu” followed by the name of the son. For instance, “Abu Mohammad” would be the father of Mohammad. Women use the term “um,” so the mother of Mohammad would be referred to as “Um Mohammad.”



Boys playing soccer, Ajjad, Mecca  
Flickr / Ikhlasul Amal

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## Cultural Orientation | Arabic-Saudi

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# Arabic-Saudi Cultural Orientation

## Chapter 6 | Family Life

### Assessment

1. The minimum age for marriage in Saudi Arabia is eight.
2. The male guardian system in Saudi Arabia means that women are treated as minors.
3. Wealthy Saudis hire professional female mourners to cry during funerals of their relatives.
4. A Saudi man can divorce his wife without her consent or knowledge.
5. Since marriage is a civil contract in Saudi Arabia, the government can deny certain marriages.

*Assessment Answers: 1. False; 2. True; 3. False; 4. True; 5. True*

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# Arabic-Saudi Cultural Orientation

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## Final Assessment

1. Nejd is the central region of Saudi Arabia.
2. The Muslim era began in the 7th century.
3. The busiest airport in Saudi Arabia is located near Jeddah.
4. The discovery of oil in the Arabian Peninsula at the end of World War I (1918) propelled the British to recognize Saudi Arabia as a new nation two years later.
5. The niqab is a full body cloak worn by Muslim women over their street clothes.
6. Non-Muslims cannot visit the two holiest cities of Islam.
7. There are no movie theaters in Saudi Arabia.
8. The founder of Saudi Arabia was King Fahd, who died at the age of 84.
9. All Saudi nationals are required by law to be Muslims.
10. The Majlis al-Shura is the enclosed women's section at the Grand Mosque of Mecca.



11. A thobe is the most common camel saddle in the Arabian Peninsula. It is made of goat hair and decorated with beads and colorful embroidery.
12. Saudi Arabia executes people who commit nonviolent crimes.
13. The literacy rate in Saudi Arabia is above 90%.
14. Muslim Shiites are a protected minority in Saudi Arabia.
15. Public buildings in Saudi Arabia have separate entrances for women.
16. Saudis risk severe penalties when they use social media. The government routinely blocks chat applications.
17. The siege of Mecca refers to the blockade on the holy city by the Ottoman Turks during their conquest of the Arabian Peninsula.
18. Jeddah is Saudi Arabia's most cosmopolitan city.
19. Women cannot attend sports events in Saudi Arabia.
20. Wahhabism is the second largest branch of Islam. Wahhabis attribute divine qualities to their Imams who are the direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad.
21. The common spoken language in Saudi hospitals is English.

22. Hijri is one of the six economic cities of Saudi Arabia.
23. Saudi Women work as drivers for ride-hailing companies such as Uber.
24. The only way to enter Oman from Saudi Arabia is through the UAE.
25. The governors of the 13 provinces in Saudi Arabia are appointed by the king.
26. Medina is the second holiest city in Islam after Mecca.
27. Since the launching of Vision 2030, unemployment among Saudi citizens has dropped significantly.
28. Expatriates cannot get medical care in public hospitals.
29. Asir is one of the geographical region of Saudi Arabia.
30. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) is the de-facto leader of Saudi Arabia.

Assessment Answers: 1. True; 2. True; 3. True; 4. False; 5. False; 6. True; 7. False; 8. False; 9. True; 10. False; 11. False; 12. True; 13. True; 14. False; 15. True; 16. False; 17. False; 18. True; 19. False; 20. False; 21. True; 22. False; 23. True; 24. False; 25. True; 26. True; 27. False; 28. True; 29. True; 30. True