



*Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.*

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** Saudi Arabia is the dominant country on the Arabian Peninsula. Covering an area of 750,965 square miles (1,945,000 square kilometers), it is about one-fourth the size of the United States and is the world's 12th largest country. The Red Sea borders the west, and the Arabian Gulf (known as the Persian Gulf in the United States) lies to the east. Most of the country is a vast, arid plain of sand and rock, with rugged mountains to the southwest. There are no major rivers or lakes. Deserts dominate much of the east and south. The largest sand desert in the world is the Rub' al Khali. Some cultivated fields and green oases can be found, and irrigation is making more agriculture possible, but most of the country is dry and barren. Saudi Arabia's greatest natural resource is crude oil, followed by natural gas, iron ore, gold, and copper. The nation's desert climate is subject to sandstorms, intense heat, and extremes in temperatures.

**History.** Arabia has a rich and colorful history that dates back several thousand years. Notable history begins in the seventh century when the prophet Muhammad began proclaiming the message of Islam from the centers of Makkah and Al Madīnah. The adoption of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula radically changed Arab civilization: it united tribes to a common goal, ended various inhumane practices, and regulated revenge taking. Because of the zeal of Muslim warriors and weakness in the Roman and Persian Empires, the religion soon spread to parts of Asia, northern Africa, and other regions. Urban centers in the Arab world fostered an advanced society. Islam's encouragement of learning, the mutual association of numerous cultures and scholars, and the translation of Greek texts into Arabic led to significant advancements in astronomy, medicine, and mathematics—including the invention of alge-

bra. After several centuries of advancement and power, the Arab Empire began to decline around the 13th century.

The peninsula was inhabited by dozens of nomadic tribes, many of which were continually at war with one another. In 1902, Abdul Aziz ibn Saud recaptured his ancestral home in Riyadh from a rival group. After 30 years of fighting, he united the major factions and declared himself king of Saudi Arabia. Four of his sons have succeeded him in the monarchy: Saud, Faisal, Khalid, and (since 1982) King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz. Another son, Abdullah, is the crown prince.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 and threatened Saudi Arabia, the Saudis hosted the international coalition that liberated Kuwait and protected Saudi Arabia. During and after the 1991 Gulf War, questions of political and social liberalization were raised. While Saudi Arabia determined it would retain its conservative customs, a Consultative Council was announced in 1992. King Fahd suffered a stroke in November 1995 but continues to rule. Should Fahd abdicate, Crown Prince Abdullah is next in line to rule. The prince already performs many duties as regent.

## THE PEOPLE

**Population.** The rapidly growing (3.3 percent annually) population of Saudi Arabia is 24.3 million. This figure includes foreign workers (about 5.6 million) who are not citizens. Most foreign workers are from other Islamic countries, but a sizable community of U.S. citizens associated with the oil industry also exists. Through quotas, stopping the issue of certain visas, and job training, the Saudi government hopes to eventually replace more than half of foreign workers with Saudi citizens. Saudi nationals comprise 75 percent of the total population. Of

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that number, 90 percent are Arabs and about 10 percent are of Afro-Asian heritage, descendants of settlers from throughout the Islamic world. The Arabs are descendants of many nomadic tribes, some of which trace their ancestry to the biblical Abraham (known to Muslims as Ibrahim).

**Language.** Arabic is the official language of the kingdom. It is also the language of the *Qur'an* (Koran), the scripture of Islam. English is used in business and educated circles. Foreign workers speak their native languages.

**Religion.** Islam is the only legally and officially recognized religion of Saudi Arabia. Arabia is the birthplace of the revered prophet Muhammad, and Saudi Arabia is home to Islam's two most sacred cities: Makkah and Al Madīnah. Non-Muslims are not permitted to enter these cities. The Arabian Peninsula is the center of the Islamic religion. Each year, hundreds of thousands of Muslims complete a pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to Makkah as part of their religious duties. During the *Hajj*, male pilgrims are expected to wear a white, two-piece, towel-like garment called the *ihram*. Women can wear traditional clothing but cannot wear a veil. As part of the *Hajj*, pilgrims circumambulate the *Ka'abah* seven times. The *Ka'abah* is the cube-shaped stone building in Makkah that all Muslims in the world face during their daily prayers to *Allah* (God). The structure contains a sacred black stone that has been venerated since before the advent of Islam. On Friday, the day of worship in Islam, people go to the mosque to pray and hear recitations from the *Qur'an*. Women often stay home to pray; those women who attend the mosque may pray in designated areas that are separate from the men.

Islam acknowledges all biblical prophets up through Jesus, although it does not accept Jesus Christ as God's son. Muhammad is considered the last and greatest of all prophets. The *Qur'an* contains *Allah's* revelations to Muhammad. Religion is a matter of daily practice and a way of life for Muslims; it is not just a matter of belief and acceptance. In addition to a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage and five daily prayers, Muslims also practice their faith through *Shahada* (professing *Allah* as the only god and Muhammad as his messenger), *Zakat* (giving a tenth of one's income to help the poor), and daily fasting during the month of *Ramadan*. Together, these practices are referred to as the Five Pillars of Islam.

The laws of Saudi Arabia are based on *shari'a* (Islamic law). All Saudi citizens are Muslims; 90 percent of them (including the Royal Family) belong to the Sunni branch of Islam while the remaining 10 percent are *Shi'i* (Shi'ite) Muslims. Saudis are prohibited to join other religions. Foreigners are allowed to practice religion in the home as they wish.

**General Attitudes.** Life in Saudi Arabia is more relaxed than in fast-paced Western nations. Saudi Arabians prefer to establish trust and confidence before proceeding with family, work, or other matters. Saudis are very conscious of personal and family honor and can easily be offended by any perceived insult to that honor. The people are generous and hospitable. Privacy is valued.

Saudis generally prefer to maintain cultural tradition in the face of modernization. While some may desire more liberal social and political practices, these people are in the minority. Most Saudis are proud that their conservative culture has escaped many of the social problems facing Western nations. While Saudi society may seem closed or repressive, Saudis remind Westerners of the country's strong families, low crime rate, and scarcity of drug problems.

The people are very religious. Islamic customs therefore

play a key role in determining cultural practices. Saudi Arabians are proud of the strength of their modern country and are patriotic; at the same time, their chief devotions are to family and religion.

**Personal Appearance.** Saudi Arabian men and women continue to wear traditional Arab dress. Men wear a *ghutra* (head-dress) and *thobe* (ankle-length shirt, usually white, that covers long pants). A *mishlah* (cloak) is often worn over the *thobe*. The *ghutra* is not removed in public. Some men have adopted Western dress for certain occasions, but the majority retain the customary clothing. A *ghutra* is usually either red checkered or completely white. It is held in place by an *igal* (braided black cord). The white *ghutra* usually is made of lighter fabric and may be seen more often in the summer.

Depending on the location, women in public have veiled faces (veiling is not practiced in some areas) and wear an *abaaya* (black robe that covers the entire body). The *abaaya* is often worn over beautifully tailored dresses. Modesty is of utmost importance, even in the heat of the Saudi summers. Visitors are expected to dress conservatively. Tight-fitting or revealing clothing is unacceptable.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** Between Muslims, the most common greeting is a handshake and the phrase *As-Salaamu 'Alaykum* (Peace be upon you). Frequently, males will follow up by extending the left hand to each other's right shoulder and kissing the right and left cheeks. The greeting used depends on the individuals' relationship and status in society. When accompanied by a woman wearing a veil, a man normally will not introduce her, and one does not expect to shake hands with her. The term for "Good morning" is *Sabah al-Khair*, and for "Good evening" it is *Mesah al-Khair*. A casual "Hello" is *Marhaba*.

**Gestures.** One avoids using the left hand for gesturing. All objects are passed with the right hand or both hands—never with the left alone. One beckons someone by turning the palm down and waving the fingers back and forth. It is impolite to point with the finger or to point the bottom of one's foot at another person. It is also rude to cross an ankle over the knee, although crossing one's legs at the knees is acceptable and common.

**Visiting.** Invitations to a Saudi Arabian home often are given to a man alone. If his wife is invited, she may be sent to eat with the other women in a separate room or quarters. It is inappropriate for a first-time guest to take a gift to the woman of the house. Otherwise, gift giving is common. Dinner guests usually present flowers, sweets, or other small items to the hosts as appreciation for their hospitality. Alcoholic beverages are never presented as gifts or offered to guests: Islamic law prohibits the consumption of alcohol.

Saudis take great care in providing for their visitors. Arabic coffee and dates are served upon a male guest's arrival in a Saudi house. The coffee is served in tiny cups, the host or eldest son hovering nearby with a coffee pot ready for refills. This coffee ritual is often followed with sweet mint or ginger tea. Guests are invited into another room for the main meal, which is spread out on a rug. After the meal, coffee and tea may be served again. When people have had enough to drink, they cover the cup with the hand or shake it gently from side to side several times and say *bes* (enough). The guest usually leaves soon thereafter.

**Eating.** Western dining etiquette is observed only in more Westernized circles. Most Saudis eat with the fingers of the

right hand. Bread may be torn with the left hand but is eaten with the right. The Saudis delight in preparing an abundance of food for their guests. Hosts encourage guests to take second helpings and are pleased when they do, but a person can also politely decline further helpings. In restaurants, a service charge usually is included in the bill. The main meal of the day is in the midafternoon (usually after 2 p.m.), when children are home from school and parents from work. This custom has changed for those whose offices remain open in the afternoon. The main meal for these families is in the evening. Conversation is often minimal during the main course of a meal; people prefer to talk before and especially after the meal, while they drink tea or coffee.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** Although the Saudi Arabian family is traditionally a strong male-dominated unit, women exercise considerable influence in the home. Most families live as extended families, but nuclear families are common in urban areas. Even so, sons and their families usually live in a neighborhood close to their father's home. The family is the key to Saudi Arabian society. Infidelity is a punishable crime.

The separation of males and females is a way of life in Saudi Arabia. Rules governing the actions of women are based on Saudi Arabian law and custom and are designed to respect and protect a woman's modesty and honor. A woman's behavior reflects on her family's reputation. An increasing number of women work in professional fields and business. Men and women have separate workplaces. Female doctors treat women and children; if they treat men, they must be veiled. Women cannot socialize in public with men and usually are accompanied by a male relative in public. Women are not allowed to interact with men outside their family and are forbidden to drive a car or ride a bicycle. Many of these laws also apply to foreigners. Despite the restrictions on public life, men and women can associate freely in the privacy of the home.

**Dating and Marriage.** Marriages usually are arranged, but a minority of young men and women in urban areas are being allowed to choose their mates. Because of the separation of sexes, dating is not practiced. A traditional Saudi Arabian wedding is an Islamic ceremony followed by separate parties for the men and women. Traditionally, men pay a dowry for their brides. To keep dowries in the family and avoid stepping down socially, many marriages are made between extended family members. Although Islamic law allows a man to have as many as four wives, most Saudi men have only one wife. To have more, a man must receive the consent of his wife or wives and must provide equally for each. Chastity is the most important thing a woman can bring to marriage. There is little intermarriage between Saudis and foreign nationals.

**Diet.** Saudi dishes, which are mildly spicy, are composed mainly of rice with lamb or chicken. *Kabsah* (rice and meat) is a favorite dish throughout the country. Rice is also often served with vegetables and a green salad. Desserts are commonly fruits, especially dates, eaten with bitter Saudi coffee (brewed with cardamom). Seafood, including a variety of fish, is popular on the coasts. Coffee or tea is served before all meals. Buttermilk and camel's milk are also popular beverages. Muslims do not eat pork or drink alcohol.

**Recreation.** Soccer is the national sport, but only men are allowed to play or to watch matches at the stadium. Sporting clubs are common. Saudi men also enjoy horse and camel races (no betting is allowed, but winners receive prizes), as

well as hunting and hawking (falconry). Hawking involves hunting for small game with falcons and requires great skill in training the birds. Young men enjoy volleyball, basketball, swimming, wrestling, and roller-skating. Women generally are not involved in sports and do not participate in most other leisure activities, but girls play volleyball and other sports at school. Women enjoy visiting other women; going on family outings to museums, playgrounds, and amusement parks; or doing volunteer work. Videos are popular among all Saudis; there are no movie theaters.

**The Arts.** Literature, and poetry especially, is a cherished art. Anciently, poets used their art to shame enemies, record great feats and genealogies, and praise their patrons. Today, poems and stories are both published and preserved orally.

Memorization and interpretation of the *Qur'an* are arts and skills requiring great study and dedication. Because the *Qur'an* proscribes idols, art in Saudi Arabia is based on abstract designs rather than images of animals or people. Calligraphy is revered and is used in documents as well as ceramics, metalwork, painting, and other arts. Also important is jewelry, often silver, decorated with objects such as beads or semiprecious stones. Other arts include embroidery, textiles, architecture, and the decoration of weapons such as daggers.

Music is often vocal. Some instruments are the *al-mizmar*, similar to an oboe; the *rebaba*, a one-stringed instrument; and the drums. The national dance is the *al-ardah*, a sword dance for men, which is accompanied by drums and a poet who chants verses. Different traditional dances, such as the *al-mizmar* (which features the *al-mizmar* instrument), are found in every region. The annual Jenadriyah Heritage and Culture Festival features traditional arts such as camel racing, dancing, music, and poetry.

**Holidays.** The Islamic calendar is based on the lunar month, which makes a year up to 11 days shorter than a Western calendar year. Therefore, holidays vary from year to year, with the exception of National Day, which is celebrated 23 September. Islam does not use Christ's birth as a reference point for counting years; rather, the calendar begins at the year of the *Hegira*, the migration of Muhammad from Makkah to Al Madīnah in the seventh century. The year 2005 roughly corresponds to the Islamic year 1426. The most important Islamic holidays celebrated in Saudi Arabia include the three-day feast (*Eid al Fitr*) at the end of *Ramadan* and the Feast of the Sacrifice (*Eid al Adha*), which commemorates the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son and celebrates the annual *Hajj*. The *Hajj* takes place during the Feast of the Sacrifice. The birth of the prophet Muhammad and the Islamic New Year are celebrated also.

During the Islamic month of *Ramadan*, Muslims do not eat, drink, or smoke from sunrise to sunset each day. Meals are in the evening and predawn hours. Public eating, drinking, and smoking are prohibited (even for foreigners) in the daytime. Children and persons in fragile health are exempt from fasting. During *Eid al Fitr*, extended families gather for feasting, people visit senior relatives, and children receive gifts and wear new clothes.

**Commerce.** The workweek runs from Saturday to Wednesday, and Thursday and Friday comprise the weekend. Government offices are open weekdays from 7:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Private business offices are open from around 8 a.m. until noon and between 3 and 6 p.m. General banking hours are from 8 a.m. to noon and from 5 to 8 p.m. Markets, shops, and *souks* (outdoor markets) are open from 9 a.m. to noon and from 3 to 9

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p.m. Government offices and banks are closed on Friday, but retail businesses are open in the afternoon and evening. During *Ramadan*, office hours are in the evening and extend past midnight.

### SOCIETY

**Government.** The kingdom is divided into 14 regions called governorates, each of which is headed by a prince-governor, or emir, who answers directly to the king. The king, currently Fahd bin Abdul Aziz (also called Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques), is chief of state and head of government; he rules with the Council of Ministers.

The king, crown prince, and Council of Ministers established all laws prior to 1992, when the king issued a new “system of governance” (the first written body of law the kingdom has had) that changed the country’s political structure and guaranteed citizens a number of basic rights. The *Qur’an* remains the country’s official “constitution.” The new system provides for a 120-member Consultative Council (*Majlis al-Shura*) that advises the king and Council of Ministers. The Consultative Council can express its opinion on any matters, review and initiate laws, and overrule cabinet decisions if the king agrees. Each governor also has a 10-member Consultative Council, and governorates now have greater autonomy to make certain decisions.

The system of governance states that all kings after the current crown prince will be elected by the princes (there are more than five hundred) and that the king can appoint or dismiss new crown princes.

**Economy.** Saudi Arabia has a strong but undiversified economy. With the largest oil reserves in the world, petroleum and derivative products are the basis of Saudi Arabia’s economy and account for nearly 90 percent of all export earnings. The low price of extracting Saudi oil is an added boon. The Saudi Arabian Oil Company is the world’s largest oil company. Primary industries include crude oil production, petroleum refining, petrochemicals, cement, construction, fertilizer, and plastics. Because of the harsh, dry climate and terrain, the country imports many foods, but dates, grains, and livestock are produced locally. The country is self-sufficient in wheat and nearly so in poultry and dairy products.

Saudi Arabia’s economy has grown consistently but has not kept pace with fast population growth, which has led to frequent deficits. Relatively high unemployment, inefficient state-owned industries, and economic swings resulting from changes in world oil prices have slowly brought the government to consider the need to promote tourism and increase foreign participation in the economy. The private sector is small and undeveloped.

Overall, Saudi society does not provide resources that allow the average individual to share in the country’s prosperity, but progress is being made toward that goal. The country’s oil wealth has allowed for a significant improvement in living conditions over the past generation. However, women earn less than 10 percent of the nation’s income and have significantly fewer opportunities to pursue personal goals than do men. The unit of currency is the Saudi *riyal* (SAR).

**Transportation and Communications.** The kingdom is con-

### DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	73 of 175 countries
Adjusted for women	68 of 144 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$13,330
Adult literacy rate	84 percent (male); 68 (female)
Infant mortality rate	48 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	71 (male); 73 (female)

tinually expanding its infrastructure. Roads are excellent. Most families own a car. However, the most convenient way to travel between cities is by airplane. A high-speed train goes from Ad Dammām to Riyadh. Taxis and buses are common in the cities. In desert areas, the camel is still used for transportation (especially among the Bedouin), but automobiles are also common. Saudi Arabia’s telecommunications system is modern and extensive.

**Education.** Kindergarten lasts for two years and is for children ages four through six. Boys and girls attend classes together. At age six, however, when compulsory education begins, boys and girls go to separate schools. Boys attend six years of primary schooling (*ibtida’i*), followed by three years of intermediate schooling (*mutawassit*) and three years of secondary education (*thanawi*). After one year of secondary school, a student follows either a science or a literary track. All schooling, including university, is funded by the government. Education for girls was not emphasized until the 1960s. By the 1980s, the basic system of education available to boys became available to girls. Many women study at universities for their degrees. The literacy rate has increased considerably in the past few years. The government is committed to improving the quality of education and increasing accessibility to it.

**Health.** Although health standards do not equal those in the West, they are improving rapidly. Free medical treatment is available to all citizens of the kingdom and to *Hajj* pilgrims. The major cities host several modern hospitals, and rural clinics continue to improve.

### AT A GLANCE

#### Events and Trends.

- Expatriates living in Saudi Arabia were the targets of two recent attacks by Islamic militants. In May 2003, suicide bombings at two expatriate workers’ compounds in Riyadh killed 35 people. Six months later, 18 people were killed and more than 100 injured in an attack at a different residential compound in Riyadh. Both Western and Arab expatriates were among the casualties.
- In October 2003, more than 250 people were arrested by police in Riyadh following a demonstration calling for political reform in the kingdom. The march was designed to coincide with the government’s first conference on human rights and its announcement that municipal elections would be held for the first time in 2004.

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