Saudi Arabia

Population:
27,345,986
Note: immigrants make up more than 30% of the total population, according to UN data (2013) (July 2014 est.)
Country comparison to the world: 47

Infant Mortality Rate:
Total: 14.58 deaths/1,000 live births
Male: 16.73 deaths/1,000 live births
Female: 12.32 deaths/1,000 live births (2014 est.)
Country comparison to the world: 110

Life Expectancy at Birth:
Total population: 74.82 years
Male: 72.79 years
Female: 76.94 years (2014 est.)
Country comparison to the world: 108

Exports:
$359.4 billion (2014 est.)
$377 billion (2013 est.)
Country comparison to the world: 18

Exports - Commodities:
Petroleum and petroleum products 90% (2012 est.)

Exports - Partners:
China 13.9%, US 13.6%, Japan 13%, South Korea 9.8%, India 9.5% (2013)

Imports:
$162.2 billion (2014 est.)
$152.7 billion (2013 est.)
Country comparison to the world: 31

Imports - Commodities:
Machinery and equipment, foodstuffs, chemicals, motor vehicles, textiles

Imports - Partners:
US 13.1%, China 12.9%, India 8.1%, Germany 7.4%, South Korea 6.1%, Japan 4.7% (2013)

GDP (Purchasing Power Parity):
$1.616 trillion (2014 est.)
$1.56 trillion (2013 est.)
$1.519 trillion (2012 est.)
Note: Data is in 2014 US dollars
Country comparison to the world: 15

Executive branch:
Chief of state: King and Prime Minister SALMAN bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud (since 23 January 2015); Heir Apparent Crown Prince MUQRIN bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud, (born 15 September 1945); Heir to the Crown Prince MUHAMMAD BIN NAYEF bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud (born 30 August 1959); note - the monarch is both chief of state and head of government.
Head of government: King and Prime Minister SALMAN bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud (since 23 January 2015); Deputy Prime Minister MUQRIN bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud (since 23 January 2015); Second Deputy Prime Minister MUHAMMAD BIN NAYIF bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud (since 23 January 2015)

Ethnic groups:
Arab 90%, Afro-Asian 10%

Languages:
Arabic (official)

Religions:
Muslim (official; citizens are 85-90% Sunni and 10-15% Shia), other (includes Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and Sikh) (2012 est.)
Note: despite having a large expatriate community of various faiths (more than 30% of the population), most forms of public religious expression inconsistent with the government-sanctioned interpretation of Sunni Islam are restricted; non-Muslims are not allowed to have Saudi citizenship and non-Muslim places of worship are not permitted (2013)
Saudi Arabia makes up a large portion of the Arabian Peninsula. The country is about one-fourth the size of the United States and is the world's 12th largest country, ahead of Mexico. The Red Sea borders the west, and the Arabian Gulf (also called the Persian Gulf) 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, including one of the largest sand deserts in the world, 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, extremes in temperatures, and intense heat. Temperatures are usually higher in the interior. Coastal areas are cooler but experience greater humidity. The hottest conditions are between May and October, when temperatures regularly exceed 110°F (43°C) in the interior and 97°F (36°C) in coastal areas. In December and January, the coldest months, 70°F (21°C) is the average daily high in the interior, where temperatures may drop to freezing at night.

Arabia has a rich and colorful history that dates back several thousand years. Notable history began in the seventh century, when the prophet Muhammad proclaimed the message of Islam, meaning "submission," from the trade center of Mecca and, later, Medina. The message of Islam is one of strict monotheism, which was contrary to many of the polytheistic religions found in the region at the time. The adoption of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula radically changed Arab civilization; it regulated revenge taking and ended female infanticide and practices that were considered superstitious. Islam also united the tribes to a common goal, which largely stopped tribal warfare and enabled the Arabs to expand their areas of control beyond the Arabian Peninsula.

As the Arab empire expanded (which was facilitated in part by weaknesses in the Roman and Persian empires), many cultures were exposed to Islam and converted to its teachings. These new cultures also saw that there were financial and political benefits to conversion, and Islam soon spread to parts of Asia, northern Africa, and other regions. Islam encouraged learning, the translation of Greek texts into Arabic, and the mutual association of numerous cultures, religions, and scholars. The subsequent centuries saw many significant advancements in astronomy, medicine, and mathematics—including the invention of algebra. The Arab empire began to
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decline around the 13th century, but Islam remained important to the people and subsequent rulers.

Wahhabism

The Arabian Peninsula was inhabited by dozens of nomadic tribes, many of which were continually at war with one another. Abdul Aziz ibn Saud established essentially what is today called Saudi Arabia by building on the military success of his father, Muhammad ibn Saud, and religious teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, a fundamentalist scholar. In 1902, Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, with the aid of the Ikhwan, a non-tribal military force that proselytized for the Wahhabi movement, recaptured his ancestral home in Riyadh from a rival group. From 1902 to 1924, Ibn Saud utilized his success as a tribal leader and his position as the head of the Wahhabi religious order to unite the major factions and declare himself king of Saudi Arabia. Five of his sons have succeeded him in the monarchy: Saud, Faisal, Khalid, Fahd, and (since 2005) Abdullah.

Foreign and Domestic Conflicts

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, 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 retained its conservative customs, some changes to the nation's political structure were announced in 1992. For example, the king created the Consultative Council to advise the monarchy. In 2003, the king granted the Consultative Council broader authority, allowing it to propose legislation without his permission. The current administration, under King Abdullah, has focused on large-scale investment in public infrastructure, particularly education. Saudi Arabia's first nationwide municipal elections were held in 2005. Though only male citizens were allowed to vote, the poll was regarded as the nation's first exercise in democracy.

Saudi Arabia has had numerous clashes with militants in the years since 2001, when King Fahd called for the eradication of terrorism. Suicide bombings, car bombings, and other militant attacks have killed both civilians and security forces. Many of the militants have been linked to al-Qaeda, and hundreds have been arrested and tried as terrorists. Saudi Arabia continues to be criticized by human-rights groups over its abuse of prisoners and discrimination against women.

Calls for Reforms

During the spring of 2011, protests swept much of the Arab world, including Saudi Arabia. As in other countries, protesters demanded political reforms and the release of political prisoners. In an effort to curb the protests, King Abdullah announced a new series of (largely financial) benefits for Saudi citizens. These benefits included government pay increases, land gifts and easier access to housing loans, and more educational and job training. Protests were also held to express dissatisfaction with the government's use of force in helping quell similar protests in Bahrain. Scores of women drove cars in defiance of the ban on women driving. Recent Events and Trends

• Saudi Arabia weekend change: In June 2013, King Abdullah changed the country's official weekend to Friday and Saturday by royal decree, matching the work days of the main global markets and increasing economic opportunities. Friday is considered a holy day during which families gather together and a communal prayer service is held at mosques.
• New law bans domestic abuse: In August 2013, Saudi Arabia's Council of Ministers approved a new law that offers protection to victims of all forms of abuse. Women, children, domestic workers, and expats are expected to especially benefit from the law, which allows those who report cases of abuse to remain anonymous. Prior to this law, abuse was not considered a criminal action.
• New king: In January 2015, Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud became the new king of Saudi Arabia after the death of his half-brother Abdullah. King Salman has served as the governor of Riyadh and minister of defense and became heir apparent in 2012. Saudis do not believe that this new king will make radical political or social reforms, as he is considered conservative and holds traditional views.

THE PEOPLE

Population
Population: 27,345,986
Population Growth Rate: 1.49%
Urban Population: 83%

Saudi nationals comprise about 80 percent of the total population. Of 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 Abrahm (known to Muslims as Ibrahim). Most of Saudi Arabia's foreign workers are from other Islamic countries; expatriates from Western nations are generally associated with the oil and information technology industries. Through quotas, job training, and the discontinuation of certain types of visas, the Saudi government hopes to eventually replace more than half of foreign workers with Saudi citizens. Riyadh is the capital and largest city.

Language

Saudi Arabia's official language is Arabic, the language of the Qur'an (Muslim holy book). Arabic consists of 28 letters, which are written from right to left. Modern Standard Arabic (the Arabic of newspapers, news broadcasts, and official speeches) differs in pronunciation and vocabulary from the Arabic spoken by people in their daily lives. There are also differences in dialect between urban and rural Saudis. English is used in business and educated circles.

Religion

The Arabian Peninsula is the center of the Islamic religion, and Islam is the only legally and officially recognized religion of Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of the revered prophet Muhammad. All Saudi citizens are Muslims; 90 percent of them (including the royal family) belong to the Sunni branch of Islam. The remaining 10 percent are Shi'i Muslims. While Wahhabism (an ultra-conservative approach to Islam) is the religious foundation for the government and is
institutionalized and enforced by it, Wahhabism represents the conservative end of the spectrum of Islamic belief in Saudi Arabia. Saudis are prohibited from converting to other religions. Foreigners are allowed to practice religion in the home as they wish.

Muslims consider Muhammad the seal of the prophets, meaning he was the last prophet to receive revelation from Allah (God). The Qur'an (Muslim holy book) contains Allah's revelations to Muhammad. In addition, the example of Muhammad (referred to as the Sunnah) is also a canon for prescribing proper behavior. The laws of Saudi Arabia are based on shari'ah (Islamic law). Religion is a matter of daily practice and a way of life for Muslims; it is not just a matter of belief and acceptance. Faith and devotion are demonstrated through the Five Pillars of Islam: shahadah (professing there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet), salat (praying five times daily while facing Mecca, Saudi Arabia), hajj (making at least one pilgrimage to Mecca), zakat (donating money to the poor), and sawm (fasting from sunup to sundown each day during the holy month of Ramadan).

Saudi Arabia is home to Islam's two most sacred cities: Mecca, the location of the Masjid al-Haram, which houses the Ka'abah (the cube-shaped stone building that all Muslims in the world face during their daily prayers to Allah, or God), and Medina, the location of al-Masjid al-Nabawi, the final resting place of the prophet Muhammad. Non-Muslims are not permitted to enter these cities.

Each year millions of Muslims complete a pilgrimage to Mecca as part of their religious duties. The major pilgrimage, called hajj, occurs during the 12th month of the Islamic lunar calendar. During the hajj, male pilgrims wear a white, two-piece, towel-like garment, called an ihram. Women wear traditional clothing and a ghutra (scarf that covers the hair only). As part of the pilgrimage, pilgrims circumambulate the Ka'abah seven times. The structure contains a sacred black stone that has been venerated since before the advent of Islam. Another pilgrimage, called Umrah (also known as the minor pilgrimage), can be done during any time of year. On Friday, the day of worship in Islam, people go to the mosque to hear a khutbah (sermon) and offer salat al-juma'ah (Friday prayer). Women often stay home to pray; those women who attend the mosque pray in designated areas that are separate from and behind the men.

General Attitudes
Life in Saudi Arabia is more relaxed than in fast-paced Western nations. While Saudi society may seem closed or repressive to Westerners, Saudis are proud of their country's strong families, low crime rate, and scarce drug problems. Islam plays 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. The people are generous and hospitable. Gheera (ardor) is a pervasive feeling in Saudi culture and extends especially to family and personal honor.

Personal Appearance
In addition to modern clothing, many Saudi Arabian men and women wear traditional clothing. Traditional clothing for men includes a thobe (ankle-length garment, usually white, that is worn over long pants) and an 'amammah or ghutra. The 'amammah is a red-and-white checkered headdress and is more commonly worn by Saudis, while the white ghutra is a headdress made of lighter fabric worn in especially hot weather or for special occasions. Either is held in place by an agal (braided black cord). A bisht (cloak) is often worn over the thobe on formal occasions.

Women in public wear a face-covering veil and an 'abaya, or black cloak, which is worn over a beautifully tailored dress or jeans and a T-shirt. 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 socially unacceptable.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings
Between Saudis, the most common greeting is a handshake and the phrase Assalaam 'alaikum (Peace be upon you), to which the reply is Wa 'alaikum assalaam (And upon you, peace). Frequently, males will follow up by extending the left hand to each other's right shoulder and kissing the right and left cheeks; women greet each other in a similar manner. Men do not greet unfamiliar women formally and do not expect to shake hands with them. The phrase for "Good morning" is Sabah al-khayr, and for "Good evening" it is Masa' al-khayr.

Greetings
One avoids using the left hand for gesturing, and eating with the left hand is highly improper. 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 considered 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 the head of the family; the family will accompany him on the visit if appropriate. Women extend invitations to other women, but male accompaniment on these invitations is less common. When a family is invited to another home for a visit, the men remain in the guest room. 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. Alcoholic beverages are never presented as gifts or offered to guests, as Islamic law prohibits the consumption of alcohol. Saudis take great care in providing for their visitors. Arabic coffee and dates are served upon a guest's arrival in a Saudi house. Coffee is served in a finjan (small cup), and a coffee pot is always nearby, ready for refills. Male guests are waited on by the eldest son or the houseboy; female guests are waited on by the eldest daughter or the housemaid. This coffee ritual is often followed with sweet mint or ginger tea. Guests are invited into another room for the main meal, which is taken while seated on a rug. After the meal, coffee and tea may be served again. When people have had enough to drink,
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they cover the cup with the hand or shake it gently from side to side several times and say *Bes* (Enough). Guests usually leave soon thereafter.

**Eating**

Food is generally served on a large plate, set on the floor, from which people serve themselves using only their right hand. Most Saudis eat a meal of rice in the early afternoon. The right hand is used to form a small ball of rice, which is then popped into the mouth. Meat is taken off the bone from the central plate, using the right hand; it is polite to offer others pieces of meat that one has torn from the bone. Arabic bread is torn and eaten with only the right hand; larger bread (like Afghani bread) can be torn with both hands but is eaten with only the right. Western dining etiquette is observed only in more Westernized circles.

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. The main meal of the day is in the mid-afternoon (usually after 2 p.m.), when children are home from school and parents from work. For those whose offices remain open in the afternoon, the family's main meal is in the evening. Saudis enjoy talking after a meal while they drink tea or coffee. In restaurants, a service charge is usually included in the bill.

**LIFESTYLE**

**Family**

**Structure**

The family is a central pillar of Saudi Arabian society, and loyalty to the extended family of tribe and clan is a part of Saudi identity. Most families live as extended families; however, nuclear families are more common in urban areas, which often draw people away from extended family for work. Although the Saudi Arabian family is traditionally a strongly male-dominated unit, women exercise considerable influence in the home. **Parents and Children**

The bond between parent and child is very strong. If their studies or employment require them to move away before marriage, children make frequent trips back to visit. Grown children tend to stay at their parents' home until (and potentially after) marriage. Married children either live in a separate part of their parents' house or in a neighborhood close to the groom's family home.

Families tend to be financially interconnected. It is not uncommon for parents to support their grown (and even married) children, and children support their parents in their old age. Men commonly help support their brothers, especially when expensive life events like weddings arise. Women primarily receive financial support from their father until they marry. **Gender Roles**

The separation of males and females is a way of life in Saudi Arabia. While expatriate workers living on a special compound may be exempt from such stipulations, many of these laws apply to foreigners outside the compound grounds. Rules governing the actions of women are based on *shari'ah* (Islamic law) and Saudi Arabian custom and are designed to respect and protect a woman's modesty and honor—which reflect on her family's reputation. Women must be accompanied by a male relative in public; women are forbidden from interacting with nonrelated males. Men and women can associate freely in the privacy of the home; however, wives are veiled in the presence of their husbands' male relatives. A woman can speak with male relatives of her husband, but never alone. Until recently, a related male escort was required for a woman to travel internationally; now she must carry written permission from her father (or, if he is deceased, the oldest living male relative). Women are forbidden to drive a car or ride a bicycle.

Despite these restrictions, an increasing number of women are gaining an education (often outperforming men at universities) and entering the workforce. Women generally work in professions where their interactions with men are limited, such as female healthcare or female education. However, women are beginning to be employed in jobs where they must frequently interact with men, such as in call centers and as receptionists in hospitals and the banking sector. They are also involved in business and hold positions in government.

**Housing**

**Interiors and Exteriors**

Because homes have separate living quarters for male and female members of the household, houses in Saudi Arabia tend to be large by Western standards. For example, a home has separate reception rooms, with adjoining bathrooms, for male and female guests. Reception room furniture is normally quite sparse and may include a television, a high-quality rug, and cushions along the walls. Some families may have Western furniture. Most house properties, urban and rural, are surrounded by high walls. Because women are forbidden to drive, many households employ a driver, who lives in a room attached to the garage. It is also common to employ maids, who generally come from the Philippines or Indonesia. Maids often live with the family and require accommodations in the home.

**Ownership**

Traditionally, when a son married, an extension was built on the family home to accommodate the newlyweds and their future family. While this custom is still generally followed in rural areas, urban Saudis increasingly prefer their own accommodations. Because of the high price of land in cities and increasing material costs, couples often rent an apartment first. Most building materials are obtained locally, and labor costs are generally low. For Western expatriates and government employees, such as military personnel or public hospital staff, housing is normally provided as part of a job package. Some companies offer interest-free loans for home purchases.

**Dating and Marriage**

**Marriage Arrangements**

Because of the cultural and legal separation of sexes, dating is not practiced and nearly all marriages are arranged. Young men and women do have some contact with each other, and cell phones and the internet have provided a way for young
people to covertly interact while maintaining their public separations. Some young people in urban areas are choosing their own mates, typically by indicating someone they are interested in to their parents, who can look into arranging the marriage. Arranged marriages are subject to approval of the young couple. *Shari'ah* (Islamic law) and Saudi law require a young woman to have her father's permission to marry.

**Engagement**

Engagements are celebrated with a contract ceremony. The bride's father signs the marriage contract for her at the engagement ceremony, but her signature is required at the wedding ceremony to make the marriage legal. The engagement ceremony is followed by separate parties for the male and female guests where dates, coffee, and sweets are served. The *mahr* (bride-price) is also presented on the day of the engagement ceremony. Weddings happen six months to a year after the engagement.

**Marriage in Society**

Women generally marry in their early twenties. Women in their late twenties may have a more difficult time finding a husband. Men usually marry at an older age—in their late twenties or early thirties—since they are expected to be financially stable, own a house, and be able to pay the *mahr* for a wife. The *mahr* generally includes a large cash payment (typically around US$25,000) and gold jewelry, which can cost several thousand additional dollars. More common among traditional Bedouin Saudis are marriages between extended family members (first cousins are ideal); this ensures the *mahr* stays in the family, and the family does not risk losing social status. Chastity is the most important thing a woman can bring to marriage. Infidelity, though rare and difficult to prove, is a punishable crime for both men and women.

Saudi men commonly marry foreigners (generally from other Arab states), a practice which is much less common for Saudi women. Responding to the rising number of single Saudi women, the government has increased the bureaucratic requirements related to men marrying foreigners in order to discourage the practice. However, some men may facilitate marriage to a foreign woman by employing a *wasta* (middle man). The *wasta* is a person with connections in the government who can help a prospective groom sidestep the normal bureaucratic requirements.

**Weddings**

Saudi families often hold wedding celebrations in rented wedding halls or hotels, though some families erect several tents on the edge of the city. Wedding celebrations generally happen in the late evening and continue into the night. Weddings feature separate parties for men and women. The groom wears a *ghutra* (headdress) and a *bisht* (cloak) over a white *thobe* (ankle-length shirt). The groom, his father, and his grandfather greet guests, which may number in the hundreds. Guests are seated on sofas and served coffee and dates. After receiving the guests, the male wedding party moves to a dining hall, where salad, roasted sheep, and rice are served. Brides commonly wear a Western-style wedding dress. The party for women is very similar but includes music, dancing, and loud ululations, called *zaghrouah*. **Polygamy**

Islamic law allows a man to have as many as four wives. While many Saudi men have only one, it is common for a man to have two or three wives. Provisions for additional marriages are stipulated in the marriage contract, which may allow or prohibit additional marriages. Additionally, in order for a man to marry another woman, he must be able to afford an additional bride-price and be able to offer each wife equal shares of material support and attention. Polygamous families carry no social stigma, and the children in these families are often proud of their father's virility.

**Divorce**

Men can initiate divorce simply by saying "I divorce you" three separate times. A period of reconciliation between the husband and wife follows the first and second occasions, but after a husband has said "I divorce you" the third time, the divorce is final. The husband can then file the appropriate paperwork to record the divorce with the government. Though it is harder for women to initiate divorce, they can do so through the family court system. After a woman is divorced, she must wait three months before remarriage. Divorced women face many challenges, including social stigma. In most cases, the woman is supported by her father or brothers and moves back into her parents' home, as the lack of public transportation coupled with the laws prohibiting women from driving require a woman to have access to a driver to travel longer distances.

Children of divorced couples tend to stay with the father, though legally a wife can retain custody of children until roughly age eight. Thereafter, children live with their fathers. Fathers pay child support while the children remain with their mothers. Some women, especially those with high levels of education, choose to remain single.

**Life Cycle**

**Birth**

The birth of a child is a time of celebration, especially if the infant is a boy. After the birth of a child, the family slaughters sheep or goats for an *aqiqah* (celebratory meal) among friends and family; some of the food may also be distributed to the poor. Two goats or sheep are slaughtered for a baby boy, one for a baby girl. After the birth, which takes place at a hospital, the mother returns to her parents' house for several weeks to recover. For the first week, the father regularly whispers the *adhan* (Islamic call to prayer) into the right ear of the baby. At the end of the week, the baby's hair is shaved off. Infant boys are circumcised within the first week after birth. The father registers the new baby's name with the government and obtains a birth certificate. The child is frequently given the name of a grandparent. Presents or gifts of money for the baby are generally given after the birth. Traditionally, children were often betrothed at birth, but this custom is no longer widely practiced.

**Milestones**

Milestones that often define adulthood do not occur at fixed ages. Young men can get a driver's license at 16, but it is common to see boys as young as 10 driving (though not generally on major roads or near cities). Saudis are generally considered adults at marriage.

**Death**

For Muslims, death is regarded as the will of God and the soul's gateway to the real world, that of paradise, so excessive mourning such as loud weeping or wailing for departed loved
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ones is not considered acceptable. Bodies are wrapped in white shrouds and placed in coffins. The body of the deceased is interred as soon as possible after death—usually on the same day—and, except for a small stone, the grave in a public cemetery is unmarked. The body is taken from the coffin and placed in the ground lying on the right side, facing the Ka'bah (the cube-shaped stone building that all Muslims face during their daily prayers). Women do not accompany the body to the cemetery. The family of the deceased receives guests for three days, and guests are offered coffee or tea.

Diet

Saudi dishes, which are mildly spicy, are composed mainly of rice with lamb or chicken. Kabsa (rice and meat) is a favorite dish throughout the country. For celebrations, kabsa is prepared with camel meat and often preceded by snacks like sambosa (fried dough stuffed with cheese, spices, meat, and vegetables) and appetizers like hummus (a dip made of chickpeas). Rice is also often served with vegetables and a green salad.

Seafood, including a variety of fish, is popular on the coasts. Desserts are commonly fruits, especially dates, eaten with bitter Saudi coffee (brewed with cardamom) served in a small cup called a finjan. Coffee or tea is served before all meals. Buttermilk and camel’s milk are also popular beverages. Juice is a common beverage, as are soft drinks, nonalcoholic beer, and laban (liquid yogurt). Muslims do not eat pork or drink alcohol.

Recreation

Sports

Soccer is the national sport, but only men are allowed to play or to attend 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 hawkwing (falconry). Hawkwing involves hunting for small game with falcons and requires great skill in training the birds. Racing cars and performing car stunts are both common activities for men. Young men enjoy volleyball, basketball, wrestling, and roller-skating. Swimming is also enjoyed, and while there are few facilities for it, some wealthy people have pools, where the family can swim together. Women are generally not involved in sports, but girls do play volleyball and other sports at school.

Leisure

The internet offers many people hours of entertainment. People enjoy spending time chatting online, which has had an impact on Saudi culture: online, young Saudis are freer to interact with the opposite gender or to take up topics such as religion and politics.

Like the internet, satellite TV provides entertainment while exposing Saudis to other cultures. Middle Eastern satellite channels broadcast English language programs in addition to Arabic language programming. There are no movie theaters, but DVDs are popular among all Saudis. Movies from Hollywood and Bollywood are freely available in stores and are shown on TV. Men play a card game called balut when enjoying time indoors. Video games are also popular, especially sport games.

Women enjoy visiting other women at their homes or at restaurants and cafés. They often do volunteer work or go on family outings to museums, playgrounds, and amusement parks. Women may ride bicycles and motorbikes for recreation but not for everyday transportation.

The Arts

Literature, especially poetry, 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 (Muslim holy book) are arts and skills requiring great study and dedication. Because the Qur’an prescribes idols, traditional Saudi Arabian art is based on abstract designs rather than images of animals or people. Calligraphy is a respected art form and is used in documents as well as metalwork, ceramics, and painting. Other arts include jewelry, embroidery, textiles, architecture, and the decoration of weapons such as daggers.

Music is often vocal. Some instruments are the mizmar (similar to the oboe), the rebaba (a one-stringed instrument), and drums. Different traditional dances, such as the mizmar (which features the mizmar instrument), are found in every region. In recent years, Saudi youth have taken an interest in Western music, though Saudi society as a whole remains focused on traditional forms of music.

The national dance is the arada, a sword dance for men, which is accompanied by drums and a poet who chants verses. The annual Jenadriyah Heritage and Culture Festival features camel racing, dancing, music, and poetry.

Holidays

Saudi Arabians celebrate National Day on 23 September. Islamic holidays are set according to the lunar calendar. Officially, only two religious holidays are celebrated in Saudi Arabia: Eid al-Fitr (a three-day feast at the end of Ramadan) and Eid al-Adha (the Feast of the Sacrifice, which commemorates the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son and celebrates the annual hajj).

Some Saudis privately celebrate the birth of the prophet Muhammad and the Islamic New Year, but most believe these to be modern additions to Islam and therefore unacceptable. On these holidays, some people may visit and eat with friends and family members.

National Day

For most Saudis, National Day is a welcome day of rest and time spent with family. Commemorating the unification of the country by Abdul Aziz ibn Saud in 1932, the day is centered on national pride. In many towns, young men celebrate by painting their cars green or waving the Saudi flag as they drive around honking their horns. Kids dress in the national color of green. Families also take the day off to visit shopping malls. Military parades and fireworks are also common festivities.

Ramadan

During Ramadan, Muslims do not eat, drink, or smoke from sunrise to sunset each day. Public eating, drinking, and smoking are prohibited in the daytime. Saudis enjoy large meals in the predawn and evening hours. Foods commonly eaten during Ramadan include kabsa (seasoned rice with
meat and vegetables—considered Saudi Arabia's national
dish), jireesh (a thick grain-based stew), sambosa (fried dough
filled with cheese and spices), and treats like luqaimat (fried
batter served with sugar syrup).  

**Eid al-Fitr**
During Eid al-Fitr, extended families gather to feast and visit.
Families purchase new clothes for all members to wear to the
first prayer of Eid. On the first day of Eid, Muslims gather in
the large prayer spaces outside mosques to offer a prayer of
thanksgiving. Muslims also offer zakat al-fitr (alms of fast-
breaking) to the poor, or, alternatively, to an aid organization.
The zakat enables the needy to buy basic food.
The rest of the day is spent relaxing and eating.

**Eid al-Adha**
Eid al-Adha, also referred to as the “Big Eid,” occurs at
the conclusion of the hajj (pilgrimage). In the week before Eid al-
Adha, preparations are made to purchase livestock to offer as
sacrifice. After the animal (a male Arab sheep is the preferred
choice among Saudis) is slaughtered, the meat is divided, with
a portion used for a feast and a portion given to the needy. Eid
al-Adha is celebrated as Eid al-Fitr is, with new clothes, prayer
services, and extended family visits.

**SOCIETY**

**Government**
Head of State: King and PM Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud
Head of Government: King and PM Salman bin Abdulaziz
al-Saud

**Capital:**
Riyadh

**Structure**
The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a monarchy and is divided into
13 regions called governorates. Each governorate is headed
by a prince-governor, or emir, who answers directly to the
king, who is also prime minister, and therefore head of state
and head of government. The king rules with a Council of
Ministers. The Qur’an (Muslim holy book) remains the
country's official "constitution." The legislature consists of a
150-member Consultative Council (Majlis al-Shura) advises
the king and Council of Ministers; 30 Consultative Council
seats are reserved for women. The Consultative Council can
express its opinion on any matter, 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 kings are to
be elected by the princes (of which there are more than five
hundred).

**Government and the People**
The king, crown prince, and Council of Ministers established
all laws prior to 1992, when the king issued a new “system of
government,” the first written body of law the kingdom has
had. These new laws changed the country's political structure
and guaranteed citizens a number of basic rights, including
access to education, health care, and social security and
protection of home and property. Males over 21 are eligible
to vote; women do not have suffrage. Despite women's
limited political powers, the king announced that women
would be able to vote in the 2015 municipal elections. Voters
elect 50 percent of the members on a municipal council.
Municipal elections were held for the first time in 2005 and
again in 2011.

**Economy**
GDP (PPP) in billions: $927.8
GDP (PPP) per capita: $31,300

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 export earnings. The low price of
extracting Saudi oil is an added boon. 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 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. 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. The unit of currency is the
Saudi riyal (SAR).

**Transportation and Communications**
Internet Users (per 100 people): 61
Cellular Phone Subscriptions (per 100 people): 176 Paved
Roads: 21%

The kingdom is continually expanding its transportation
infrastructure. Most families own a car. People in cities also
get around by taxi and bus. In an effort to reduce traffic in
cities, the Ministry of Transportation enacted a law banning
free-roaming taxis, requiring passengers to reserve a taxi
before traveling. This law mostly affects women, who use taxis
frequently because they are banned from driving and riding
on most urban bus routes. The most convenient way to travel
between distant cities is by airplane, but the cost can be
prohibitive. Available cheap gasoline enables longer car trips
to be more affordable. A high-speed train goes from Dammam
to Riyadh. 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. While private television stations are not allowed to
operate in the country, Saudi Arabia has a large market for
pan-Arab satellite television. Saudi Arabia has four state-run
television stations and several radio networks. Cellular
phones, including smartphones, are widely used. Although
internet can be expensive, access to it is widespread, and its
CultureGrams-

speed is continually being improved. Over a dozen Saudi and pan-Arab daily newspapers are distributed in the country. The government censors all forms of media, blocking content critical of the government, the royal family, and the tenets of Islam. Because of this, journalists and editorial staff often self-censor topics in the news. Social media is a popular and relatively open outlet for dialogue on public issues.

Education

Adult Literacy: 87%
Mean Years of Schooling: 8.7

Structure

All public schooling, including university education, is paid for by the government. Correspondingly, all education includes Islamic curriculum and study of the Qur’an (Muslim holy book). Kindergarten lasts for two years and is for children ages three through five. Boys and girls attend classes together. At age six, however, when compulsory education begins, boys and girls go to separate schools. Students attend six years of primary schooling (ibtida’i), followed by three years of intermediate schooling (mutawassiti) and three years of secondary education (thanawi). After one year of secondary school, a student follows either a science or liberal arts track.

Access

The quality of education in Saudi Arabia is generally considered poor, due in part to an emphasis on teaching students to pass a test rather than on well-rounded instruction. Saudi education is also criticized for its emphasis on religious instruction and rote memorization.

To counter these criticisms, the government has worked to review and improve the public school curriculum. The government has also stressed secular and vocational instruction. With the aid of the government, the standards of post-secondary education are generally improving. The government has also worked to provide post-secondary educational facilities to students outside major city centers. University education is free, and students receive a monthly stipend of 1,000 riyals (US$267). To ease the country’s unemployment figures, the government has also launched a number of diploma programs for people who did not pursue college education.

Education for girls was not emphasized until the 1960s. By the 1980s, the basic system of education available to boys became available to girls. Though education is not compulsory for girls, nearly all families send their daughters to school. Many women also study at universities.

School Life

Classes are generally held in Arabic, with English taught as a second language. At higher levels, some government and many private institutions are transitioning to providing instruction in English. This is especially true of instruction in fields like information technology, management, and medicine. There has been an influx of expatriate English teachers (who make up a large proportion of teachers in the kingdom) to offer instruction to ensure the students meet a minimum level of English proficiency. Cheating on exams prior to college is widespread and socially acceptable; however, cheating is not tolerated at the university level.

Higher Education

A growing number of private universities offer higher-quality education to those who can afford it (mostly wealthy elites). Recently, a limited number of half-tuition scholarships have been made available for high-achieving students to attend private universities. Many Saudi students are also given scholarships to study abroad in the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand.

Health

Free medical treatment is available to all citizens of the kingdom and to hajj pilgrims. Although health standards do not equal those in the West, they are improving rapidly. Saudi Arabia has many highly trained doctors, and major cities host several modern hospitals. Not all medical procedures can be performed in-country, and Saudis must travel abroad for certain treatments. Rural clinics continue to improve. Health concerns include hypertension and rising obesity levels. Over a fifth of Saudi adults have some form of diabetes.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information


Country and Development Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capital</th>
<th>Riyadh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>27,345,966 (rank=46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area (sq. mi.)</td>
<td>830,000 (rank=12)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Area (sq. km.)</td>
<td>2,149,650</td>
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<tr>
<td>Human Development Index</td>
<td>34 of 187 countries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender Inequality Index</td>
<td>56 of 148 countries</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP (PPP per capita)</td>
<td>$11,300</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adult Literacy</td>
<td>91% (male); 82% (female)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Infant Mortality</td>
<td>15 per 1,000 births</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life Expectancy</td>
<td>74 (male); 78 (female)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currency</td>
<td>Saudi riyal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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