



EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE **FIELD GUIDE**

Saudi Arabia



About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.



Arab Gulf States.

NOTE: While the term Persian Gulf is common in the US, this guide uses the name preferred in the region, the Arabian Gulf.

Part 2 “Culture Specific” describes unique cultural features of Kuwaiti society. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location. This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment training.



For further information, visit the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/> or contact the AFCLC Region Team at AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil.

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PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual



symbol of a core American value -- freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic because it represents the premium Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.

Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones, where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to

focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

Cultural Domains

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner

that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize behaviors and systems into categories—what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains”—in order to better understand the primary

values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains—which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems and others (see chart on next page)—as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the way a culture defines family and kinship, a US military member operating overseas can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

Social Behaviors across Cultures

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival, although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.



Conversely, industrialized nations have more complex market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

Worldview

One of our most basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different based on our cultural standards. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are “people like me” or “people not like me.” Usually, we assume that those in the “like me” category share our perspectives and values.

12 Domains of Culture



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This collective perspective forms our worldview—how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It

helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

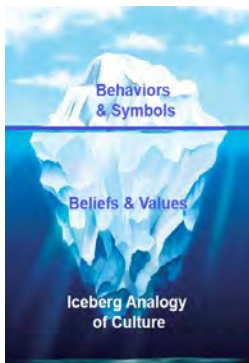
Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system assigns meaning, sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true — regardless of whether there is evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central aspect of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have helped shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.

Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is



important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).

In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a

culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.



As you travel through the Arab Gulf States, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

CULTURAL DOMAINS

1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable or which occurred prior to written language.

The Arab Gulf States comprise 7 countries that border the Arabian Gulf: Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman. Scientists believe that the southern Gulf region was once home to early humans who

established permanent settlements as many as 125,000 years ago. In the region's north, the favorable soil and climate conditions of Mesopotamia (present day Syria and Iraq) allowed people to settle, farm the land, create irrigation systems, build structures, and establish towns beginning around 6200 BC.

A unique culture emerged between 3000 and 2500 BC at Dilmun in present-day Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. As a regional hub, Dilmun played an important role in trade between the Arabian Peninsula and the Indus River valley (located in present-day Pakistan and India) as well as along longer routes to East Africa, Southeast Asia, and China. While the Arab Gulf was an important trading hub for centuries, the region never saw the birth of its own empire nor were its inhabitants ever united under a single local power. Instead, each of the region's port cities was autonomous, with its own local economy and social organization. The cities' dispersed power prevented their unification and also made the region a target for incursions from beyond the Gulf.



The first external force to exert power and influence over the region was the Achaemenid Empire which controlled parts of the Gulf starting in 550 BC from its center in Pasargadae (Iran). It was followed by the Parthian (140 BC) and Sassanian (226 AD) Empires centered in Iran and the Umayyad Caliphate (661 AD) centered in Syria and Turkey. The period marked by the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (570 AD) in present-day Saudi Arabia and the subsequent emergence and establishment of Islam as the region's predominant religion was a defining era in the Gulf's history.



In the 16th century, Portugal established control over Bahrain and parts of the southern Gulf, a move that ushered in an era of European struggle for supremacy in the region. In the late 16th century, the Safavid Dynasty of Iran allied with England to expel Portugal. At the same time, Iraq came under control of the Ottoman Empire (centered in present-day Istanbul) whose rule lasted until World War I, when the British assumed control.

England became active in the southern Gulf in the late 18th century then solidified its dominance in the 19th century through agreements with local rulers in present-day Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the UAE. Unlike in Africa and Asia, the British never established formal colonies in the region and left local ruling families largely in place.



The discovery of oil in the 1930s had a profound impact on the Gulf States' economies and politics. While English and US companies initially owned and managed the Gulf oil industry, local rulers confirmed their control of the industry following their countries' full independence (Saudi Arabia, 1932; Oman, 1951, Kuwait, 1961; then Bahrain, Qatar, and UAE in 1971). Iraq, like Saudi Arabia, achieved independence in 1932 but was occupied by Britain during World War II. Following the monarchy's overthrow in 1958, Iraq became a republic.

Under the leadership of royal dynasties since independence, 6 of the Gulf States have remained stable. By contrast, Iraq has been enmeshed in several conflicts that have contributed to regional instability. Under the autocratic rule of Saddam Hussein, Iraq engaged in the bloody Iran-Iraq War from 1980-1986, then invaded and annexed neighboring Kuwait 4 years later, inciting the First Gulf War. Since its 2003 invasion of Iraq and subsequent collapse of the Hussein regime, the US has engaged in security cooperation activities in Iraq. In reaction to the 2011 Arab Spring, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Kuwait have suppressed protests and calls for reform.

2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all of the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community.

The Arab Gulf's position at a crossroads for international trade has greatly influenced its ethnic makeup, politics, and social structures. The diversity of people passing through and residing in the region as part of its trade-based economy persists today



– foreign non-citizen workers make up sizable portions of the populations in each of the Gulf States with the exception of Iraq.

Today, the Gulf States minus Iraq are governed by

monarchy, though several have introduced political and institutional reforms since independence. While Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar have each adopted a constitution, the Saudi Arabian government considers the Qur'an, the primary religious text of Islam, its constitution. In 1996, Oman established the Basic Law of the State, which introduced a new system of government that includes a 2-chamber legislature that meets at the request of the sultan (ruler). The 2005 Iraqi constitution established an Islamic, democratic, federal parliamentary republic led by an elected Prime Minister, President, and legislature. Unlike the region's other monarchies, the UAE's government is comprised of the hereditary leaders of each of its 7 emirates.

While the legal systems of the Gulf States have incorporated many aspects of English, French, and Egyptian law, **Sharia** (Islamic) law continues to play a central role, particularly in criminal and family matters. In recent years, the Gulf States have undertaken efforts to create formalized legal systems that combine *Sharia* and civil systems.

Despite some political tensions, relations among most of the Gulf States are largely amicable. Their good relations are primarily a result of their participation in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – a political, economic, and military alliance uniting Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman. Since the organization's inception in 1981, member states have undertaken efforts to integrate their economies, militaries, and other social and political structures.



Iraq's role in fomenting regional instability has affected its relations with the other Gulf States. While the UAE, Qatar, and Oman have strong trade and diplomatic relations with Iraq, Saudi Arabia and its close ally Bahrain frequently clash with Iraq. Disagreements center on Iran's role in the region fueled by ideological differences between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain's Sunni Islam leadership and Iran's Shiite Islam leadership. While Iraq and Kuwait have taken steps to repair their relationship, tensions continue to linger from Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Due to their significant sizes, populations, and resources, Iraq and Iran compete for influence in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia with its large oil reserves is also a powerful regional player even though its military forces are significantly smaller than those of either Iraq or Iran.

Most of the Gulf States rely on the US to augment their military capabilities. With over 30,000 US troops stationed at several military installations throughout the region, the US has entered into agreements to sell or transfer arms and defense services to most of the States. The US remains in Iraq to train, support, and advise Iraqi security forces. Bahrain is the site of the longest-serving permanent US military presence in the Gulf, while Kuwait, the UAE, and Qatar also host large numbers of US military personnel.

While Gulf States citizens are predominantly Arabs, the region is also home to several ethnic minorities – Persians in the UAE and Kuwait; Palestinians in Qatar; and Baloch and Persians in Oman. In Iraq, strong tensions exist between the country's 2 primary ethnic groups, the Arabs and the Kurds. In each of the States, except Iraq, significant portions of the population are foreign non-citizens – about 42% in Saudi Arabia, 54% in Bahrain, 41% in Oman, 75% in Kuwait, 88% in the UAE and Qatar.

The Gulf's tribal networks were historically a fundamental element of social relations. While the region's governments have attempted to supplant tribal allegiances with national identity in recent decades, the tribe continues to play an important role in social life in most States.

3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society. Early regional inhabitants worshipped various gods and objects, such as the sun, moon, animals, and tribal heroes. Between 500 BC and the 5th century, Zoroastrianism, one of the world's first monotheistic religions, gained followers in the region. Although

Christianity arrived in the Arab Gulf in the 1st century, most of the region's Christians fled or converted following the arrival of Islam.

In 610 AD, a merchant from Mecca (in present-day Saudi Arabia), Muhammad ibn Abdullah, began

preaching the worship of 1 God, Allah, marking the founding of Islam. Through conquest and proselytization Muhammad and his followers had united the entire Arabian Peninsula under Islam by the time of his death in 632 AD.



Without a chosen successor to Muhammad, his death ushered in an era of infighting that eventually split Islam into 2 sects, Shias and Sunnis. This divide persists and occasionally causes conflict in the region today. Sunni Muslims began moving beyond Arabia shortly after Muhammad's death, making their way to Iraq in 638.

Since its introduction, Islam has been a defining factor in shaping the region's cultures, societies, and political systems. Today, Islam is the official religion of each of the Gulf States. Further, the majority of the region's non-citizen residents are also Muslim. While the Arab Gulf is also home to some religious minorities – primarily Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Baha'is – these non-Muslims are largely non-citizen foreign residents.

The Gulf States governments exhibit varying levels of religious freedom. For example, Saudi



Arabian law does not recognize or protect religious freedom. While conversion from Islam is punishable by death, Saudi courts rarely inflict this sentence and instead issue lengthy prison sentences and lashings as punishment. Although the Iraqi constitution guarantees religious freedom, the government has been unable to stop recent acts of violence against Shia Muslims, Christians, and others.

4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called “fictive kin”).

A fundamental element of Gulf society, family may refer to a person's household and extended family, clan (a group of families), or tribe. Family, clan, and tribal connections typically play an important role in an individual's life—they may determine a person's social status, potential marriage partners, business opportunities, and inheritance rights. While residence patterns

differ slightly among the States, multiple generations typically reside together in 1 household.



Historically, marriage was an arranged union intended to bring both families social and economic advantages. Although arranged marriages are still common across the region, many regional residents now choose their own spouse,

particularly in urban areas. Married couples typically live with the man's family. While divorce was traditionally uncommon in the Gulf States, divorce rates have increased in some of the Gulf States yet remained steady in others. Of note, polygyny, the practice of a man having multiple wives, is legal in the Gulf States.

The urbanization of Gulf society has changed family life in recent years. As both men and women take advantage of the enhanced educational and employment opportunities available primarily in urban areas, family structures have become much more diverse.

5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

The Arab Gulf States' cultures and religions (primarily Islam) traditionally privilege the male's role as leader and provider. For example, Sharia law grants men privileges in inheritance and other family matters. While most of the region's inhabitants continue to adhere to traditional gender roles—men as breadwinners and guardians and women as mothers and companions—recent influences from external and internal sources have introduced some changes.

Women, like most men, were largely uneducated for much of the Gulf's history. In recent decades, literacy rates for women have increased significantly across the Gulf. Further, women now

make up more than 50% of the university student population in all States, although they often face challenges to getting their education. For example, women are often encouraged to pursue traditional “female” disciplines such as education and healthcare. In Kuwait, they are required to score higher than men on entrance exams for traditionally male-dominated fields such as engineering.

Because the Gulf States’ legal systems permit gender-based discrimination, women are far less likely to participate in politics than men. Some progress has occurred: Saudi Arabia became the last Arab Gulf State to extend the right to vote to women in 2015. Although women may serve in prominent diplomatic and judicial posts, the number of women serving in elected political office across the region remains very low.



Historically, Gulf women rarely worked outside the home, a tradition that has changed over the past decades. For example, female participation in the workforce has increased 7% in Qatar and 18% in the UAE between 2000-2022. Despite steps towards gender equality, women still face barriers to their full participation in society. For example, it remains traditional for male guardians to accompany women to events outside of the home, while many workplaces and schools continue to practice gender segregation.

Homosexuality is illegal in all of the Gulf States except Bahrain, where it was decriminalized in 1976. Most Gulf residents consider issues regarding homosexuality as inappropriate topics of conversation.

6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally.

Arabic is the official language of each of the Arab Gulf States. Most residents regularly use 2 Arabic varieties—Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), derived from the classical Arabic of the Qur'an and used in school, the media, and in official government proceedings, and Gulf Arabic or Khaleeji Arabic, a widely spoken dialect. The residents of some States speak additional languages and dialects. For example, Iraq names Kurdish as its 2nd official language, and most Iraqis speak a unique dialect of Arabic called Mesopotamian Arabic. Some residents of Oman speak other Arabic dialects.



The Arab Gulf nations are also home to millions of non-citizens who speak their own native languages. These include Farsi (spoken in Iran); Malayalam, Tamil, Hindi, Balochi, Bengali, Pashto, and Urdu (spoken in South Asia); African

languages such as Somali and Swahili; and Asian languages such as Thai, Tagalog, and Korean. English is also widely spoken in business and by the expatriate communities of the Gulf.

Generally, Gulf residents demonstrate respect, generosity, and hospitality in their communication practices. Residents tend to share information about themselves and expect Westerners to do the same: they may ask personal questions about salary, marital status (particularly of unmarried people of a certain age), and family. Regional residents commonly use gestures when they speak, particularly if they are passionate about the topic of conversation.

7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized

systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.

Prior to the 20th century, formal education in most Arab Gulf States was limited to **madrasas**, religious schools that taught memorization of Qur'anic verses and the fundamentals of Islamic beliefs and practice, primarily to males. Following the 20th-century discovery of oil, educational opportunities expanded greatly.

Bahrain became the first Gulf State to establish a public educational system in 1932. In the mid-1950s, governments began to establish departments of education and



allocate funds for schools and other resources. An exception was Oman, where educational offerings until 1970 consisted solely of 3 primary schools reserved for 900 boys hand-selected by the Omani sultan.

Today, most of the Gulf States invest heavily in education, often at rates higher than many other developed nations. Consequently, adult literacy is over 96% in all States except Iraq where it is a low 86%. Further, the past several decades have witnessed a significant growth in the number of higher education institutions across the region.

Due to years of conflict, Iraq continues to have inadequate education facilities and a shortage of teachers and resources. Because many students are displaced, their education is often incomplete.

8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In most western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management, devoting less effort to relationship-building. By contrast, in the Arab Gulf States, establishing and maintaining relationships with

others often takes precedence over meeting deadlines, punctuality, or accomplishing a task in the most efficient manner.

As in other Islamic societies, men and women in the Arab Gulf region often interact differently than Americans are used to. For example, in many parts of the Gulf unrelated women and men seldom interact, and when they do, it is only in group settings.

Concepts of personal space also differ from those in the US. For example, Gulf State residents of the same sex commonly sit and stand closer to each other than Westerners do. They may also touch more often during conversations than Westerners.



Residents of the Arab Gulf States also tend to manage time differently. While residents typically agree in advance on scheduled start times, meetings frequently begin late. Further, Gulf residents may prefer to deliberate for an extended period before making final decisions.

The Arab Gulf States use both the Islamic and Western calendars. Because Friday is considered a holy day in Islam,

most Arab Gulf States observe a Sunday-Thursday workweek, except for Oman, which observes a Saturday-Wednesday workweek.

9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Most of the Arab Gulf's forms of artistic expression, including its art, architecture, dance, music, and theater, reflect the region's Arabic and Islamic influences. Gulf artists historically favored geometric designs and patterns to depict plants, flowers, and animals on buildings, jewelry, and household items.

Due to historic trade relationships and intermingling of cultures, music and dance in the Arab Gulf States reflect Persian, Indian, and east African influences. Popular throughout the region, Khaleeji music combines local Bedouin (Arab seminomadic group) music with styles from Africa, India, and Iran.

For some regional residents, dance forms are an integral part of Islamic worship. Others perform dances only in same-sex settings. Many of the region's dances are done in line, circle, square, or semicircle formations with participants moving in tandem. Dances in the Arab Gulf are generally grouped by type, including warfare, work-related, "foreign," women's, weddings, healing, and Sufi religious dances.

Regional residents practice a variety of arts and crafts including weaving (typically using camel or goat hair) and calligraphy – the art of handwriting in



which artists transform letters and words into intricate designs. While soccer is the most widely followed sport in the region, wealthier residents also enjoy falconry, horse racing, and camel racing.

10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

While cuisine varies across the region, residents throughout the Arab Gulf use many common staple ingredients and spices such as mutton, lamb, and fish prepared with cardamom, turmeric, saffron, and dried limes. Fruits, yogurt, various salads, and rice are common accompaniments to meals. The most popular drink, tea is served sweetened and prepared either with or without

milk. Observant Muslims in the Arab Gulf consume neither pork nor alcohol.

Health in most of the Arab Gulf countries has improved significantly in recent decades as evidenced by decreased infant and maternal mortality rates and longer life expectancies. Most residents in all States except Iraq have access to quality healthcare that is largely subsidized by governments.

Years of conflict and the Saddam regime's defunding of public healthcare by 90% created significant problems in the Iraqi healthcare system. In 2009, with funding from the World Health Organization, the Iraqi Ministry of Health introduced a plan to reform and decentralize the country's healthcare system. Additionally, international humanitarian organizations have expanded their efforts in Iraq to provide healthcare to both the local population as well as those fleeing conflict areas.

The region's healthcare systems face several challenges, particularly rapidly growing healthcare expenditures associated with a large, aging population and lifestyle changes that have negative health implications. For example, fewer residents adhere to the region's traditional diet and instead have increased



their consumption of pre-packaged and fast foods. Simultaneously, rapid urbanization, the increased use of mechanized transportation, and a lack of dedicated green spaces for physical activities have led to an increasingly sedentary lifestyle for many

residents. As a result, obesity rates have increased and non-communicable diseases (such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer, and chronic respiratory disease) now cause more than 69-83% of all deaths in all of the Arab Gulf States, except Iraq.

Communicable diseases remain a concern in Iraq, where contaminated water supplies, inadequate sanitation, and poor hygienic practices contribute to the spread of typhoid, cholera, and tuberculosis.

11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. Besides fishing and agriculture, the Gulf States' economies have been enmeshed with local and international trade since ancient times. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Arab Gulf's port cities were integral elements of the trade routes connecting India, Europe, and East Africa.

In the late 19th century, the region began exporting dates and pearls to new markets in Europe and North America. After global demand for pearls grew significantly around the turn of the 20th century, pearl diving became a major contributor to the economies of the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain before the industry collapsed in the 1930s. The region then entered a period of socioeconomic hardship until the discovery of oil.

The growth of the oil industry in the 1950s-60s significantly changed the region. Within a few decades the States had transformed from some of the world's poorest countries to some of the wealthiest. This wealth has facilitated investment in infrastructure, enhanced the quality of life, and encouraged rapid urbanization throughout the region with the exception of Iraq.



Prior to 1980, Iraq had one of the most advanced economies of all Arab Gulf States. Years of conflict, however, have had a profound effect on Iraq's economy. In late 2015, Iraq implemented an economic reform proposal intended to cut excess government spending and crackdown on corruption.

Oil remains an important part of the region's economies today—in Iraq, Qatar, and Kuwait, oil exports make up over 80% of government revenues. Over the past several decades, the Gulf States collectively have taken steps to reduce their economic dependence on oil through diversification efforts. For example, Bahrain has worked to develop its banking sector; Kuwait produces cement and ships and specializes in food-processing; Qatar is expanding its agricultural sector; and the UAE is investing in tourism, airport and aviation services, and facilities management services.

Despite these efforts, the region remains dependent on oil: all of the region's economies were adversely affected by the decline in oil prices and a reduced demand for oil during the 2008 global financial crisis. The States are currently exploring ways to adapt to the fluctuating oil prices that began in 2019.

12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology.

Most of the Arab Gulf States have invested heavily into



extensive road networks. The governments of Oman and Saudi Arabia, for example, have put significant sums of funding towards building large freeways and roads that extend to remote areas. Despite years of conflict, Iraq's 36,000 miles of roads remain in relatively good condition. Six of the region's governments allocated \$250 billion for the construction of a regional rail network which will link Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman, Bahrain, and Qatar after many delays the Gulf

Cooperation Council (GCC) is estimating a now 2030 completion date.

Information technology is spreading rapidly throughout the Arab Gulf. Between 2000 and 2022, Internet usage grew from between 0 and 24% of population to between 99% and 100% of population. The exception is Iraq where just 79% of population are Internet users. Cell phones are extremely popular –the States report between 98 and 212 mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people.

As the destination of 7% of all GCC exports, the European Union (EU) is the region's 4th largest trading partner. The EU and the GCC States (with the exception of Iraq) are pursuing a free trade agreement. The Gulf States also maintain important trade relationships with several Asian nations.

For example, China depends on the Arab Gulf for 41% of its oil imports, India for 35%, South Korea for 70%, and Japan for over 91%.

The Arab Gulf faces challenges in meeting its growing energy needs. As a result of the region's rapid urbanization and population growth, the Gulf States are shifting from being energy suppliers to major energy consumers. Energy consumption grew by about 5%

annually since 1972 (compared to 2% globally). While the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have less than 1% of the world's population, these countries now use more than 8% of the world's

oil. Iraq has had difficulty meeting its own power needs, relying on imported electricity and petroleum products.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize Arab Gulf society at large, we will focus on specific features of society in Saudi Arabia.



PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

1. HISTORY AND MYTH

Overview

The birthplace of Islam and home to its two holiest shrines, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has experienced profound societal and economic changes since its 1932 founding. With some of the world's largest oil reserves, the KSA has significant global influence, and its policies sometimes cause serious tensions with regional neighbors. Under the influence of young Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the KSA is today a blend of ancient traditions, modern technology, conservatism, and reform.



Note: While readers may refer to the body of water to the east of the KSA by its more common name, the Persian Gulf, this guide uses the name preferred by Arabs in the region, the Arabian Gulf.

Early History

Archaeological finds suggest that humans have inhabited the Arabian Peninsula for millennia. Some of the region's oldest artifacts include hand axes, cleavers, and other stone tools from Saffaqah in central Arabia, estimated to be 190,000-240,000 years old. Around 10,000 years ago, regional inhabitants began to create permanent settlements near oases and engaged in agriculture. As early as 6000 BC, trade routes developed, primarily in coastal areas. Around 2000 BC, a peaceful civilization called Dilmun, centered in present-day Bahrain and extending along the Arabian Gulf coastline near Dammam (in the KSA's present-day Eastern Province), emerged as a thriving regional trade hub.

Around 1000 BC, trade intensified as Gulf inhabitants domesticated the camel, first to provide milk and then as a beast of burden. By this time, Arabia had extensive contact with other regions. Trade routes between present-day Oman and Yemen and Mediterranean civilizations passed through central Arabia, while other routes linked the region with advanced civilizations in Mesopotamia (present-day Syria, Iraq, and Kuwait).

As merchants carried spices, frankincense, myrrh, and precious metals through Arabia, settlements prospered, especially along the coastlines. Meanwhile, nomadic **bedu** (Bedouin – see p. 13 of *Political and Social Relations*) moved across the region, occasionally raiding villages and trade caravans. Visible today is a collection of ancient carved rock tombs built by the Nabataeans some 2,000 years ago at Mada'in Saleh.

The Birth of Islam

Born in 570 in Mecca in western Arabia, the Prophet Muhammad permanently transformed the region and became one of the



world's most influential religious and political leaders. According to Muslim belief, Muhammad began to receive revelations from God around 610 and quickly gathered followers of the new religion, Islam (see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

Facing persecution from hostile local leaders in Mecca, Muhammad and his followers fled north to the city of Medina in 62, an event subsequently memorialized as the **hegira** ("migration"). In Medina, Muhammad created a theocratic state based on the **ummah** (community of believers – see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Over the next decade, Islam spread rapidly through proselytization and armed conflict.

The Struggle for Power: By Muhammad's 632 death, most of Arabia belonged to the *ummah*. Succession disputes over who would lead the *ummah* as its **caliph** (leader – see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*) led to a division in the *ummah* between two main groups known as the Sunni and the Shi'a (see p. 2 of *Religion*

and Spirituality), with Sunnism predominating in Arabia. As Islam spread beyond Arabia over the next centuries, various Islamic dynasties and sects competed for control. After the death of the third *caliph* in 656, the seat of the caliphate (area under the authority of the *caliph*) moved from Medina to Kufa (in present-day Iraq), then Damascus (in present-day Syria), and eventually to Baghdad (Iraq).

While Arabia declined in importance after the seat of the caliphate shifted, pilgrims continued to visit Islam's primary spiritual centers at Mecca and Medina, collecting revenue and facilitating cultural exchange. Subsequently, Arabia divided into two distinct regions: the west coast region called the Hejaz (including Mecca and Medina) grew into a cosmopolitan center while central Arabia, called Najd, remained isolated with a population spread over a vast area.



Over the next centuries, both local and foreign groups struggled for control of Arabia. In the 10th century, descendants of Muhammad, calling themselves **sharifs** (“nobles”), took control of Mecca. In the mid-13th century, the Mamluk Empire of Egypt proclaimed Cairo the center of the *ummah* and extended its authority into the Hejaz. From their homeland in modern-day Turkey, the Ottomans seized the Hejaz from the Egyptians in 1517 and appointed local *sharifs* to rule Mecca in their place. By the mid-16th century, the Ottomans controlled most of the peninsula’s eastern and western coastlines but struggled with local Arab tribes for control of the interior.

The First Saudi State (or the Emirate of Diriyah)

In 1744, the Sunni Muslim theologian Muhammad bin Abd al Wahhab was expelled from his central Arabian hometown of Uyaynah due to his controversial religious views (see p. 5 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Abd al Wahhab sought refuge in Diriyah, a nearby town on the outskirts of the modern capital of

Riyadh that was ruled by Muhammad bin Saud. The alliance that subsequently formed between the two men changed Arabia's religious landscape and lay the groundwork for the eventual founding of the KSA.

Together, Abd al Wahhab and Muhammad bin Saud sought to create a new state based on Abd al Wahhab's puritanical understanding of Islam, now known as Wahhabism or Salafism (see p. 6 of *Religion and Spirituality*). They conquered villages across central Arabia and gained converts and followers known as Wahhabis. Upon Muhammad bin Saud's 1765 death, his son Abdul-Aziz bin Muhammad established Saudi rule over much of Najd before his 1803 assassination.



Provoking the Ottomans:

At the end of the 18th century, the Wahhabis began attacking caravans of pilgrims crossing Arabia on their way to Mecca, provoking the Ottomans, who invaded eastern Arabia. In response, the Wahhabis marched on Iraq around 1801, sacking the Ottoman-ruled city of Karbala and killing thousands of Shi'as, whose religious practices the Wahhabis condemned. Returning to Arabia, the Wahhabis attacked the Ottoman-controlled Hejaz. Upon capturing the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, the Wahhabis destroyed features of Islamic life different from their conservative ideology.

Preoccupied with other matters, the Ottomans declined to engage the Wahhabis until 1811, when they dispatched Egyptian troops to invade western Arabia. While the Egyptians recaptured Mecca and Medina by 1813, fighting continued for several years, with the Wahhabis eventually retreating back to their central Arabian homeland. Meanwhile, the Egyptians had gained the support of several Arab tribes. In 1818, they besieged the Wahhabis at Diriyah, but after six months, the First Saudi State's last leader, Abdullah bin Saud, surrendered. Abdullah and other Wahhabi leaders were imprisoned in Constantinople (Istanbul today – the Ottomans' capital) and eventually killed.

The Second Saudi State (or the Emirate of Najd)

After destroying Diriyah, the Egyptians eventually withdrew from central Arabia and returned to the Hejaz. Meanwhile, the surviving members of the Al Saud family went into hiding. By 1821, they had reorganized under Turki bin Abd Allah, a grandson of Muhammad bin Saud, founder of the First Saudi State. By 1824, Turki controlled all of Najd, naming Riyadh the capital of the Second Saudi State. Turki successfully extended his influence in interior regions and along Arabia's eastern coast. To avoid conflict with the Ottomans, he refrained from attacking the Hejaz, which remained under Egyptian control.

During his 10-year reign, Turki succeeded in creating a stable state and spreading Wahhabism throughout his realm. Following his 1834 assassination, there was a decade of unrest. Further, Egypt repeatedly attempted to reassert control over Saudi territory, notably capturing



Turki's son Faisal after he assumed leadership of the Saudi state. Egypt then placed a rival family member, who pledged loyalty to Egypt, on the throne. However, internal conflicts prompted by British activities in the region eventually forced the Egyptians to withdraw from Arabia, allowing Faisal to retake leadership of the Saudi state in 1843. Subsequently, Faisal extended his rule into present-day Bahrain and parts of Oman and Yemen.

A period of family infighting developed following Faisal's 1865 death. In 1871, the Ottomans occupied a large territory on the east coast of Arabia, which they would retain along with their holdings in the Hejaz until World War I. Meanwhile, another Arab dynasty sought expansion from their stronghold in the North – the Al Rashid, rulers of the Emirate of Jabal Shammar. In 1891, the Al Rashid defeated the Al Saud at the Battle of Mulaidda and captured Riyadh, ending the Second Saudi State and forcing the Al Saud family to take refuge in neighboring Kuwait.

Conquests towards a Third Saudi State

The Al Rashid struggled to maintain their hold over the former Saudi territory. Meanwhile, from his refuge in Kuwait, a grandson of Faisal, son of the last ruler of the Second Saudi State, and the



future founder of the KSA, Abd al Aziz bin Abd al Rahman Al Saud (commonly known as Abd al Aziz or Ibn Saud), developed a strategy to reestablish Saudi rule in Arabia. In 1902, he gathered some 40 followers and traveled to Riyadh, where he and 15 other invaders scaled

the city walls, surprising the Al Rashid governor and overwhelming his defenses. Welcomed by the population, Ibn Saud installed himself as Riyadh's ruler. While his efforts to consolidate power beyond Riyadh were initially unsuccessful, in 1904, Ibn Saud defeated a combined Al Rashid and Ottoman force. By 1906, he controlled much of central Arabia.

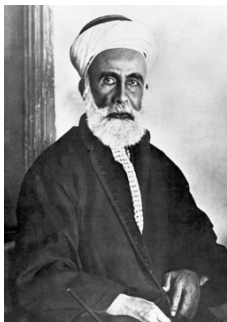
The Emergence of the *Ikhwan*: Recognizing the need for a permanent military force, Ibn Saud established some 100 *Ikhwan* ("brotherhood") colonies, where largely *bedu* recruits received land, tools, and compensation in exchange for their strict adherence to Wahhabism and devotion to Ibn Saud. The *Ikhwan* played a crucial role in helping Ibn Saud extend his rule through Najd and territories on the east coast by 1913.

Struggle for Control

In 1914, World War I (WWI) broke out between the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire) and the Allies (the US, Britain, France, and Russia, among others). In the Arabian Gulf, British and Ottoman competition for influence increased.

In 1915, the British recognized Ibn Saud's control over Najd and his east-coast holdings. In return, Ibn Saud promised to refrain from attacking British territory. Meanwhile, other regional rulers negotiated with foreign powers towards their own ends.

For example, in 1915, Hussein bin Ali, the *sharif* of Ottoman-controlled Mecca, agreed to support the British in exchange for the creation of an independent Arab state following WWI. Consequently, during the 1916 Arab Revolt (an uprising of Arabs against the Ottomans in the Hejaz, Jordan, and Syria), Hussein bin Ali collaborated with the British to attack Ottoman camps in Mecca and Medina. However, following the Ottomans' 1918 surrender, several European powers took control of former Ottoman Arab territories in the Middle East, dashing hopes for an independent Arab state and severing relations between Hussein and the British.



The next decade saw continued fighting across the region. Ibn Saud and his *Ikhwan* periodically attacked Kuwait beginning in 1919 before the appearance of British planes and ships convinced them to withdraw in 1920. They also clashed with the Al Rashid before finally defeating them at Hail in 1921 and taking control of much of northern Arabia. The next year, Ibn Saud agreed to British delineation of the northern boundary of his Saudi state, forming two neutral zones along the Iraqi and Kuwaiti borders.

Ignoring British efforts to negotiate peace in the region in 1924, Ibn Saud attacked the Hejaz, where *sharif* Hussein bin Ali still ruled. With the British declining to support Hussein, Ibn Saud's forces were quickly victorious. Soon, he controlled much of the territory comprising the modern-day KSA. In the 1927 Treaty of Jiddah, the British acknowledged Ibn Saud as King of an independent Saudi state.

The *Ikhwan* Revolt: However, Ibn Saud soon faced opposition from some *Ikhwan*, who resented his association with a Christian power (Britain) and refusal to confront the British in an invasion of Iraq. Further, Ibn Saud struggled to balance his duties as a political and religious leader. In the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, Ibn Saud enforced **sharia** (Islamic law – see p. 5 of *Political and Social Relations*) to appease religious

conservatives such as the *Ikhwan*, but he also supported some modernization. Troubled by these attempts at innovation and the centralization of power in the hands of the King, the *Ikhwan* became increasingly violent, defying Ibn Saud's authority and attacking other Arabs whose beliefs and actions strayed from strict Wahhabism. The revolt lasted almost a year before Ibn Saud repressed it in the Battle of Sabilla in 1929.

The Third Saudi State: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

On September 23, 1932, Ibn Saud proclaimed the KSA's founding, beginning a dynasty that continues today but faced many challenges. King Abd al Aziz (as Ibn Saud was formally known) struggled to unify the KSA's different regions and delineate its boundaries, notably engaging in a border war with Yemen in 1934. Further, the worldwide Great Depression of the 1930s caused a significant decrease in the number of foreign participants in the **hajj** (pilgrimage to Mecca – see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality*), decreasing the KSA's income and worsening an economic crisis.



The Discovery of Oil: In the 1920-30s, Western companies began surveying for oil in the Gulf. In 1923, Ibn Saud granted the region's first oil concession to a British company, though it never pursued exploration. In 1933, the KSA gave Socal (Standard Oil of California, now Chevron) oil rights. By 1938, exploration near Dhahran on the east coast revealed the world's largest petroleum reserves, though the start of World War II (WWII) delayed large-scale exports.

WWII: The KSA under Ibn Saud maintained neutrality during the early years of WWII, fought between the Axis powers (Nazi Germany, Italy, and Japan) and the Allies (Britain, France, the US, and the Soviet Union, among others). Yet, with little oil income, the KSA was compelled to accept aid from the US and subsequently allowed the US to build an airfield at Dhahran. In February 1945, Ibn Saud and US President Franklin Roosevelt

met secretly on the *USS Quincy* in the Suez Canal to further discuss their mutual relationship. While Ibn Saud sought a powerful ally to ensure the KSA's independence, Roosevelt wanted access to the KSA's oil and influence in its affairs. As WWII was winding down weeks later, Ibn Saud declared war on the Axis powers. Subsequently, the KSA became 1 of 51 founding members of the United Nations (UN).

Social and Economic Changes

The resumption of oil exports after WWII's end earned revenue needed to transform the KSA's economy and society. Beginning in the late 1940s, Aramco (as Socal's operation in the KSA was now named) began to construct housing, roads, and hospitals throughout the Kingdom, while establishing educational and training programs. The oil industry's growth also initiated an influx of non-citizen workers to perform both skilled and unskilled labor. In the early 1950s, some 64% of Aramco employees were Saudis and 20% Americans, with the remainder from a variety of other countries. Over the years, the proportion of non-citizens in the workforce gradually grew (see p. 1 of *Political and Social Relations*).



The discovery of oil intensified territorial disputes. For example, the Saudis and the British both claimed a presumably oil-rich territory in southeastern Arabia called the Buraimi Oases. Saudi troops occupied the area from 1952-55 before the British forcefully expelled them. Negotiations in the 1970s eventually divided the land among the KSA, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

With its increasing wealth and vast oil reserves, the KSA's standing in the international community increased. In 1960, it became a founding member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC – see p. 1 of *Economics and Resources*), a group of 14 oil-producing countries that has significant influence over the global oil market.

King Saud

Upon Ibn Saud's 1953 death, his son Saud bin Abd al Aziz ascended the throne. As King, Saud lived lavishly, viewing state oil revenues as the royal family's personal property. Saudis generally opposed the King's excessive spending and resented the obvious divide between the KSA's rich and poor.

Meanwhile, King Saud's relationship with the US deteriorated after US President Dwight Eisenhower joined an anti-USSR alliance that included some KSA adversaries. Concurrently, his relationship with Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser warmed. Israeli, British, and French forces invaded Egypt after Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956. King Saud provided financial aid to Egypt, severed diplomatic relations with Britain and France, and placed an oil embargo on the two.

Just a year later, relations with the US improved, while those with Nasser worsened, primarily because King Saud viewed Nasser's focus on pan-Arab nationalism as threatening to the Saudi monarchy. In 1954, King Saud financed a failed plot to assassinate Nasser. Tensions with Egypt further increased in 1962, when the KSA and Egypt supported opposing sides in a Yemeni civil war. In 1963, Egypt bombed Saudi villages. After

the US deployed fighter jets to the KSA, Egypt backed down.



Meanwhile, rivalry between King Saud and his younger brother Faisal caused internal instability. In 1958, King Saud bowed to family pressure and transferred executive

powers to Faisal, stripped them in 1960, then restored them again 2 years later. In 1964, the royal family united to depose King Saud and replace him with Faisal.

King Faisal

King Faisal instituted a variety of reforms, notably free health insurance, public schools for girls (see p. 2 of *Learning and Knowledge*), the KSA's first television broadcast, and a modern

banking system. Some religious conservatives opposed these programs, protesting that they deviated from tradition.

He also settled various boundary disputes with neighboring countries and reached a cease-fire with Egypt, ending the Yemeni conflict. King Faisal strongly supported Palestinian Arab rights and consequently sided with Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in the 1967 Six-Day War against Israel, though no Saudi troops participated in the conflict.

Arab-Israeli War and Oil Embargo: Sympathy for the Palestinians again prompted the KSA to support Egypt and Syria against Israel during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. As OPEC reduced oil production and raised prices to force a resolution to the conflict, King Faisal nationalized part of Aramco and organized a short-lived oil embargo of Israel's allies, notably the US. Within a few months, the price of oil had more than tripled. As the country's oil revenues increased significantly, the Saudis gained unprecedented global influence.

King Khalid

In 1975, King Faisal was assassinated by a nephew, leading to the accession of Faisal's brother, Khalid. As King, Khalid continued Faisal's social and economic modernizations, using the KSA's oil revenues to diversify the economy and make the Kingdom into an international financial power. Nevertheless, King Khalid faced challenges from both inside and outside the KSA.



The Siege of the Grand Mosque of Mecca: Sensitive to his conservative critics, King Khalid emphasized his dedication to the monarchy and to Wahhabism. Nevertheless, opposition to King Khalid and other royal family members grew among some Saudis, who viewed them as un-Islamic and corrupt. In late 1979, hundreds of armed Sunni extremists stormed the Grand Mosque of Mecca (Islam's holiest mosque and site of the Ka'aba – see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality*) where 50,000-100,000 people had gathered to pray.

Since Islamic doctrine forbids violence in holy spaces, the authorities were initially reluctant to deploy forces into the mosque. Thus, the extremists repelled attempts to expel them,



retaining control of the mosque for 2 weeks. With the help of French counterterrorism experts, the Saudi authorities eventually removed the extremists with poison gas. Later, the government publicly executed 63 of the attackers. The sight of

military troops and equipment in the holy site infuriated many Saudis, contributing to the rise of other Sunni extremist groups. To quiet conservative critics, the government subsequently reversed several modernization trends, especially regarding women's rights and roles in society.

Shi'a Uprisings: Some 2 weeks after the Grand Mosque siege, Shi'a activists began an insurrection in the Eastern Province. Long repressed and discriminated against by the KSA's Sunni majority (see p. 7 of *Religion and Spirituality*), the Shi'a activists were inspired by the success of the 1979 Iranian Revolution overthrowing Iran's monarchy. In response, King Khalid dispatched troops to suppress the rebels, killing several demonstrators and arresting hundreds. The KSA has continued to experience Shi'a unrest since 1979 (see p. 9 of *Political and Social Relations*).

Foreign Relations: During this period, the KSA was also involved in several foreign conflicts. When the USSR invaded Afghanistan in 1979, the KSA and the US collaborated to finance *mujahedeen* ("holy warriors") as a resistance force. A year later, Iraq under Saddam Hussein attacked Iran. In the subsequent 8-year Iran-Iraq War, the KSA provided financial support to Iraq and faced Iranian attacks on Saudi oil ships. Recognizing the need for mutual support, the KSA joined Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE to form the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981 to provide for regional defense and coordinate policy on trade and economic issues (see p.11 of *Political and Social Relations*).

King Fahd

Upon King Khalid's 1982 death, his brother Fahd ascended the throne. In 1986, King Fahd adopted the title "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques" to emphasize his role as a religious leader and affirm Saudi control over Islam's holiest cities.

The Gulf War and its Aftermath:

In August 1990, Iraq unexpectedly invaded Kuwait, initiating the Gulf War (also known as the Persian Gulf War). When Iraqi troops approached the Saudi border, King Fahd allowed the US to station some 550,000 troops in the KSA. As tensions mounted, the US, the KSA, and other allies under the authority of the UN engaged in a 5-week bombing campaign in early 1991 called Operation Desert Storm. The next month, Iraq retreated from Kuwait and agreed to a cease-fire.



Many Saudis resented the high cost of the Gulf War and were angered by the presence of foreign military in the KSA. To quell opposition and cement his family's authority, King Fahd enacted the Basic Law of Government (see p. 4 of *Political and Social Relations* and p. 1 of *Religion and Spirituality*) in 1992. The Law included provisions allowing the king to select his heir from within the royal family and creating the **Majlis al-Shura**, an appointed consultative body (see p. 4-5 of *Political and Social Relations*).

Meanwhile, the government cracked down on regime opponents, prompting some to flee. One notable example was Osama bin Laden, a wealthy Saudi who had been part of the *mujahedeen* during the Soviet-Afghan War and later founded the international terrorist group **al-Qaeda** ("the base").

King Abdullah

Following King Fahd's incapacitation after a 1995 stroke, Crown Prince Abdullah assumed leadership of the KSA, then formally ascended the throne in 2005 after Fahd's death. Under

Abdullah, the country held its first elections in 2005 (for some municipal offices – see p. 6 of *Political and Social Relations*). In 2011, he announced that women would be allowed to vote in 2015 (see p. 3 of *Sex and Gender*).

Both international and domestic terrorist events posed major challenges during this period. Notably, the September 11, 2001 attacks were planned and carried out by al-Qaeda, and 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi citizens. Though the Saudi government resolved to fight terrorism, some experts blamed the KSA's support of the spread of Wahhabism abroad for enabling terrorist acts. In 2003, al-Qaeda detonated explosives in Riyadh, killing 35 people.

The Arab Spring: During the 2011 “Arab Spring,” when pro-democracy movements swept North Africa and the Middle East, the Saudi government deployed some 1,000 GCC troops to Bahrain to support its Sunni royal family; financially aided monarchies in Jordan, Morocco, and Oman; and supported rebellions in Syria and Libya. At home, the Saudi government faced protests in Shi'a-dominated regions.

Contemporary Saudi Arabia

Following his brother Abdullah's 2015 death, King Salman ascended the throne at the age of 79. While widely considered more conservative than his predecessor, King Salman has been inactive in day-to-day governing.



In September 2022, King Salman appointed his 31-year-old son, Mohammed bin Salman (known as MbS) as Crown Prince. Since then, MbS has been the *de facto* ruler

of the KSA. He has championed social reform and progressive change, notably lifting the 35-year ban on cinema and expanding some freedoms for women (see p. 2- 3 of *Sex and Gender*). MbS also launched the Vision 2030 plan (see p. 2 of *Economics and Resources*) to modernize society and diversify the economy. Nevertheless, he faces international criticism for human rights

abuses and forceful attempts to consolidate power and silence dissenters.

In 2017, MbS ordered the detainment of dozens of Saudi princes, businessmen, and government officials. Accusing them of corruption, he released them only after they transferred significant funds to the government. Around the same time, the KSA detained Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri and forced his temporary resignation in a move that was condemned internationally.

Since 2015, the KSA has led a violent war against Shi'a Houthi rebels in Yemen, causing one of the world's largest humanitarian crisis and worsening relations with Iran, which supports the



Houthi rebels (see p. 10 of *Political and Social Relations*). In 2017, the KSA, the UAE, Bahrain, and several other Muslim-majority countries accused Qatar of supporting terrorist groups and Iran's regional interventions. They all severed diplomatic relations with Qatar and limited transit of Qatari citizens and vessels in their territories.

In fall 2018, Jamal Khashoggi, a dissident Saudi journalist and columnist for US newspapers, was killed and dismembered by Saudi agents inside the KSA's Istanbul consulate. Although US intelligence officials concluded MbS ordered the murder, he continues to deny his involvement. In 2020, MbS ordered the detention of at least four senior members of the royal family and led the KSA to a petroleum price war with Russia, shocking world stock markets already reeling from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic (see p. 3 of *Economics and Resources*).

Myth Overview

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the

natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity.

Storytelling historically played an important role among Arab tribespeople. Traditionally, ***hakawati*** (storytellers) recounted legends and stories, many from the Qur'an (the Islamic Holy Book – see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*), for both entertainment and to preserve and transmit traditions and values. Many stories tell of the exploits of heroes and their chivalrous, charitable, and honorable acts, providing a model of proper behavior. Others tell of evil spirits or ***djinn*** (see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*) or relate the adventures of magical creatures.

Scholars suggest that such stories illustrate how difficult life was and continues to be for desert dwellers. Further, they demonstrate life's uncertainty and how quickly one's fate can change. While many instruct children to avoid the deadly mid-day temperatures, most tend to emphasize that survival depends on rejecting the unfamiliar and unknown and adhering to tribal and family rules and habits. Because most stories were passed orally through the generations, some have been lost.

In Arabian mythology, ***Bahamut*** ("Behemoth" of the Bible's Old Testament) is the massive creature that holds up all of creation. Described as a fish or sea creature with the head of an elephant



or a hippopotamus, ***Bahamut*** holds a giant bull named ***Kujata***, which in turn supports a mountain of rubies. Perched on top of the rubies is an angel, who holds up hell, the earth, and the heavens. In other versions ***Bahamut*** carries a sandy beach

on his back on which ***Kujata*** stands alongside a rock containing the waters in which the earth floats.

2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Official Name

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)

Al-Mamlakah al-'Arabīyah as-Sa'ūdīyah

المَمْلَكَة العَرَبِيَّة السَّعُودِيَّة (Arabic)

Political Borders

Iraq: 504 mi

Kuwait: 137 mi

Qatar: 54 mi

United Arab Emirates: 284 mi

Oman: 409 mi

Yemen: 812 mi

Jordan: 454 mi

Coastline: 1,640 mi



Capital

Riyadh

Demographics

The KSA's population of about 35.9 million is growing at a rate of 1.65% per year. Non-citizens make up about 38% of the population and 68% of the workforce (see p. 2 of *Economics and Resources*). Some 85% of KSA residents live in urban areas concentrated in a horizontal strip spanning the peninsula from Ad Dammam in the East to Mecca and Medina in the West. The

KSA's largest city, Riyadh, had an estimated population of 7.7 million in 2023.



Flag

The KSA's flag consists of a green background with the **Shahada** (Muslim creed which translates to "There is no god

but God, and Muhammad is His Messenger") inscribed in white Arabic script above a white horizontal sabre pointing to the hoist side. The flag's design dates to the early 20th century and is associated with the Al Saud family, which formally established the KSA in 1932 (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*).

Geography

The KSA constitutes some 80% of the Arabian Peninsula and borders Jordan, Iraq, and Kuwait to the north, the Arabian Gulf, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to the east, Oman and Yemen to the south, and the Red Sea to the west. The KSA's total land area is about 830,000 sq mi, making it about one-fifth the size of the US.

Most of the KSA's territory is comprised of a vast, tilted plateau that rises sharply from the waters of Red Sea in the west and gradually descends toward the Arabian Gulf coast in the east. The interior features several barren sand and gravel deserts (the Nafud in the North, ad-Dahna in the East, and the immense Rub al-Khali in the Southeast) interspersed with sharp mountain ridges, deep valleys, and occasional date palm oases.



Covering nearly one-third of the KSA (about the size of Texas) and featuring shifting sand dunes up to 330 ft tall, the mostly uninhabited Rub al-Khali (also known as the "Empty Quarter") is one of the world's driest and most desolate areas. The KSA is the world's largest nation without a lake or permanent river, instead having dry riverbeds (**wadis**) occasionally filling with water following winter rains.

Along the Red Sea coast, mountains parallel a thin, rocky coastal strip, while flat plains, rolling sand dunes, beaches, and occasional mangrove and palm woodlands extend along the Arabian Gulf coastline. Just 2% of KSA territory is arable, located primarily in the Southwest near the border with Yemen, where mountainous terrain and relatively generous rainfall allow for terraced agriculture. This area is also home to the KSA's highest point, Jabal Sawda', reaching 10,279 ft.

Climate

The KSA experiences a harsh, dry desert climate characterized by large variations in daily temperatures and low annual rainfall. Generally, the climate divides into two seasons: a summer or hot

season and a winter or cool season. During the dry summer, temperatures often exceed 100°F in interior desert areas and can reach as high as 129°F. By contrast, the winter months are cooler. Torrential rains from sudden cloudbursts can occur along the Red Sea coast, while the Southwest's highlands are prone to heavy monsoonal rains. Elsewhere, rains are inconsistent and infrequent and, in some desert regions, do not occur for years.

Natural Hazards

The KSA's most significant hazard are wind storms that intermittently blanket the landscape with thick, rolling clouds of sand and dust that reduce visibility, force industrial closures, and cause dangerous driving conditions. Flooding is occasionally a concern in cities located in the foothills, notably Jeddah and Mecca.



Environmental Issues

The KSA's most pressing environmental issues are a lack of natural freshwater resources and desertification due to overgrazing, climactic changes, and population

growth. With its underground water sources quickly depleting, the KSA increasingly relies on large-scale, energy-intensive desalination facilities that process seawater to meet its freshwater needs.

Along the coasts, oil, gas, and chemical spills, sewage runoff, and pollution from desalination facilities threaten marine ecosystems. Further, most cities have inadequate waste management, with some lacking proper sewage treatment facilities. Air pollution from auto and industrial emissions significantly impacts large urban areas. According to its Vision 2030 plan (see p. 2 of *Economics and Resources*), the government intends to curb the KSA's overall pollution through industrial reforms, marine conservation efforts, and investment into renewable energy sources, among other initiatives. Climate-change scientists recently predicted that the region may suffer temperature levels intolerable to humans by 2100.

Government

The KSA is a patriarchal absolute monarchy with a hereditary ruler that divides into 13 **manatiq** (regions), each led by a governor, who is a member of the royal family. Issued by royal decree in 1992 (see p. 13 of *History and Myth*), the Basic Law of Government names traditional Islamic social and legal customs and the Qur'an (Islam's holy book – see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*) as its constitutional framework. The Law also stipulates that KSA governance be based on justice, **shura** (consultation), and equality in accordance with **sharia** (Islamic law).



Further, the Law mandates that KSA monarchs be direct male descendants of its founder, Ibn Saud (see p. 6-8 of *History and Myth*). The King selects his heir, the Crown Prince, with approval from the Allegiance Council, a 34-member panel of princes. The KSA's current King Salman bin Abd al Aziz Al Saud ascended the throne in 2015 following the death of his brother, Abdullah (see p. 14 of *History and Myth*). He is the seventh consecutive member of the Al Saud family to rule the KSA.

Executive Branch

Both executive and legislative powers, including the authority to ratify laws and decrees, are vested in the King, who acts as the head-of-state. Typically, the King is also the Prime Minister, who is the head-of-government and leads the Council of Ministers (CM), composed largely of royal family members. The CM includes the Deputy Prime Minister (a role filled by the Crown Prince), 21 other ministers with portfolios, and 7 ministers of state. Appointed by the King every 4 years, the CM is responsible for drafting and overseeing the implementation of domestic, foreign, financial, economic, education, and defense policies. In September 2022, King Salman appointed Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman as Prime Minister.

Legislative Branch

The KSA's legislature is a one-chamber body called the **Majlis al-Shura** (Consultative Council or **Shura** Council), an advisory body of 150 members appointed by the King to serve renewable 4-year terms. The **Shura** Council's primary functions include advising the King and the CM, reviewing domestic and foreign policies, proposing new laws, and amending existing laws, though it may not pass laws. Since 2013, women must hold at least one-fifth of **Shura** Council seats.

Judicial Branch

The judiciary adheres to **sharia** (Islamic law) based on Sunni principles for both criminal and civil cases, though Shi'a-majority regions have their own family courts based on Shi'a interpretations (see p. 6-7 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Because the KSA does not have a formalized penal code, judges determine punishments and penalties through their own interpretation of **sharia** and by considering the **fatwas** (religious opinions) issued by the **ulema** (Council of Senior Scholars), an autonomous advisory body.

As the highest court, the Supreme Court oversees the implementation of Islamic laws and decrees issued by the King. Other courts include Courts of Appeal and Courts of First Instance, which comprise general courts, criminal courts, matrimonial courts, business courts, and labor courts. The King acts as the final Court of Appeal and grants pardons.



Political Climate

The KSA has a closed political system in which parties are outlawed. Instead, the political arena is dominated by the large and influential royal family,

the Al Saud. Controlling the KSA since 1932 (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*), members of the Al Saud kin group occupy most high-level government positions and consequently retain significant control over the KSA's political environment. Besides the House of Saud, as the Al Saud family is known, members of the **ulema**, tribal leaders, and prominent business heads also influence the

political arena. Occasionally, disputes or divisions within the royal family as well as between them and other powerful Saudis impact political decisions.

Since 2005, the government has held elections to fill some municipal council seats, and in 2015, women were allowed to vote and run as candidates for the first time (see p. 3 of *Sex and Gender*). These municipal elections provide a channel for Saudis to voice concerns at the local level, though voter turnout is usually low.

King Salman is one of the “Sudairi Seven” (an alliance of seven sons of KSA founder Ibn Saud and Hussa Sudairi, one of Ibn Saud’s many wives), historically the most influential faction in the House of Saud. In 2015, King Salman named his nephew, Mohammed bin Nayef (MbN), as Crown Prince but abruptly reversed this decision in 2017, naming his 31-year-old son Mohammed bin Salman as Crown Prince instead and placing MbN under house arrest. All KSA Kings since Ibn Saud have been his sons. If MbS ascends the throne, he will be the first



grandson to become King. Today, MbS has largely replaced the elderly King Salman as the KSA’s leader (see p. 14-15 of *History and Myth*). Given his young age, MbS could rule the KSA for decades.

While familial disputes typically remain private, MbS has publicly rebuked and detained members of the Al Saud family, who question or pose a threat to his power and authority (see p. 15 of *History and Myth*). In the latest example in early 2020, MbS ordered the detention of several officials and royal family members, notably Prince Ahmed, King Salman’s younger brother, and MbN, the former Crown Prince. Generally, the KSA government represses all forms of political dissent through arbitrary arrest and detention. Further, it grants no freedom of peaceful assembly, movement, association, speech, or press (see p. 2 of *Technology and Material*).

Defense

The Royal Saudi Armed Forces (SAF) are a unified force with 257,000 active-duty troops and 24,500 paramilitary personnel. The SAF are primarily tasked with promoting internal security and maintaining regional stability. Among the region's best equipped militaries, the SAF procure most of their advanced military equipment from the US and United Kingdom.

Army: Comprises 75,000 active-duty troops in 120 maneuver brigades, regiments, and commands (armored, mechanized, light, air maneuver, and aviation) and 3 support brigades.

Navy: Consists of 13,500 active-duty personnel headquartered in Riyadh and divided into two fleets, an Eastern Fleet based out of Jubail and a Western Fleet out of Jeddah. The Navy is a well-equipped force organized into 10 principal surface combatants, 93 patrol and coastal combatants, 3 mine warfare and mine countermeasures vessels, 5 amphibious/landing craft and 1 logistics and support vessel. The Navy also includes a Naval Aviation unit and 3,000 Marines.

Air Force: Comprises 20,000 active-duty personnel divided into 54 fighter squadrons, 385 fighter/ground attack squadrons, 3 ground attack squadrons, 18 airborne early warning and control squadrons, 19 ELINT squadrons, 23 tanker squadron, 56



tanker/transport squadrons, 42 transport squadrons, 211 training squadrons, and 169 transport helicopter squadrons, equipped with 648 fixed wing aircraft, 45 helicopters, unmanned aerial vehicles, air-launched missiles, and bombs.

Other Forces: Air Defense Forces comprise 16,000 active-duty personnel divided into 39 battalions, batteries, and units. Strategic Missile Forces include 2,500 active-duty troops. The National Guard has some 130,000 members, and some 24,500 Paramilitary troops divide into 15,000 Border Guards, 9,000 Facilities Security Force members, and 500 Special Security Force troops.

Royal Saudi Air Force Rank Insignia



General



Lieutenant
General



Major
General



Brigadier
General



Colonel



Lieutenant
Colonel



Major



Captain



First
Lieutenant



Second
Lieutenant



Warrant
Officer



Senior
Master
Sergeant



Master
Sergeant



Technical
Sergeant



Staff
Sergeant



Senior
Airman



Airman
First
Class

Security Issues

A volatile Gulf region and the activities of militant Islamist groups dominate the KSA's internal security environment. Active groups include al-Qaeda (AQ – see p. 13-14 of *History and Myth*), al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP – an al-Qaeda affiliate), and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as Daesh, ISIL, and IS). The KSA is frequently a primary target of such groups, since it is the birthplace of Islam and home to Islam's two holiest shrines (see p. 1 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

Over the years, the KSA has endured some 60 terrorist attacks, killing around 200 civilians and policemen. To improve its counterterrorism capability, the KSA partners with international allies, notably the US, and has seen fewer terrorist attacks in recent years. The government uses a broadly-written 2017 counterterrorism law to arrest, imprison, and execute both suspected terrorists and political dissenters.

Internal Tensions:

Historically, relations between the government and the KSA's Shi'a minority (see p. 6-7 of *Religion and Spirituality*) have been strained. The government tends to view the Shi'a



community with suspicion, due primarily to its religious and cultural ties to Iran (see "Foreign Relations" below). Since the 1970s, the government has faced periodic Shi'a unrest and uprisings (see p. 12 of *History and Myth*).

In 2017, the government destroyed the neighborhood of Awamiya in the Eastern Province, viewing it as the source of ongoing anti-government protests. In 2019, the KSA executed 37 Saudis for terrorism-related crimes, a move denounced by international observers as prompted by sectarianism, since most of the condemned were Shi'a. Nevertheless, the government has attempted to improve relations with the Shi'a over the years, appointing a Shi'a as ambassador to Iran in 1999 and another to the Council of Ministers in 2014.

Conflict in Yemen: A KSA- and UAE-led coalition has been fighting Yemeni Shi'a Houthi rebel forces allied with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh since 2015. The skirmish is designed to restore the toppled government of internationally-recognized President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi. The conflict



has evolved into a war of attrition, causing Yemen considerable physical destruction and staggering loss of life, with millions of Yemenis lacking food, water, and medicine. With the conflict at a stalemate, Yemen has experienced one of the

world's worst humanitarian crises. In 2017, the KSA tightened a blockade of Yemen that temporarily restricted UN humanitarian deliveries after the rebels' launched missiles toward Riyadh, drawing international condemnation. Since then, it has pledged over \$1.5 billion in new humanitarian aid for Yemen.

In September 2019, drone missiles struck and damaged Saudi oil installations (see p. 3 of *Economics and Resources*). While the Houthi rebels claimed responsibility, the KSA, US, and other Western powers blamed Iran. Despite Iran's denial of involvement, experts confirm that it has supplied the Houthi rebels with significant technological and weaponry support. Subsequent efforts to deescalate the conflict were unsuccessful and fighting resumed. In spring 2020, the Saudi-led coalition announced a ceasefire at least partly in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Foreign Relations

The KSA is a member of the United Nations, World Bank, World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, and Arab League, among other international organizations. The KSA also participates in the Organization for Islamic Cooperation, a 57-member pan-Islamic organization seeking to improve the image of Muslims, promote peaceful conflict resolution, and counter Islamist extremism.

Under MbS, the KSA has pursued an activist foreign policy, with countering the regional influence of Iran a primary objective. For example, the KSA forced the temporary resignation of the Lebanese PM in 2017 in an attempt to curb the power of the Shi'a militia group, Hezbollah, Iran's most powerful nonstate ally in the region. Further, the KSA has been a major supplier of military and financial assistance to the rebel movement in Syria against President Bashar al-Assad, whom Iran has long supported.

The 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the KSA's Istanbul consulate (see p. 15 of *History and Myth*) damaged relations with several countries and negatively impacted its international standing. In spring 2020, Turkish authorities announced the indictment of 20 Saudi nationals on murder charges, including two senior officials, further straining relations between the KSA and Turkey. In early 2020, an oil-related dispute with Russia upset production agreements among world oil producers and roiled the global economy.

Regional Tensions: The KSA participates in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), an economic and political union composed of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, the UAE, and Qatar that aims to strengthen the security of partner countries and promote military and economic cooperation. However, in 2017, Egypt and

a KSA-led bloc of several GCC members accused Qatar of financially supporting Islamist extremists and severed diplomatic and trade ties. The tension primarily stemmed from Qatar's warm relations with KSA



rival Iran and Qatar's longstanding support of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood is a group that Egypt, the UAE, and the KSA classify a terrorist organization, and which the US has considered labeling as a terrorist organization. As of mid-2020, the crisis remains unresolved.

Relations with the UAE: Despite strong trade and political ties, unresolved border disputes and the possibility of oil deposits in the disputed area cloud relations with the UAE.

Relations with Kuwait: The KSA played a significant role in reversing Iraq's invasion of Kuwait during the Gulf War (see p. 13 of *History and Myth*), and Kuwait is currently participating in the Saudi-led military operation in Yemen. While Kuwait's neutral stance over the ongoing intra-GCC rift with Qatar affects relations, bilateral ties generally remain strong.

Relations with Iraq: After a 25-year break following the 1990 invasion of Kuwait (see p. 13 of *History and Myth*), Iraq and the KSA resumed diplomatic relations in 2015. While the Iraq-KSA border reopened in late 2019, the KSA remains wary of various Shi'a militia groups operating in Iraq.

Relations with Iran:

In 2023, Riyadh agreed to reestablish diplomatic ties with Iran under a China-brokered deal in March. While not engaged in direct war, they support rival sides in several regional conflicts. Their struggle for regional supremacy is heightened by religious tensions: while the KSA officially supports Wahhabism, a Sunni Islamic ideology, the official religion of Iran is Shi'a Islam (see p. 6-7 of *Religion and Spirituality*). The KSA has historically partnered with the US and other allies to counter Iranian influence and capabilities.



Relations with the US: The US and the KSA established full diplomatic relations in 1940. Since then, the two countries have forged strong bilateral economic, military, and political ties with a common interest in preserving the stability, security, and prosperity of the Gulf region. The US-KSA relationship has survived some challenges, notably the 1973 oil embargo (see p. 11 of *History and Myth*), and enabled some successes such as Operation Desert Storm (see p. 13 of *History and Myth*).

Today, the US is a source of protection, advice, technology, and armaments for the KSA, which is the US' largest foreign military sales customer. The US and KSA also have a strong economic partnership based on US business interests in Saudi oil that date to 1933 (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*). A cornerstone of US foreign policy in recent decades has been the protection of Gulf oil producers like the KSA.

In recent decades, the US and KSA have cooperated closely on regional counterterrorism efforts. Nevertheless, US reporting on the KSA's human rights abuses and its lack of democratic



representation, among other issues, has occasionally caused friction. Many US lawmakers object to the use of US armaments in the Yemen conflict, especially against civilian targets, and to the US' lack of official response

following the 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi by KSA operatives. Following the 2019 missile strike on Saudi oil facilities, the US deployed additional military resources and personnel to the KSA.

Ethnic Groups

Comprising about 58% of the total population, Saudi citizens are a relatively ethnically homogeneous group. About 90% claim descent from Arab tribes, while about 10% identify as Afro-Asian. Some 10% of citizens are **bedu**, descendants of Bedouin tribes, whose members traditionally roamed the desert as herders.

As of 2023, about 11 million non-citizen workers – primarily from Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Sudan, and Yemen – resided in the KSA. According to KSA authorities, the Kingdom has accepted 3 million Syrian refugees since the Syrian civil war began in 2011. The US government estimates the KSA also hosts up to 500,000 Rohingya refugees from Burma, up to 400,000 Palestinians and over 500,000 Syrians.

Social Relations

Saudi society is organized according to kinship. Saudis identify first with their family, which typically aligns to a group of families (a clan), which in turn belongs to a tribe. Family connections form the primary governing principles of Saudi society, and consequently, influence almost all social, political, and economic interactions. The largest and most powerful family in the KSA is the Al Saud (see p. 3-8 of *History and Myth*), although members of other families also hold important positions in government and the economy, notably several old merchant families.

Traditionally, tribal leadership does not always pass from one generation to the next but often passes laterally to a brother, nephew, uncle, or cousin. A ruler wields his power through his **wasta**, or connections, clout, and influence and acts as a mediator between conflicting interests. To justify his claim to rule, a leader is bound to demonstrate deep generosity, both to his family members and society at large.

The separation between citizen and non-citizen is the KSA's most significant social division. Foreign workers exist outside the Saudi kinship system and have little power in society. They are subject to strict labor laws that grant them few protections and have restricted access to healthcare, education, and housing. Despite talk of reform, observers note that employers retain significant control over workers' residency status and freedom of movement (see p. 2 of *Economics and Resources*).



In the past it was estimated some 70,000 stateless **bidoon** ("without") live in the KSA, primarily native-born residents, whose ancestors failed to attain nationality documentation. As non-citizens, the *bidoon* were historically denied employment and educational opportunities. Recently, the government has issued some *bidoon* special identification cards that allow them access to government-provided healthcare and other services. Nevertheless, they remain marginalized and among the KSA's poorest residents.

3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Overview

The US government estimates that 85-90% of Saudi citizens are Sunni Muslims and 10-12% Shi'a Muslims. Most of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's (KSA's) non-citizen residents are also Muslim: a 2020 World Religions database estimates that 90% of the total population (both citizens and non-citizens) are Muslim, 6% Christian, and 2% Hindu. Followers of other traditions such as Buddhism, Judaism, and traditional indigenous religions comprise less than 1% of the population and less than 1% is estimated to have no religious affiliation.



The KSA's 1992 Basic Law (see p. 13 of *History and Myth* and p. 4 of *Political and Social Relations*) dictates that the Qur'an (Islam's holy book) and **Sunnah** ("habitual practice" or the Islamic community's traditional social and legal

customs) serve as the country's constitution. Islam is the country's official religion and freedom of religion is neither recognized nor protected under the law.

The KSA strictly adheres to **sharia** or Islamic law (see p. 5 of *Political and Social Relations*) and classifies its citizens as Muslim. It further denies them the freedom to change religion and forbids proselytization by non-Muslims. It also considers the attempt to convert to another religion a capital offense, though it has not conducted a death sentence in recent years. While national level courts rely on Sunni interpretations of Islamic law, the Shi'a minority has separate family courts in the Eastern Province.

Early Spiritual Landscape

Early regional inhabitants typically followed an indigenous faith characterized by the worship of multiple gods and natural phenomena such as the sun, moon, and animals. Further,

significant tribal heroes were revered and often depicted as idols. These early inhabitants also recognized **djinn**, supernatural spirits that could bring good or bad fortune. Worship rituals likely included pilgrimages to honor gods and idols.

Between 500 BC-5th century, Zoroastrianism, a monotheistic religion that focuses on the divide between good and evil and uses fire as a form of worship, gained popularity on the Arabian Peninsula. By the 5th century, the region also consisted of Christianity, Judaism, and a range of polytheistic and monotheistic faiths. Following the spread of Islam in the 7th century, most members of other religious communities fled or converted to Islam.

Islam

Origins of Islam

The KSA is known as the birthplace of Islam. Muhammad, who Muslims consider God's final Prophet, was born in Mecca in 570 (see p. 2 of *History and Myth*).



Muslims believe that while Muhammad was meditating in the desert, the Archangel Gabriel visited him over a 23-year period, revealing the Qur'an, or "Holy Book," to guide their everyday lives and shape their values.

Meaning of Islam

Islam is a way of life to its adherents. The term Islam literally means submission to the will of God, and a Muslim is "a person who submits to God."

Muslim Sects

Islam is divided into two sects: Sunni and Shi'a (see p. 2-3 of *History and Myth*). Sunnis are distinguished by their belief that the leader (**caliph**) of the Muslim community (**ummah**) should be elected. Conversely, Shi'a Muslims believe the religious leader should be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad.

Five Pillars of Islam

There are 5 basic principles of the Islamic faith.

- **Profession of Faith (*Shahada*):** “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Messenger.”
- **Prayer (*Salat*):** Pray five times a day while facing the Ka’aba in Mecca. The Ka’aba is considered the center of the Muslim world and a unifying focal point for Islamic worship.
- **Charity (*Zakat*):**
Donate a percentage of one’s income to the poor or needy.
- **Fasting (*Sawm*):**
Abstain from food, drink, and sexual relations from sunrise to sunset during the holy month of Ramadan.
- **Pilgrimage to Mecca (The *Hajj*):** Perform the pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime.



Shared Perspectives

Many Islamic tenets parallel those of Judaism and Christianity. In fact, Muslims consider Christians and Jews “people of the Book,” referring to biblical scriptures, because they also believe in one God.

Abraham: All three faiths trace their lineage to Abraham, known as *Ibrahim* in Islam. However, Christians and Jews trace their descent to Abraham, his wife Sarah, and their son Isaac; while Muslims trace theirs to Abraham and his Egyptian concubine, Hagar, and their son Ishmael.

Scriptures: Much of the content of the Qur’an is similar to teachings and stories found in the Christian Bible’s Old and New Testaments, and Muslims view Islam as a completion of previous revelations to Jewish and Christian prophets. However, Muslims believe Jews and Christians altered God’s word and that Muhammad received the true revelation of God.

Jesus: The three religions differ significantly in their understanding of the role of Jesus. While Christians consider him the divine Messiah who fulfills Jewish Scriptures, Jews are still waiting for the Messiah to come. Muslims recognize Jesus as a prophet but do not acknowledge his divinity or the Christian Trinity.

View of Death: Muslims believe that God determines the time of death and birth. While people grieve the loss of family members or friends, they do not view death as a negative event, as Muslims believe that a person who lived a good life goes on to live in Heaven.

Concept of Jihad

The concept of jihad, or inner striving, is a fundamental element within Islam. Traditionally, it is the principled and moral pursuit of God's command to lead a virtuous life. It should not be confused with the publicized violence often associated with jihad. Most Muslims are strongly opposed to terrorism and consider it contrary to Islamic beliefs.



Ramadan

Observed during the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar (see p. 2 of *Time and Space*), Ramadan is a month-long period for inner reflection, self-control, and focus on God. During this time,

Muslims who are physically able fast from dawn to sunset. Many Muslims believe that denying their hunger helps them to learn self-control, appreciate the difficulties of the poor, and gain spiritual renewal – by fasting, a Muslim learns to appreciate the good in life. The KSA authorities expect Muslims and non-Muslims alike to refrain from eating, drinking, and smoking in public during daylight at this time and has threatened to deport foreign nationals who violate these guidelines. Muslims typically break their daily fast at sunset with a meal known as *iftar*. Ramadan includes several holidays:

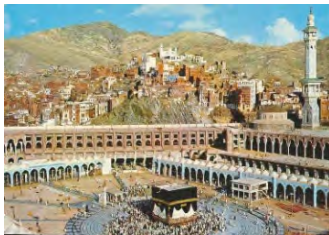
- **Lailat al-Qadr:** This “Night of Power” marks Muhammad’s receipt of the first verses of the Qur’an.
- **Eid al-Fitr:** This “Festival of Fast-Breaking” celebrates Ramadan’s end and is a national holiday in the KSA.

Another important holiday is celebrated when the *hajj* ends, about 70 days following the end of Ramadan.

- **Eid al-Adha:** This “Festival of Sacrifice” commemorates Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, Ishmael (or Isaac, according to Christians), as proof of his loyalty to God. *Eid al-Adha* is also a national holiday in the KSA.

The Spread of Islam in Arabia

By the time of Muhammad’s 632 death, Islam had spread through the entire Arabian Peninsula through conquest and proselytization (see p. 2 of *History and Myth*). In the mid-18th century, Sunni Islamic scholar Muhammad bin Abd al Wahhab began to teach that Islam had become compromised by non-traditional elements such as icon worship and mysticism and called for a return to Islam’s true, unadulterated form. His conservative ideology became known as Wahhabism or Salafism. Abd al Wahhab formed an alliance with Muhammad bin Saud, a local ruler, and together they initiated the spread of Wahhabism across the Arabian Peninsula (see p. 3-4 of *History and Myth*). Today, the KSA’s royal family, the descendants of Muhammad bin Saud, maintains its strong connection with Wahhabism and ties with the descendants of Abd al Wahhab.



Religion Today

Islam

The Islamic faith features prominently in Saudi society and is an important part of most Saudis’ identity. Islamic traditions inform socially acceptable public behavior for Muslims and non-

Muslims alike, influence ethics and culture, and frame day-to-day living. For example, Islam's frequent calls to prayer shape the daily rhythm, while the routine use of the phrase ***insha'allah*** ("if God wills") reveals the popular belief that God directly and ultimately controls all events.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Call, and Guidance oversees the construction of Sunni mosques, guides clerical affairs, appoints most ***imams*** (worship leaders), and reviews sermons. Concurrently, a semiautonomous government agency, the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV, known informally as the "religious police" or ***mutaween***), monitors individuals' social behavior and enforces *sharia* in public spaces.



For example, the CPVPV reports infractions such as public and private contact between unrelated men and women (gender mixing – see p. 2 of *Family and Kinship*), failure to respect Islam,

"immodest" dress (see p. 2-3 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*), and Islamic celebrations forbidden under Wahhabism, among others to the police.

Sunni Islam: Most of the KSA's Sunni Muslims adhere to Wahhabism – a fundamentalist and conservative form of Islamic thought that endorses a literal interpretation of the Qur'an and includes strict enforcement of religious codes and practices. Wahhabism opposes Islamic practices such as saint veneration and the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday that are common in other Islamic countries and traditions. In the KSA, many Wahhabis prefer the label "***Salafiyyun***" or "Unitarians."

Shi'a Islam: About 10-12% of citizens are Shi'a Muslim, most living in the Eastern Province. The KSA government tends to view the Shi'a community with suspicion (see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations*) and provides no financial support to Shi'a

mosques, hinders the construction of new mosques, and restricts Shi'a religious observances.

Non-Muslim Religions

Experts estimate that one-fourth of the KSA's foreign workforce are non-Muslim. The government forbids the construction of churches, synagogues, or other non-Muslim places of worship, the public practice of any non-Muslim religion, and the public display of non-Muslim religious symbols. While it permits private non-Muslim worship in personal residences, the authorities occasionally detain or arrest foreign residents participating in such events, citing noise disturbance or gender mixing violations.

Religion and Society

The ruling family and high-ranking government officials promote Sunni Islam in daily life. By contrast, members of the KSA's Shi'a community are subject to repression, discrimination, and other unfair treatment (see p. 9 of *Political and Social Relations*). Over the years, the Shi'a have protested mistreatment, sometimes violently (see p. 12 of *History and Myth*).



Various customs and laws ensure the predominance of Sunni Islam in society. For example, public school students receive mandatory religious studies based on Wahhabism regardless of personal religious affiliation (see p. 3 of *Learning and Knowledge*), and some textbooks contain negative language about other religious traditions.

Laws forbid marriage between Muslim women and non-Muslim men and deem children born to Muslim fathers as Muslim, regardless of the mother's religious affiliation. Further, *sharia*-based penalties generally apply to non-Muslim residents, notably alcohol consumption (see p. 2 of *Sustenance and Health*). In court rulings awarding compensation for loss, non-Muslims receive only a fraction of the amount granted Muslims.

4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

Overview

Rapid urbanization and population growth have altered the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's (KSA's) housing patterns and family structures in recent decades. Nevertheless, family loyalty, respect for tradition, and reverence for elders remain the foundation of Saudi society.

Residence

Some 85% of the population resided in urban areas as of 2023, up from 21% in 1950. The KSA's government provides interest-free home loans to Saudi citizens. However, housing is sometimes in short supply, and as of 2017, some 1.6 million citizens were on waitlists for government housing. Residences vary widely, ranging from palaces and villas to small city apartments and slum-like huts. Citizens typically live in more spacious accommodations – such as villas surrounded by high

walls or large, two or three-floor duplexes – than non-citizens.



Saudi homes typically feature both modern, Western-style and traditional architectural designs such as a **qa'ah** (reception area), **malqaf** (wind tower),

mashrabiyyah (wooden lattice bay window), courtyards, and balconies. Saudi homes usually have at least one **majlis** (living room) used for entertaining guests or hosting weekly **diwaniyah** gatherings (see "Family Structure" below). Such rooms are generally decorated in the traditional style with thick carpets, plush floor cushions or sofas, and coffee tables.

Some homes provide separate quarters for staff and servants, usually non-citizens. Alternatively, some non-citizen workers live in crowded, poor quality dormitory-style apartments. Other non-citizens live in compounds, gated residential communities that sometimes include shopping, recreational, and community

facilities, where Saudi gender segregation policies (see p. 2 of *Time and Space*) may not apply.

Islamic Tradition and Physical Space

With the intention of protecting the chastity, purity, and honor of women, Islamic societies tend to limit interaction between unrelated members of the opposite sex, typically by physically separating women and men during social gatherings.

Traditionally, Saudi society also follows these conventions. Some Saudi homes include separate dining and sitting areas and bathrooms for men and women. While small families may dine together, large families commonly segregate by gender for social gatherings, especially when guests are present. Further, houses and compounds are often surrounded by tall walls meant to further shield women from public view.

Family Structure

Family is at the center of Saudi social life and forms the backbone of society. Generally, extended family members are expected to help each other, avoid actions that may bring shame to the family, and value the needs of the family over individual desires. Family structures are patrilineal, meaning both lineage and inheritance pass through the male bloodline. The eldest male is typically the head of the extended family.

While traditionally three or four generations of a family lived under one roof, households increasingly comprise just a nuclear family (two parents and their children). Children typically remain in the family residence as young adults and move into their own quarters after marriage. Saudis respect their elders, with children typically caring for their elderly parents. Consequently, nursing homes are uncommon and are generally reserved for the ailing or those without close kin.

Male elders traditionally make most family decisions, often in consultation with male relatives during weekly *diwaniyah* meetings. These gatherings also serve as a time for male friends and family to enjoy refreshments, play games, and discuss business and politics in addition to family matters. Traditionally, Saudi women manage all domestic affairs, such as setting household budgets and supervising servants, typically non-citizens (see p. 2 of *Sex and Gender*). Consequently, women often have significant influence in the household. Today, some women hold their own separate weekly family meetings.

Polygyny: This practice involves a man having multiple wives simultaneously. In accordance with *sharia* (Islamic law – see p. 4 of *Political and Social Relations*), a man may have up to four wives if he provides for them all equally. Today, few Saudi men have more than one wife at a time.

Children

Traditionally, families had several children, who helped to fulfill household labor needs. Today, most Saudi families have just two or three children (see p. 4 of *Sex and Gender*). Extended family members typically help raise children, serving as mentors and supporting the parents as needed. Physical discipline and corporal punishment for disobedience are allowed by *sharia*. While the KSA criminalized domestic violence and child abuse in 2013, experts note that some Saudi children continue to suffer physical and psychological mistreatment.

Birth: In the Islamic tradition, the father whispers the *adhan* (call to prayer) into a baby's right ear and the profession of faith (see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality*) in his left immediately following birth. While traditions vary across



the KSA, some parents celebrate a birth with an *aqiqa*, a ceremony involving the slaughter of an animal to provide a feast for guests, neighbors, and the poor. A week after the birth,

parents name the child, often after revered figures in Islam or senior family members, then mark the occasion with a celebration.

Circumcision: Saudi boys traditionally underwent circumcision around age 6-7, signifying their membership in the Islamic community. Today, most newborn males are circumcised at the hospital immediately following birth.

Marriage

Marriage in the KSA is an important rite that grants prestige, social status, and greater economic opportunity to both spouses. Traditionally, a marriage was an arranged union between family member, typically cousins or other distant relatives. It was often used to strengthen and extend alliances among the region's leading families and ruling tribes.



Today, arranged marriages among families of similar social standing remain the norm. However, some Saudis choose their own spouses based upon mutual attraction, though their choice must receive family approval. In judging a suitable spouse, families consider education, social status, religiosity, character, and wealth. In addition, some parents arrange a **shawfa** (viewing), so that a man can see his future bride unveiled (see p. 1 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

Families generally do not force arranged matches, and either marriage prospect can reject a proposed mate. Marriages usually proceed with the mutual consent of the groom, the bride, and the bride's male guardian (see p. 2 of *Sex and Gender*), although the guardian may consent to a marriage on behalf of the bride. Since 2019, the government prohibits marriage under the age of 15.

Casual dating is socially unacceptable, and the country has strict gender segregation rules and traditions (see p. 2 of *Time and Space*). Nevertheless, Saudi youth often interact through social

media and telephonically, or they encourage family members to contact potential mates on their behalf.

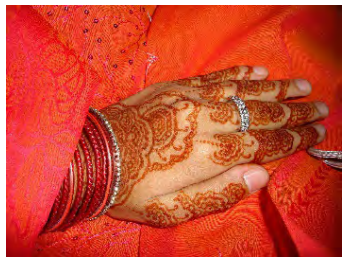
While some marriages between citizens and non-citizens are allowed, various laws discourage and regulate the practice. For example, a Saudi man must be between 40-65 years old to marry a non-Saudi woman. To marry a non-Saudi man, a Saudi woman must be between 30-50 years old. Other laws regulate marriages with certain foreign nationals. For example, most Saudi men must obtain government consent to marry a citizen of any country not a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (see p. 11 of *Political and Social Relations*). Since 2014, Saudi men are forbidden from marrying women from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Burma, and Chad.

Bridewealth: Upon marriage, Saudi men traditionally pay *mahr* or a so-called bridewealth to the bride. A legal requirement for Islamic marriages, the *mahr* symbolizes the bride's financial independence. In the event of a divorce, a woman may be asked to return the *mahr*.

Weddings: Saudi weddings are segregated by gender. The women's festivities are typically extravagant social occasions held in upscale venues. Over several days, the bride and her female relatives and friends participate in a series of celebrations.

For example, the day before the wedding, they attend a **Laylat al Ghumra** (henna party), where they receive intricate temporary henna tattoos.

The actual wedding is usually held at a banquet hall or hotel. To officially seal the marriage, the



couple signs the **nikah** (an official marriage contract). Afterwards, feasting and dancing are held for hundreds of family and friends, with men and women often performing traditional dances in gender-segregated groups at separate locales (see p. 5 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*). Around midnight, the men join

the women's party. When the groom arrives, the couple is seated together in front of the guests, and celebrations continue.

Weddings are generally expensive. This financial burden combined with high unemployment rates (see p. 2-3 of *Economics and Resources*) compels many young couples to opt for smaller festivities with fewer guests or to delay marriage altogether. While most Saudis marry later in life than their parents did, a 2018 survey revealed that 46% of married Saudi women had wed before the age of 20.



Divorce: In 2020, 37% of marriages were reported to end in divorce. Experts attribute high divorce rates to changing expectations of married life and family intervention.

Death

According to Islamic tradition, Saudis bury their loved ones as soon as possible after death, usually within 24 hours. The deceased is bathed, dried, perfumed, and wrapped in a **kafan** (clean white cloth or shroud). Male relatives and friends then transport the deceased to a mosque, where a cleric offers prayers. Next, male relatives and close friends deliver the deceased to a cemetery, where the body is buried in an unmarked grave, facing the Ka'aba in Mecca (see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

Family members and friends gather for the graveside funeral service, where they pray for the deceased and offer condolences to the family, though Saudis typically refrain from public displays of grief. Some mourners throw handfuls of dirt into the grave. Women are typically forbidden from attending the funeral ceremonies. For 3 days following the funeral, during a period called the '**azza**, the family receives mourners, who offer further condolences and read prayers from the Qur'an (the Islamic holy book – see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

5. SEX AND GENDER

Overview

While traditional Arabian society privileged men over women, this trend is slowly changing as Saudi women take advantage of educational and professional opportunities. Despite these advances, legal and institutional discrimination plus certain cultural norms limit women's full participation in society. In the 2023 Global Gender Gap report, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) ranked 131 of 146 countries in gender equality.

Gender Roles and Work

Domestic Labor: Women traditionally hold responsibility for childcare, cooking, and cleaning, and Saudi women who work outside the home remain responsible for the household. Further, some women manage the family budget and oversee the household duties of domestic servants.

Labor Force: In 2022, about 36% of Saudi women worked outside the home, a significantly lower rate than that of neighbors Kuwait (50%) and the United Arab Emirates (56%), yet higher than in neighboring Jordan (15%) and Iraq (12%). The

nation is close to the goal set forth by the government's Vision 2030 plan (see p. 2 of *Economics and Resources*) to increase women's participation in the workforce to 30% by 2030.



While Saudi women were traditionally excluded from various industries and legally bound to work in positions "suitable to their nature," labor laws outlaw gender discrimination in the workplace. Women's roles in the workplace tend to concentrate in traditional "female" healthcare, retail, and education. Saudi women comprised more than half of university students in 2019 (see p. 5 of *Learning and Knowledge*).

Strict gender segregation policies (see p. 2 of *Time and Space*) and cultural norms discourage employers from hiring women, resulting in high female unemployment rates. As of 2022, 19% of working age Saudi women were unemployed, 6 times the rate of their male counterparts. Further, men typically receive preferential job placement and earn higher wages than women with equal qualifications.

Female non-citizens comprise 9% of the KSA's total workforce. These women typically hold domestic service jobs requiring extremely long hours and are sometimes subject to physical or sexual abuse (see "Gender Based Violence" below).



Gender and the Law

The KSA's Basic Law (see p. 13 of *History and Myth* and p. 4 of *Political and Social Relations*) does not guarantee gender equality. Further, Wahhabism, the conservative version of Islam predominant in the KSA (see p. 5-6 of *Religion and Spirituality*), demands strict gender segregation in many public places and restricts women's social, political, and economic liberties. For example, every woman must have a close male relative, such as her father or husband, who acts as her "guardian" and make important decisions on her behalf.

Further, judges often apply **sharia** (Islamic law – see p. 4 of *Political and Social Relations*) in ways that disadvantage women. Under *sharia*, a woman's testimony is worth half that of a man's, and daughters receive just half the inheritance that sons receive. Women must demonstrate legally sufficient grounds for divorce, while men may divorce without giving cause. Moreover, Saudi citizenship derives solely from the father, meaning a Saudi woman cannot transmit her citizenship to her children if their father is a non-citizen.

Nevertheless, various legal reforms in recent years have promoted women's rights. In 2018, the KSA criminalized sexual harassment in the workplace, authorized women to join the country's security forces, granted divorced women custody of their children, and ended the ban on female driving. Since 2019,

the KSA permits women over age 21 to travel without their guardian's permission and no longer requires restaurants to have separate entrances for men and women, though other public establishments remain segregated (see p. 2 of *Time and Space*).

Gender and Politics

In 2009, King Abdullah (see p. 14 of *History and Myth*) appointed the Kingdom's first female minister, and 4 years later, decreed that women must comprise at least 20% of the 150-member



Shura Council. As of 2021, women hold 20% of seats (see p. 4-5 of *Political and Social Relations*).

In 2015, women gained the right to vote and run for seats on municipal councils. However, in those elections, women made up less than

10% of the voter roll and won less than 1% of available seats. One hurdle to their electoral success was the strict gender segregation policy that prevented female candidates from speaking to male voters face-to-face when campaigning.

Despite these restrictions, by 2018, a woman served as Deputy Minister of Labor and Social Development and dozens of others held appointed positions in public administration. The KSA also has a growing number of female diplomats. In 2019, Princess Reema bint Bandar Al Saud was named the Saudi ambassador to the US, becoming the first female KSA ambassador.

Gender Based Violence (GBV)

Rape is a criminal offense under *sharia*, with penalties ranging up to execution. Domestic violence is punishable by up to 1 year in prison or fines. Despite this legal framework, few victims report offenses due to the severe social stigma attached to the crime combined with their lack of trust in law enforcement officials. If crimes are reported, courts often punish both victims and perpetrators, identifying them as cases of illegal gender-mixing instead of GBV. Further, women reporting or attempting to flee abusive situations are often arrested and returned to their families.

Having few legal protections, the KSA's non-citizen female workforce is especially vulnerable to GBV. Living secluded in their employers' homes, non-citizen domestic workers rarely report abuse for fear of losing their employment and housing.

Sex and Procreation

Saudis consider sexual intimacy a private matter. While married couples are allowed to hold hands in public, open displays of affection by unmarried couples are both socially unacceptable and criminalized. Further, sexual relations outside marriage are illegal and punishable by imprisonment, stoning, or death. However, while Saudi couples must show proof of marriage when checking into a hotel, as of 2019, unmarried foreign nationals may share a hotel room.

The birthrate in the KSA has dropped dramatically in recent decades from 7.2 children per woman in 1960 to 1.89 in 2023. This decrease is likely due to several reasons, such as the influx of non-citizens



during recent decades, many of whom do not have children while living temporarily in the KSA; economic growth and enhanced opportunities for women's education and employment; and the availability of contraception. Abortion is generally prohibited under *sharia*, even in the case of rape, though some exceptions exist.

Homosexuality in Saudi Arabia

The KSA's interpretation of *sharia* punishes consensual same-sex conduct by death or flogging (though flogging was abolished as a punishment for all crime in 2020). Further, it is illegal for men to wear women's clothing and to "behave like a woman," and vice-versa. There are no specific organizations or advocacy events, and most homosexual individuals conceal their sexuality to avoid discrimination and persecution. At this time, the US State Department does not have a Status of Forces Agreement in place for Saudi Arabia. Service members will be subject to local laws with regards to this topic.

6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Language Overview

Arabic is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's (KSA's) official language. Due to the presence of foreign workers (see p. 13 of *Political and Social Relations*), other languages such as English, dialects of Arabic, Middle Eastern, South Asian, and East African varieties also are spoken.

Arabic

Most Saudis speak one of three regional Arabic dialects as a first language: **Hijazi** (some 10.3 million speakers as of 2018), **Najdi** (14.6 million), or **Khaleeji** or Gulf Arabic (962,000). In school, Saudis learn to read and write Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which is spoken across Arabic-speaking countries. Saudis use

MSA for writing, formal discussions, speeches, and in national news broadcasts. With a 28-character alphabet, Arabic is written horizontally from right to left.



Saudi dialects and MSA differ in vocabulary and pronunciation. For example, *Hijazi* speakers may replace a “th” sound with a “d” or “z” sound. Similarly, *Khaleeji* speakers may replace the “k” sound with a “ch” sound. The Saudi dialects are mutually intelligible with most other regional Arabic dialects except for certain local varieties from Iraq and North Africa.

Among the KSA's non-citizens, over 4.5 million people speak other Arabic dialects such as Egyptian, North and South Levantine, Omani, Sudanese, and Yemeni varieties, all of which differ from the Saudi dialects.

English

Often serving as a common language among citizens and non-citizens, English is part of the national education curriculum and is taught beginning in grade 4 (see p. 4 of *Learning and*

Knowledge). In general, younger Saudis in urban areas are more likely to speak English than older Saudis. Many foreign companies and non-citizen employees, regardless of their native language, conduct business in English.

Other Languages

While exact numbers are unknown due to constant fluctuation in the foreign worker population, the KSA is home to around three million South Asian



language speakers. These include Balochi (a language spoken in Pakistan), Bengali (an official language of both Bangladesh and India), Malayalam (an official language of India), Rohingya (the native language of the Rohingya people of Burma), and Urdu (Pakistan's national language). Other languages spoken by non-citizens include Tagalog (the official language of the Philippines), East African languages like Swahili and Somali, Turkish, Karbadian (a language of southwestern Russia), and Uyghur (the language of China's Uyghur minority).

Communication Overview

Communicating competently in the KSA requires not only knowledge of Arabic, but also the ability to interact effectively using language. This broad notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these forms of communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.

Communication Style

Saudis' communication patterns reflect their regard for politeness, generosity, hospitality and respect for tradition. Accordingly, Saudis devote significant time to greetings and other formalities, such as inquiring about one's family and health in detail. In their interactions, Saudis strive to emphasize respect for their conversation partners and their social status, while

avoiding embarrassment to themselves or others, particularly in business meetings and with elders and social superiors.

The emphasis Saudis place on politeness is evident in a widely-held preference for indirect or non-specific answers. Further, Saudis tend to provide a positive response to most requests, usually accompanied by the phrase ***insha'allah*** ("if God wills" – see p. 6 of *Religion and Spirituality*). However, this "yes" answer is not necessarily a promise. Similarly, foreign nationals should not interpret a noncommittal answer to a request as neutral. Instead, such an answer might actually be negative.

Politeness also demands that Saudis express goodwill instead of criticizing another person's ideas. Consequently, a foreign national should avoid giving direct criticism, especially in public. Instead, he should combine indirect criticism with praise for any positive points while reassuring the individual of his high regard for him personally.

In relaxed social situations among family and friends, Saudis tend to be talkative, often repeating themselves to make a point or shouting when excited. Saudis may also punctuate their speech to emphasize their point and exaggerate for effect. They tend to be tolerant of interruptions during discussions and several people speaking at once. Saudis consider the display of

emotions during discussions as an indicator of deep and sincere concern for the subject.

Greetings

Saudis typically extend greetings carefully and respectfully. Upon entering a room,



Saudis say ***Salaam Aleikum*** ("peace be upon you"), and all present respond ***Wa Aleikum as-Salaam*** ("and upon you be peace"). Following this verbal exchange, men may shake hands or exchange cheek kisses depending on the nature of their relationship. To indicate deep respect and sincerity, Saudis may place their right hand over their heart after shaking hands.

Foreign nationals should generally avoid offering the Arabic greeting *Salaam Aleikum*, as some Saudis consider it appropriate only among practicing Muslims. Others consider the use of Arabic by a foreign national as an indicator that their English is inadequate. Saudis of the opposite sex typically do not touch when greeting. Men usually greet women verbally or with a nod, though some women may extend their hands for a handshake with foreign men. Foreign nationals should wait for members of the opposite sex to initiate the greeting.

Names

Arab names for both genders reflect the genealogy of the father's side. The full name consists of a first (given) name, the person's father's (first) name, sometimes the paternal grandfather's (first) name, and a family or tribal name. Some Saudis include the term **bin** (son of) or **bint** (daughter of) between the given name and father's name. If written at the beginning of a sentence, **bin** and **bint** become **lbn** or **lbnt**.



Family names frequently begin with **al-**, an article meaning “the,” which differs from **Al**, a prefix used to indicate a tribal name. A Saudi's family or tribal name typically indicates membership in an extended family, a relationship with a tribal ancestor, or origins in a particular geographic location. Traditionally, a Saudi woman does not take her husband's name upon marriage.

Forms of Address

Friends and relatives of the same sex usually address one another by first name. Honorifics such as military ranks and professional/personal titles (Dr., Mr., or Mrs.) are often combined with the person's first name (e.g. Dr. Sarah, Mr. Mohammad). Upon having a son, Saudis add the appropriate title, either **umm** (mother) or **abu** (father) along with the son's name to the end of their full names. Saudis reserve the titles **Sheikh** (for males) and **Sheikha** (for females) for religious scholars, tribal leaders, and other prominent members of society.

Conversational Topics

Polite conversation typically involves a series of elaborate and repetitive inquiries about the general health and well-being of each other and the extended family. Male Saudis usually avoid inquiring about another man's female relations, and male foreign nationals should also. While Saudis safeguard familial privacy, they are often eager to share information about their family's economic status and social connections.

Likewise, they may feel comfortable questioning a foreign national about similar matters. Foreign nationals should avoid discussing politics, religion, and regional conflicts, particularly those between the KSA and its neighbors (see p. 11-12 of *Political and Social Relations*). Saudis consider profanity, and comparisons between people and animals offensive.

Gestures

Saudis often use gestures to augment and sometimes replace spoken words. To point, Saudis use the entire hand. To motion someone to pass through, Saudis wave the fingers of a raised hand. To signal someone to stop, Saudis wave the fingers of a dropped hand. Holding the right hand out, palm upward, then touching the thumb and tips of the fingers together and slowly

moving the hand up and down means "calm down," "be patient," or "slowly."



Generally, Saudis consider slouching, hands in pockets, and other body language indicative of lack of

interest as impolite. Foreign nationals should also avoid using the left hand when gesturing (see p. 3 of *Time and Space*) and showing the soles of feet or shoes to Saudis. Lastly, they should avoid walking in front of anyone who is praying.

Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/ and click on "Resources" for access to language training and other resources.

Arabic Pronunciation and Transliteration

Transliteration is the process of spelling out Arabic words using the Roman (Latin) alphabet. The table below shows sounds or letters having no English equivalent or that vary from MSA pronunciations. When texting or writing informally online in Romanized Arabic, Saudis frequently replace certain Arabic letters with numbers, also depicted below.

Arabic Letter	Transliteration and Description	Number (if applicable)	Example
أ	a	2	Africa
ع	'a or aa	3	sound from deep in the throat as in the name 'Ali or the instrument 'oud
خ	kh; strong "h"	5	loch (as pronounced in Scotland)
ط	ṭ or t	6	tar
ح	ḥ or h; whispered "h"	7	hoot
ق	g	8	golf (pronounced like cough ; transliterated q in MSA)
ص	ṣ or s	9	saw
غ	gh; like the guttural French "r"		Paris (as pronounced by a French person)
ذ	dH; Soft "th"		this
ء	' (glottal stop)		pause in the middle of "uh-oh"
ج	y (or j)		yes
ك	ch (or k)		chin

Useful Words and Phrases

English	Arabic (Romanized)
Hello (May peace be upon you)	Salaam Aleikum
Response: And upon you be peace	Wa Aleikum as-Salaam
How are you?	Kaifa haloka (haloki for female)
Hi	Marhaba
Good morning	Sabah el kheer
Good afternoon/evening	Masaa el kheer
My name is...	Esmee...
Yes	N'em
No	La
Please	Men fedlek
Thank you	Shukran
You're welcome	'Afwan
Good night (when leaving)	Tosbeho (tosbeheena for female) 'ala khair
Where are you from?	Men ayna anta (anti? for female)
Where do you live?	Ayna taskun? (Ayna taskuneen? for female)
I am American	Ana amreeki (amrekiah for female)
Do you speak (English/Arabic)?	Hal tatakallamo alloghah al enjlezhiah/alarabiah?
Today/Now	Alyawm/Al aan
Tomorrow	Ghadan
Yesterday	Ams
The meal was very good	Alwajba tayba waayed
Look!	Onzor (Onzori! for female)
Excuse me	Lo samaht
Pardon?	A 'ederney
I don't understand you	Ana la afhem 'eleyk
What?	A'eesh?
Where?	Ayn?
How?	Kaif?
Me/you	Ana/anta/anti (you for female)
Him/her	Houwa/hiya
What time is it now?	Kam assa'a al aan?

7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 97.6%
- Male: 98.6%
- Female: 96% (2020 estimate)

Early Education

Historically, regional inhabitants informally transmitted values, skills, beliefs, historical knowledge, and a sense of community to younger generations. With the spread of Islam, more formal methods of education developed, whereby instructors delivered lessons in Qur'anic verses, Islamic rituals and duties, and Arabic calligraphy to the male children of elites.

Given the Islamic requirement that all able-bodied Muslims perform the pilgrimage to Mecca (see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality*), Arabia's west coast became a cosmopolitan center that supported the exchange of ideas and knowledge. The 8th-14th centuries saw a "Golden Age" of learning in the Islamic world, with significant advances in mathematics, physics, astronomy, and philosophy.

Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)

With the 1932 establishment of the KSA, the region's first public schools for boys opened. King Abd al Aziz (also known as Ibn Saud – see pg. 8 of *History and Myth*) promoted Western-style education focused on secular subjects like science and mathematics alongside religious instruction.

With the influx of oil revenues after World War II (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*), the government began allocating significant resources to expand education, developing a system of kindergarten, primary, intermediary, and secondary schools.

In 1954, the KSA established the Ministry of Education (MoE) to manage its 226 schools, providing instruction to some 30,000 male students. In 1957, Riyadh



University (later renamed King Saud University) opened as the KSA's first institution of higher learning.

Government investment in education rose significantly in subsequent decades, and a fast-growing network of colleges and universities offered new post-secondary options. The educational system's rapid development relied heavily on foreign teachers.

Introduction of Female Education:

Before the mid-20th century, few girls received formal education, though some wealthy families hired private tutors to teach their daughters or sent them abroad to study. Opponents of female education cited conservative interpretations of the Qur'an that emphasized a woman's role in the home. Arguing that formal education would help girls become better wives and mothers, in 1955, Queen Iffat al-Thunayan founded Dar Al-Hanan, a private school that initially served just 15 girls. A decade later, the KSA opened its first public schools for girls, though few operated in rural areas until the 1990s. By the end of 1970, some 250,000 Saudi girls were enrolled in school.



Modern Educational System

Today, grades 1-9 are compulsory for all Saudi children. In the public system, Arabic is the primary language of instruction, and schools are gender-segregated after kindergarten. Public primary through post-secondary programs are free for citizens.

By contrast, Muslim non-citizens are entitled to free primary and secondary education but are barred from attending Saudi universities. Non-Muslim non-citizens cannot enroll in any public institutions. Instead, they attend tuition-based private or international schools.

In 2023, the government allocated some 17% of its budget to education, significantly higher than the 13.3% average spent across the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC – see p. 11 of *Political and Social Relations*). Despite this investment,

students exhibit average to poor scholastic achievement. In a 2018 assessment of 79 countries, Saudi students ranked 44th in reading, 59th in math, and 56th in science, compared to 11th, 29th, and 16th for the US. Saudi students also underperform students in countries with significantly lower income levels.

The KSA's educational objectives align with its broader goals of diversifying the economy. Between 2018-20, the MoE and private investors launched educational development plans aimed at increasing access to education and the proportion of Saudi teachers and administrators, and improving educational facilities. The KSA's Vision 2030 plan (see p. 2 of *Economics and Resources*) also prioritizes the development of a highly skilled citizen workforce through improved education.

The **ulema** (Council of Senior Scholars – see p. 5 of *Political and Social Relations*) oversees the creation of educational materials and curricula to ensure content aligns with Wahhabism, the KSA's Sunni Islamic ideology (see p. 3-4 of *History and Myth* and p. 6 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Religious courses are an integral part of the public-school curriculum, and by law, private schools must also provide the official, government-approved Sunni Islamic instruction to their Muslim students.



Some observers criticize the educational system's focus on rote memorization of religious texts over analytical skills. Further, some Saudi textbooks disparage other faiths and followers of Islamic traditions that deviate from Wahhabism. Despite some efforts to remove inflammatory language, critics claim some educational materials promote religious intolerance.

Pre-Primary: In 2021, 19% of children age 3-5 were enrolled in non-compulsory, pre-primary programs, the only level of Saudi education that is coeducational. Teachers in exclusive female schools focus on providing a foundation in reading, writing, math, and religious studies.

Primary: Primary school consists of grades 1-6. The standard national curriculum focuses on Islamic education, Arabic, mathematics, science, history, geography, civics, and fine arts,



with English added in grade 4. Girls also study “women and art education,” while boys receive physical education. To qualify for the next grade and graduate, students must pass final comprehensive

exams. In 2021, some 95% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in primary programs.

Intermediary: Comprising grades 7-9, intermediary instruction builds on the fundamentals of primary school, while adding some subjects. Upon successful completion of a year-end evaluation, students may move on to secondary school or enroll in a 2-year vocational program.

Secondary: Non-compulsory secondary school consists of grades 10-12. After an initial year of the general curriculum, male students in general secondary schools may choose among four tracks for their final 2 years. These include applied science, natural sciences, administrative and social sciences, or **sharia** (Islamic law – see p. 2-3 of *Political and Social Relations*) and Arabic studies.

By contrast, female students have just two tracks, art or science, to choose from. Alternatives to the general secondary program include specialized schools focusing on Islamic theology, teaching, agriculture, industry, and commerce. After passing the **Tawjihi** (General Secondary School Certificate Exam), students continue to post-secondary education. In 2021, some 96% of students of the appropriate age were enrolled in secondary programs.

Post-Secondary: Today, there are about 45 public and 50 private universities and hundreds of colleges offer post-secondary programs in the KSA. Historically, these institutions have failed to produce enough graduates to fill technical and

managerial positions in the workforce, especially in science and engineering fields. Accordingly, the KSA has established new universities, technical colleges, and vocational centers across the country in recent years, notably the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), established in 2009. By 2018, university capacity in the KSA had reached 1.62 million students, up from 636,000 in 2006.

Since about 2000, women have comprised a growing proportion of students in higher education. Today, women represent some 50% of Saudi university students, though they remain underrepresented in the workforce (see p. 1-2 of *Sex and Gender*).

Traditionally, public post-secondary institutions offered only gender-segregated instruction. Today, some institutions continue to maintain separate campuses for men and women, while others are open to only one gender. For example, Princess Noourah bint Abdulrahman University in Riyadh is the world's largest institution of higher learning solely for women.



KAUST was established as the KSA's first coeducational university. Today, al-Faisal University and all medical schools also offer partially desegregated classes, where male and female students engage in discussions, while remaining segregated. Nevertheless, opportunities for women in higher education remain limited, with degree restrictions and inferior facilities compelling some women to study abroad. While Saudi women are eligible to receive a governmental study abroad scholarship, acceptance is contingent on their accompaniment by a male guardian (see p. 2 of *Sex and Gender*) for the duration of their studies.

Critics note that many post-secondary graduates are ill-prepared for the workforce. One aim of the KSA's Vision 2030 plan (see p. 2 of *Economics and Resources*) is to address this mismatch between skillsets and job requirements.

8. TIME AND SPACE

Overview

Saudis believe that trust, respect, and consensus are fundamental to building strong relationships. In general, public displays of affection are inappropriate and even unlawful in some cases, although social touching between friends of the same gender is common.

Time and Work

The Saudi work week runs from Sunday-Thursday, and business hours vary by establishment type. While public sector employees generally work from 7:30am-2:30pm, private businesses typically open from 8am-5pm. Some businesses and shops close for a midday break from 1pm-4pm and consequently open earlier or extend the workday to 8pm.

While some shops are open 9:30am-12:30pm and 4pm-7pm, larger stores and shopping centers stay open all day. Many shops have limited hours on Fridays, the Muslim holy day. Most banks are open 9:30am-4:30pm Sunday-Thursday. Post offices are generally open 7:30am-10pm Sunday-Thursday and 4:30pm-10pm on Friday.

Working Environment: Labor laws establish an 8-hour workday, a maximum 48-hour work week, and 21-30 days of annual leave. However, non-citizen workers are often exempt from legal protections or laws rarely are enforced, resulting in forced labor and lack of legal recourse for victims. Some employers abuse the **kafala** sponsorship system (a system of contracting and monitoring migrant laborers – see p. 2 of *Economics and Resources*), confiscating passports and withholding salaries, even though laws prohibit such practices.



Time Zone: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) adheres to Arabia Standard Time (AST), 3 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 7 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST). The KSA does not observe daylight savings time.

Lunar Calendar: The KSA traditionally uses the *Hijri* calendar, which uses the lunar system to count the years since the Prophet Muhammad's *hegira* ("migration") from Mecca to Medina in 622 (see p. 2 of *History and Myth*). Consequently, the year 2020 in the Western calendar is 1441 in the *Hijri* calendar. While the government adopted the Western calendar for some administrative purposes in 2016, the *Hijri* calendar remains predominant. As the *Hijri* calendar is based on lunar phases, dates fall 11 days earlier each year in relation to the Western

National Holidays

- September 23: Saudi National Day

These holidays occur on variable dates:

- ***Eid al-Fitr*:** End of Ramadan
- ***Eid al-Adha*:** Festival of Sacrifice

calendar. The calendar's 12 months each have 30 days or fewer, each day begin at sunset, and each week begins on Saturday.

Time and Business

Saudis tend to have a relaxed approach to time, considering schedules and deadlines less important than relationships and social obligations. Consequently, lengthy introductions and small talk tend to delay the start or progress of a business meeting. Further, Saudis often interrupt meetings to take phone calls, confer with colleagues, and engage in prayer (see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Saudis typically schedule multiple overlapping meetings and receive several visitors at once.

Public Space

Gender segregation exists in most public spaces, though it's declining. Restaurants have separate dining areas for men and women, and stores, public parks, and entertainment venues offer "family days," when men are permitted to enter only with their wives and children. Pools and gyms offer gender-segregated operating hours, while banks and grocery stores have separate lines for men and women. In the home, men and women typically have separate spaces for entertaining (see p. 2 of *Family and Kinship*). Public-schools are segregated by gender after pre-primary (see p. 2-5 of *Learning and Knowledge*).

Personal Space

Saudis maintain slightly more than an arm's length when conversing with strangers but stand closer to family and friends. Friends of the same gender tend to maintain very little personal space when interacting.

Touch: Close friends and family members commonly touch one another while interacting, and friends of the same gender may hold hands in public, though unrelated Saudis of the opposite sex rarely touch. Saudis use only the right hand when eating, gesturing, passing and accepting items, and shaking hands because traditionally the left hand is considered unclean. Foreign nationals should adhere to this custom to avoid offense.

Eye Contact: Saudis generally consider direct eye contact during greetings a demonstration of sincerity. Men typically avoid extended eye contact when interacting with unrelated women.

Photographs

Mosques, airports, shopping centers, government offices, oil fields, and military installations generally prohibit photography. Foreign nationals should obtain permission before photographing a Saudi, especially a woman or group of women. Because some Saudi women (or their male companions) might be offended by the request, foreign nationals should seek advice from their Saudi counterparts before initiating a request.



Driving

Like Americans, Saudis drive on the right side of the road. Roads are generally well maintained with signage in Arabic and English. In urban areas, traffic is often heavy, and speeding, poor lane discipline, and aggressive driving are common. In the desert, dust storms, flash floods, camels, and livestock present hazards. In 2021, the KSA's rate of traffic-related deaths was 18.5 per 100,000 people, a significant decrease from 2019 number of 36 deaths per 100,000 people.

9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

Overview

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's (KSA's) clothing, sport, music, and art reflect its Arab and Islamic traditions and its place in the modern global economy.

Dress and Appearance

Both Western and traditional attire are worn in the KSA, where standards of dress tend to be conservative. Both male and female visitors should also dress conservatively, avoiding shorts, mini-skirts, and sleeveless tops except while visiting private beaches or pools.

Men: Saudi men traditionally wear a **thawb**, a collared, loose white robe designed to keep the wearer cool.



This garment is complemented by a small skullcap called a **taqiyyan** or **kufiyyan** worn underneath a **ghutra** (white headscarf) or **shemagh** (red/white checked headscarf) that is secured in place by an **iqal** (a braided, black cord). While most **thawbs** are white, other shades such as beige, grey, and navy blue, are popular in the winter months. For special occasions, men often wear a dark-colored outer robe called a **bisht** or **mishlah** that is trimmed with gold embroidery. Leather sandals are common year-round. Most men prefer traditional dress for everyday wear, though they may opt for Western-style suits or jeans when traveling abroad.

Women: While many Saudi women wear modest Western clothing such as loose blouses with long skirts or trousers, traditional women's wear includes the **abaya**, a loose black robe that covers most of the body, accompanied by a **hijab** (headscarf). Women from religious families typically wear a **niqab** (face veil) that reveals only the eyes or a **burqa** (full face and body covering). Some rural women wear a **qub'as** (woven palm front hat). Under the **abaya**, women traditionally wear a

thawb and **sirwāl** (loose trousers), though many women today prefer Western-style clothing such as jeans, colorful designer dresses, and high heels.

Children: Children and youth typically wear Western-style pants, shirts, and dresses on a daily basis, reserving traditional clothing for formal occasions. All public and many private schools require female students to wear uniforms.

Recreation and Leisure

Saudis tend to spend their leisure time with friends and family, often during regular **diwaniyah** gatherings (see p. 3 of *Family and Kinship*) or over meals to celebrate weddings, birthdays, and religious holidays. Dining, shopping, and socializing at shopping malls, traditional covered markets (**souqs**), recreation centers, and amusement parks are also popular pastimes. During the cooler months, family excursions to the desert are popular. Closed for 35 years, movie theaters began reopening in 2018.

Festivals: Over two million pilgrims from around the world usually visit the KSA during the annual **hajj** (pilgrimage to Mecca – see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality* and p. 4 of *Economics and Resources*). While the official event lasts 5 days, the weeks preceding and following the formal observance are also busy. Given the logistics and safety concerns of managing millions of visitors, the KSA government permits Saudis to attend the *hajj* just once every 5 years. The *hajj* culminates in **Eid al-Adha**, a joyous celebration involving family meals and charitable giving.



To attract foreign visitors at other times of the year (see p. 4 of *Economics and Resources*), the government has begun organizing events like the 2019 MDL Beast electronic music festival and “Riyadh Season,” an annual months-long entertainment and sports festival. The 2021-22 festival had more than 15 million spectators. Other festivals

seek to combine traditional Saudi culture with Western-style entertainment. For example, the “Winter at Tantora” offers a host of traditional cultural events, while international pop musicians perform among ancient Nabatean tombs and monuments (see p. 2 of *History and Myth*).

Sports and Games

Due to high desert temperatures, indoor swimming, martial arts, basketball, and tennis are popular. On the Red Sea coast, sailing, waterskiing, scuba diving, and jet skiing are popular. In the Olympics, Saudis have medaled in track and equestrian events, with the first female Saudi athletes competing in 2012.

Soccer: Known as “football” in the region, soccer is the most popular sport in the KSA, with 14 teams competing in the Saudi Professional League. The men’s national team, the “Green Falcons” competes regularly in the Asian Cup and has made five World Cup appearances since 1994. Historically, the KSA has barred women from participating in public sports. However, in early 2020, the government announced the formation of the Saudi Women’s Football League.

Traditional Sports: For centuries, desert-dwellers raced camels across the desert for sport. Today, the KSA hosts several annual camel-racing festivals, with the Crown Prince Camel Festival in Taif ranked as the world’s largest. During a race, owners and trainers drive alongside camels that are jockeyed by remote-controlled robots. Judges also award “beauty” prizes to camels based on the form of their nostrils, hindquarters, and lips.

Falconry is another popular pastime. For centuries, Saudi men trapped peregrine falcons and trained them to hunt and return prey such as other birds and hares. Today, wealthy Saudi men practice the sport on weeks-long luxury hunting trips. Most falcons are imported from North America, and prized birds can cost up to \$500,000.



Music

Following conservative interpretations of the Qur'an (the Islamic holy book – see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*) that discourage the playing of musical instruments, the KSA banned public concerts in the early 1990s. In 2017, Crown Prince Mohammed



bin Salman (see p. 14-15 of *History and Myth* and p. 6 of *Political and Social Relations*) lifted the ban on public music performances, part of an effort to promote the entertainment and leisure sectors, create jobs, and

diversify the economy (see p. 2-3 of *Economics and Resources*). In 2019, the KSA began permitting restaurants to play music.

Traditional: This type of Saudi music is influenced by ancient Bedouin (see p. 13 of *Political and Social Relations*) forms that were historically composed to accompany certain tasks like camel driving or pearl diving. These Bedouin songs typically involve vocal poetry with clapping accompaniment. After the spread of Islam, international pilgrims introduced South Asian and East African elements combined with distinctly Arabian features like rhythm syncopation.

Traditional instruments include varieties of hand drums, the **nay** (bamboo flute), **shawm** (oboe), **ud** (pear-shaped, fretless, stringed lute), and **rababa** (one- or two-stringed fiddle). Traditional music is typically performed at family events, *diwaniyah* gatherings and during cultural celebrations. Saudi women have their own distinct styles of traditional music. For example, female musical groups led by a **mutriba** (lead musician) perform both traditional songs and pop music for women's gatherings at rites of passage like births and weddings (see p. 3-5 of *Family and Kinship*).

Modern: Today, many Saudis listen to a modern pop version of Arab music that incorporates traditional instruments with

Western styles. Radio stations also broadcast Western and other Arab music genres, and international pop music is popular.

Dance

Traditional Saudi dances vary by region and are typically performed to traditional poems and chants. Perhaps the most famous dance, the **al-'ardah al-najdiyyah** involves a circle of men waving swords and rotating in rhythm with drums to depict mock battles. By contrast, the African-influenced **laywah**, traditionally performed after a successful fishing expedition, showcases dancers who swirl in a circle while gradually increasing their pace and intensity.

Other dances are traditionally performed by and for women, such as the **na'ish**, which involves women moving their shoulders and swinging their hair in long circles in time to music. The **baddawi**, an energetic Bedouin courtship dance, features women waving their hands in different motions to signify their marital status.



Literature

Saudi Arabia has a rich tradition of poetry and storytelling. For centuries, men from isolated communities met to exchange news, tell stories, and recite poetry, often while sitting around a desert campfire. While some stories taught moral lessons, others reflected the principles of Islam, defined tribal identities, or promoted certain values such as hospitality, generosity, and endurance (see p. 16 of *History and Myth*). Some Bedouin poems called **Qasidah**, praised the virtues of particular individuals or tribes by contrasting them with others.

There are two types of Saudi poetry: classical, based on verses and stories from the Qur'an and written in Modern Standard Arabic, and **Nabati**, written in regional Arabic dialects (see p. 1 of *Language and Communication*). *Nabati* poems include both universal themes such as valor, pride, and grief, and

contemporary political and social issues. Poetry recitation remains popular today. Female Saudi poet Hissa Hilal became the first woman to reach the finals of “Millions Poet,” a widely popular televised oral poetry competition. Young poets further develop the ancient art form by experimenting with a free-verse style poetry called ***Shi’r hurr*** characterized by irregular rhyme schemes and political themes.

The KSA government has banned thousands of literary works by both domestic and foreign authors it deems offensive to Islam or public morality. It also bans works it considers threatening to the royal family and its hold on power or to the KSA’s security. Consequently, many authors self-censor, focusing on uncontroversial nonfiction and religious themes, while avoiding politics, social commentary, and romance. Writers who pursue topics that reflect on Saudi society or make political statements face condemnation by the KSA’s religious authorities (see p. 6 of *Religion and Spirituality*), censorship, and exile. The KSA has banned the works of Rajaa Alam and Abdo Khal, Saudi winners of the prestigious International Prize for Arabic Fiction.

Folk Arts and Crafts

Traditionally, certain Sunni Islamic teachings have prohibited the lifelike portrayal of humans and animals. Instead, traditional Saudi visual artists have used geometric designs, repetitive patterns, and calligraphy to produce complex decorative motifs. Artisans also craft functional everyday objects like tea pots,



doors, and trunks with stylized designs. Decorative weapons, typically daggers inlaid with semi-precious stones and silver, are fitted into embroidered belts and worn for ceremonial occasions. Bedouin women (see p. 13 of *Political and Social*

Relations) traditionally used looms to weave camel and goat hair to make tents, camel bags, carpets, and other functional textiles. Other crafts include silver jewelry and ceramics.

10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

Sustenance Overview

Meals are often important social events in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Friends and families frequently gather at home or meet in cafes to eat and socialize. Traditional Saudi dishes typically feature fresh meats and vegetables seasoned with aromatic spices.

Dining Customs

Most Saudis eat three daily meals and snack throughout the day. In some households, female and male family members eat separately (see p. 2 of *Family and Kinship*). Even in households where male and female family members typically eat together, women and children sometimes decline to join a meal when unrelated male guests are present. To begin a meal, the host gives thanks to **Allah** (God) by saying "**Bismillah**" ("In the name of God"), then ends the meal by saying "**Al-hamdu lillah**" ("Praise be to God").



Traditionally, Saudis sat on carpeted floors and pillows during meals, although today, some Saudis dine at Western-style tables and chairs. Before and after dining, hosts usually provide a dish of scented water for diners to rinse their hands. Families typically share large, centrally-placed dishes, using their right hands to scoop food. Saudis do not use the left hand to pass or eat food (see p. 3 of *Time and Space*). A meal typically begins with a collection of starters (**mezze**) served with flat bread, followed by a main course. At social gatherings, food is typically shared family-style.

Diet

Prepared in variety of ways, rice is the KSA's most common staple and served at almost every meal. Besides rice, most dishes include an animal protein such as lamb, chicken, or goat. In coastal regions, Saudis also consume a variety of fish and

other seafood, typically grilled or fried and served with hummus and salads. Many dishes incorporate a wide assortment of seasonings such as garlic, cinnamon, cumin, and coriander. Served alongside most dishes, bread (**khubz**) comes in dozens of varieties. A common form is a flatbread that diners tear into pieces to pinch up morsels of food in place of utensils. Bread is sometimes fried and seasoned with various toppings such as **zaatar**, a spread of sesame seeds, dried thyme, and olive oil. Although dates are the most popular fruit, others include oranges, grapes, melons, figs, cherries, and apricots.

Observant Muslims consume neither pork nor alcohol. In addition, they adhere to particular rules of animal slaughter and meat preparation to ensure that food is **halal**, allowed by Islamic law. Unlike some other Gulf countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Qatar, alcohol is unavailable even to non-Muslims. It is illegal to import or possess alcohol and pork products, with violations punishable by fines, imprisonment, and corporal punishment. Evidence of alcohol consumption, such as public drunkenness, is also punishable.

Meals and Popular Dishes

For breakfast, Saudis often pair olives with bread, soft cheeses, honey, and jam. Hot breakfasts include **ful mudammes** (mashed fava beans with garlic and lemon) and **shakshuka** (eggs served with onions and tomatoes). While lunch is traditionally the largest meal, dinner also may comprise multiple courses. A typical main course consists of rice flavored with



cardamom, saffron, and cinnamon and served with seasoned chicken, lamb, or fish. A lighter meal may consist of grilled meat, soup, and salad.

Popular dishes include **kabsa**, a spiced meat, rice, and vegetable dish; **shikamba**, creamy lamb meatball soup; **kofta**, ground meat mixed with rice and tomatoes; **adas**, lentil stew; **kebdah**, goat or lamb liver marinated in spices then fried with tomatoes and onions; and

matazeez, spiced lamb and vegetables. Traditional cooking styles include the **al-mathbi** method, in which meat is grilled on flat stones heated by embers, and the **al-mandi** style, with meat, rice, and spices stewed together, traditionally in a hole in the ground.

Dates are the most popular snack and typically consumed dried, raw, or baked into various confections. Other common snacks, often served with coffee during a **diwaniyah** gathering (see p. 3 of *Family and Kinship*), include **maamoul** (pastries of pistachios, dates, figs, and almonds); **kunafah** (pastries with cheese and syrup); and **muhallabia** (rice and milk pudding with mango). **Kalaj** (fried pastry filled with cream) and **umm ali** (a type of pudding) are other sweet snacks and desserts.

Beverages

Saudis drink tea heavily laden with sugar and traditional Arabian coffee (**kahwa**) served black and spiced with cardamom, cloves, or saffron throughout the day. Hosts or servers provide refills until the guest gently swivels his cup to indicate he has had enough. Saudis also drink a variety of fresh-squeezed juices such as “Saudi Champagne,” sparkling fruit juice mixed with fresh fruit pieces.



Eating Out

Restaurants and cafes are popular sites for socializing with friends and families. Coffee shops offering **shisha** (flavored tobacco smoked through a water pipe) are also common gathering spots. Street stalls offer casual fare and snacks such as slices of fresh fruit, **falafel** (fried balls of ground chickpeas), **kebabs** (skewers of meat), and **shawarma** (meat grilled on a rotating spit, sliced, and wrapped in flat bread with yogurt and vegetables). Restaurants serving Western-style fast food and other international fare are common, with American fast-food chains particularly popular. At restaurants, servers do not expect but appreciate a 10-15% tip.

Health Overview

Saudis' health has improved significantly over the last decades, largely due to substantial enhancements to the healthcare system. Saudis' life expectancy at birth increased from 63 to 77 years from 1980-2023, exceeding the global average of 73. Similarly, infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age 1) dropped from 68 deaths per 1,000 live births to 12 – one of the Arabian Gulf's higher rates and twice that of the US'. Although maternal mortality dropped from 24 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2000 to 16 by 2020, this rate remains significantly higher than regional neighbors Kuwait (7), Qatar (8), and the UAE (9).



Today, both Saudi citizens and non-citizens employed in the public sector have access to free public healthcare. By contrast, non-citizens working in the private sector

must purchase health insurance. In practice, few low-wage, non-citizen workers bound by the **kafala** labor sponsorship system (see p. 2 of *Economics and Resources*) receive adequate healthcare.

Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine consists of the knowledge, practices, and skills derived from a native population's beliefs, experiences, and theories. Traditional Saudi medicine relies on prayer, amulets and herbal and honey treatments to identify and cure illness. **Al-ṭibb al-nabawī** (Prophetic Medicine), based on health and wellness traditions defined in traditional Islamic social practices (see p. 1 of *Religion and Spirituality*), involves treatments like **hijama** (also known as wet cupping, the process of applying heated cups to the skin to extract toxins from the body, improve blood flow, and alleviate pain). Many pilgrims undergo **hijama** treatments while visiting the KSA for the **hajj** (see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

Other common practices include acupuncture (a process in which a practitioner inserts very thin needles into various parts of a patient's skin) and bloodletting (the removal of blood from a patient for therapeutic purposes). While insurance does not cover traditional treatments, the Ministry of Health's National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine regulates the industry, licenses practitioners, and funds alternative medicine research.

Modern Healthcare System

The healthcare system offers free services at general hospitals, maternity hospitals, clinics, and specialized health centers to eligible residents. In addition, numerous private hospitals and clinics offer high quality, fee-based services. The government provides free medical services to the millions of religious pilgrims, who visit the KSA each year (see p. 4 of *Economics and Resources*).

The KSA has increased government healthcare investment in recent years, allocating some 14.4% of its budget to healthcare in 2022 to address an aging population, inequities in care between citizens and non-citizens, and inefficient public administration systems. Part of the Vision 2030 development plan (see p. 2 of *Economics and Resources*), the National Transformation

Program calls for a series of healthcare reforms. These include training new Saudi healthcare providers to reduce reliance on foreign medical staff, improving existing and constructing new



healthcare infrastructure, expanding access to primary and preventative care, and encouraging private investment in the healthcare industry. Further, the KSA plans to privatize 295 hospitals and 2,259 healthcare centers by 2030.

Some Saudi residents lack access to adequate care, with notable disparities between healthcare options for citizens and non-citizens. While all residents can access public healthcare

centers, most prioritize the needs of citizens. The KSA's public facilities are generally well-equipped with the most modern equipment, yet overwhelming demand sometimes causes overcrowding and results in long wait times. While private hospitals and clinics address gaps in healthcare service and generally offer exceptional and timely care, they are too expensive for many residents, particularly non-citizens.

Health Challenges

Despite significant government investment in immunization and post-exposure treatments, communicable and infectious



diseases such as tuberculosis, measles, and malaria accounted for 7% of all deaths in 2019. Communicable diseases disproportionately affect low-income, non-citizen workers, some of whom live in crowded, sometimes unsanitary

conditions (see p. 1 of *Family and Kinship*).

The social and economic changes of recent decades have caused an increase in chronic and non-communicable “lifestyle” diseases that are now the leading causes of death and accounted for about 57% of all deaths in 2022. While cardiovascular diseases contributed to about 34% of all deaths, other prominent causes included cancer, diabetes, and chronic respiratory diseases. Preventable “external causes” such as accidents, suicides, drug use, and smoking result in a significantly high rate of death, causing 11% of all deaths in 2022 compared to the US rate of 6%.

Obesity: An increasingly sedentary lifestyle and unhealthy eating habits have led to a surge in obesity over the last few decades. As of 2023, some 60% of Saudis are overweight, while over 20% are obese, compared to the world's averages of 39% and 13%, respectively. Moreover, some 11% of Saudi children are overweight. Increased obesity has resulted in the growth of associated illnesses, notably diabetes, with 19% of adult Saudis suffering from the disease.

11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

Overview

Prior to the discovery of oil, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's (KSA's) economy was centered on farming and trade. The **hajj** (see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality*) and other religious activities were also important sources of revenue in Mecca and Medina.

With the development of the oil industry through the 1940s, notably the creation of Aramco (Arabian American Oil Company) in 1944 (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*), the KSA began to gain enormous wealth. To meet the growing need for labor, Aramco recruited large numbers of foreign workers. High oil prices brought prosperity throughout the 1970s, and the government began enacting a series of 5-year plans to guide long-term economic development. In 1980, the government nationalized Aramco, which became Saudi Aramco in 1988.



As of 2023, the KSA's economy ranked as the Middle East's largest and the world's 19th largest. Average economic growth between 2010-19 was a healthy 3% despite an economic contraction of -2% during the 2008-09 global financial crisis. Also, there was a drop of -0.7% in GDP in 2017 and -0.3% in 2019 due to oil production cuts by OPEC, a group of oil-producing countries (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*). In 2022, GDP grew 8.7%, the highest among G20 countries. In 2023 the GDP declined to 0.8%.

Some 66% of working Saudi citizens are employed in the public sector, which offers higher salaries, better benefits, job security, and shorter working hours than the private sector. To encourage more Saudis to enter the workforce, the government has pursued "Saudization" initiatives such as the **nitaqat** program, which uses both penalties and incentives to encourage private firms to meet certain citizen employment quotas. Nevertheless,

Saudis remain underrepresented in the private sector for several reasons, most notably cultural and religious norms that discourage some women from seeking work and employers from hiring them (see p. 2 of *Sex and Gender*) and a skills mismatch between Saudi job-seekers and employers (see p. 5 of *Learning and Knowledge*).

The Saudi economy is heavily dependent on foreign labor. Of a workforce of about 16.1 million people in 2021, some 11 million were non-citizens. Just over 76% of the private sector workforce are non-citizen workers, sometimes employed in dangerous, unhealthy conditions and often without proper compensation. The KSA continues to use the controversial **kafala** system, a sponsorship program that ties workers to their employers and facilitates serious human rights violations, though it was reformed in 2021 to ease contractual obligations.

The KSA has some of the world's largest remittance outflows, with non-citizen workers sending near \$40 billion to their families back home in 2022. Nevertheless, the KSA has seen an exodus of over 1.4 million non-citizen workers since 2017, due in part to the Saudization initiatives.

In recent years, the KSA has sought to modernize and diversify its economy and thereby reduce its dependence on oil. This



initiative is being achieved through the Vision 2030 plan, a sweeping reform strategy announced in 2016. The plan includes a number of targets, most notably increasing the private sector's contribution to GDP from 40% to

65%. Other goals include lowering the unemployment rate from 12% to 7%, increasing foreign direct investment from 4% of GDP to 6%, and increasing women's participation in the workforce to 30% (see p. 1 of *Sex and Gender*), all by 2030. In 2019, Saudi Aramco listed some stock for public purchase to boost the KSA's

income, making it the largest listed company in the world and valued at \$1.7 trillion at that time.

Nevertheless, the KSA faces challenges to future economic growth, most notably its continuing dependence on oil exports. Further, unemployment of citizens remains a problem, especially among youth and women (see p. 2 of *Sex and Gender*). Further, the impacts of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic on global oil consumption and on the KSA's overall economic health will likely be severe, the country reported a 3% contraction in mid-2021. The KSA's sweeping Vision 2030 plans will also likely be affected by this economic downturn.



Industry

The largest sector, Industry accounted for some 53% of GDP in 2023 but employed just 20% of the KSA's labor force. Most activity involves

the extraction, processing, and export of oil and gas (commonly called "hydrocarbons") conducted by Saudi Aramco.

Oil: KSA is the world's second largest crude oil producer, trailing the US. Further, its 260 billion barrels of proven reserves as of 2021 comprise 17% of the world's oil reserves, and state-owned Saudi Aramco is the KSA's only crude oil producer. Oil products account for about 70% of exports, 53% of fiscal revenues, and over 23% of GDP. The KSA is home to the world's largest onshore and offshore oil fields, both located in the Eastern Province. While missile strikes on oil facilities in 2019 (see p. 10 of *Political and Social Relations*) reduced crude oil production by half, production was quickly restored.

Natural Gas: With 9.43 trillion cubic m of natural gas in 2020, the KSA has the world's sixth largest natural gas reserves and plans to increase gas production to become the world's third largest gas producer by 2030. As of mid-2023, it exports no natural gas but intends to become a gas exporter by 2030.

Mining: The KSA has significant mineral resources such as aluminum, phosphate, gold, copper, and uranium, worth around \$1.3 trillion by some estimates. The government aims to

increase mining's contribution to GDP from \$3 billion to over \$64 billion by 2030.

Manufacturing: The KSA's manufacturing sector comprised 14% of its GDP in 2022 and focuses on petrochemicals, plastics, cement, fertilizer, machinery, and food products.

Construction: Since the announcement of Vision 2030 in 2016, the KSA has experienced a construction boom, with the subsector now representing 6% of GDP. As of 2023, projects valued at over \$2.1 trillion are projected over the next 8 years. Notable large-scale initiatives include the Neom Economic City project and the Qiddiya entertainment resort. Further, the government plans to develop ports, railway lines, airports, and other facilities.

Services

The services sector comprised 52% of GDP in 2023 and employed about 76% of the labor force. Key subsectors include financial services, retail, tourism, and real estate.

Tourism: Historically, the KSA accommodated foreign visitors only for business or religious reasons. In 2019, some 2.5 million pilgrims from 168 countries visited the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. In 2019, revenue from religious pilgrimages represented some 20% of the KSA's non-oil GDP and about 7% of total GDP. The KSA's Vision 2030 plan seeks to increase the number of foreign *hajj* participants to six million annually. The government limited participation in the 2020, through 2022 *hajj* to due to the coronavirus pandemic. The pilgrimage has resumed to full participation with nearly 1.8 million taking part in 2024.



The Vision 2030 plan also calls for the growth of leisure tourism from 3% of total GDP in 2019 to 10% by 2030. Accordingly, the government introduced a new tourist visa program in 2019, while investing heavily in entertainment and leisure attractions (see p.

2-3 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*). Other destinations include the Asir Mountains, archaeological sites at Mada'in Saleh, and Red Sea coral reefs.

Agriculture

With an arid climate, limited freshwater resources, and little arable land (see p. 2 of *Political and Social Relations*), the KSA has a small agricultural sector, comprising around 2% of GDP in 2023 and employing 2% of the workforce. While the KSA relies on imports for three-quarters of its food needs, it is nearly self-sufficient in the production of meat, milk, and eggs. The KSA harvested 140 tons of fish in 2020 and plans to be self-sufficient in seafood production by 2030.

Currency

The KSA's currency is the **riyal** (SAR or ر.س in Arabic). Since 2016, it is issued in five banknote values (5, 10, 50, 100, and 500) and two coin values (1 and 2), though some 1 *riyal* banknotes remain in circulation. The *riyal* divides into 100

halalas which are issued in five coin values (1, 5, 10, 25, and 50). The *riyal* has been pegged to the dollar since 1986 at a rate of \$1 to 3.75 *riyals*.



Foreign Trade

KSA's imports, totaling \$169 billion in 2022 included machinery and equipment, motor vehicles, electronics, medication, and construction materials purchased primarily from China (22%), the UAE (16%), the US (7%), India (6%), Germany (7%), Japan (3%), and South Korea (3%). The same year, exports totaled \$362 billion and comprised primarily petroleum and petroleum products, destined for China (19%), India (13%), Japan (10%), South Korea (10%), and the US (7%).

Foreign Aid

The KSA is a major donor, providing \$96 billion in foreign aid to some 167 countries between 1996-2023. Since 2015, the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center has contributed \$6.2 billion across 2,374 projects in 91 countries.

12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

Overview

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has a modern transportation infrastructure, consisting of well-maintained roads and public transit systems. Residents have access to an advanced telecommunications network, although the government imposes restrictions on speech, the press, and Internet.

Transportation

Most Saudis and some non-citizens have at least one privately-owned vehicle (POV) and usually travel within the country by POV or taxi. An extensive state-subsidized bus system, SAPTCO, serves destinations across the region, while passenger ferries link the Saudi ports of Jeddah, Yanbu, and Duba with Egypt and Sudan.



Roadways: The KSA has over 45,000 mi of paved roads. Several major multi-lane highways link urban areas and connect the KSA to neighboring countries. The King Fahd Causeway spans 15 mi of the Arabian Gulf to connect the KSA with Bahrain.

Railways: The KSA has just over 2,200 mi of railways. The state-owned Saudi Railway Company (SAR) provides passenger and cargo service between Riyadh and Dammam on the Arabian Gulf and Jauf in the North. Meanwhile, the Haramain or Western high-speed railway links Mecca and Medina. In 2022, the minister of investment of KSA announced plans to triple the size of the rail network by adding close to 5000 miles of new track.

Ports and Waterways: Major seaports include Jeddah, King Abdullah Economic City, and Yanbu on the Red Sea coast and Dammam and Al Jubail on the Arabian Gulf side. The KSA has no inland waterways.

Airports: Saudi Arabia has 86 airports consisting of International, Regional, Domestic and Military airports. The busiest, King Abdulaziz International Airport in Jeddah, offers flights to 155 destinations in 63 countries and maintains designated terminals for pilgrims visiting for the **hajj** (see p. 4 of *Economics and Resources*). The world's largest airport in terms of area, King Fahd International Airport in Dammam offers domestic and international service to Europe, Southeast and South Asia, and the Middle East. Based in Jeddah, flag carrier

Saudia operates domestic and international flights.

Energy

The world's top exporter of crude petroleum products in 2022. The KSA generated 100% of its electricity from fossil

fuels in 2022, 36% from oil and 64% from natural gas. To reduce its reliance on petroleum products, the KSA is exploring alternative sources for energy generation, notably the construction of two nuclear power plants and the installation of solar panels in the desert.

Media

The KSA permits no independent media and ranked 170 of 180 countries in the 2023 world press freedom index. KSA law requires press outlets to “boost national unity” and protect the state's public image. The Ministry of Information strictly monitors press activities, compelling some journalists to self-censor, particularly on sensitive social, economic, and political subjects. Further, ambiguous laws give government officials broad powers to ban or suspend media outlets, fine and imprison journalists, and dismiss editors of private publications.

When Saudi government operatives murdered prominent Saudi journalist and US newspaper correspondent Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 (see p. 15 of *History and Myth*), international outrage regarding KSA's repressive media environment intensified under Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (see p. 13-14 of *History and Myth* and p. 6 of *Political and Social Relations*).



Print Media: Due to strict government censorship, most Saudi newspapers avoid political commentary in favor of impartial police reports, sport scores, and other local news. National Arabic-language dailies with the largest circulation include *Okaz*, *Al-Riyadh*, and *Al-Watan*. Domestic English-language publications include *Arab News* and the *Saudi Gazette*. Publishers also print newspapers in Urdu (the national language of Pakistan) and Malayalam (an official language of India), targeted at the KSA's non-citizen workforce (see p. 13 of *Political and Social Relations*).

TV and Radio: The state-run Saudi Broadcasting Authority operates all domestic TV and radio broadcast outlets. Programming includes informational, religious, educational, and entertainment offerings. Although the law bans satellite dishes, lax enforcement result in most residents using these devices to access



numerous private and international channels, many operated by MBC Group, a broadcasting company partially owned by the KSA government. Besides the public "Saudi Radio," private stations include MBC FM and Mix FM.

Telecommunication

The KSA's advanced telecommunications consists of 19 fixed-line telephone subscriptions and 132 mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people in 2022. The main providers of telecommunications services are Mobily, Zain, and the state-owned Saudi Telecommunications Company (STC).

Internet: Nearly 100% of the population regularly used the Internet in 2021, with 23 fixed broadband subscriptions per 100 people. The government monitors both the Internet and individual users. It also blocks sites deemed offensive, indecent, un-Islamic, or a threat to national security. Despite these strict Internet controls, the KSA remains one of the Middle East's largest social media markets.



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