



## Saudi Arabia Fact Sheet

### Background

In 1744, Muhammad ibn Saud, head of the Al Saud tribal family [cut a deal](#) with Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahab, the founder of “Wahhabism”: Al Saud endorsed the puritanical “Wahhabi-Islam” and in return gained political legitimacy and collected taxes from the Wahabi followers. In 1932, Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud, (known to the world as Ibn Saud), declared himself King of Saudi Arabia after uniting the majority of the Arabian Peninsula and consolidated his power by marrying a daughter from every tribe and influential clerical family. (He produced 45 sons with 20 plus wives.) Before oil was discovered by Standard Oil (now Chevron), Ibn Saud had a net worth of \$200,000, Saudi Arabia was a poor country and the majority of revenue came from taxing Muslim pilgrims. After oil was discovered, King Ibn Saud began making \$2.5 million+ a week, Saudi Arabia became wealthy and the country catapulted into the global spotlight.



### The Current Royal Family

King Salman bin Abdulaziz is also the current Prime Minister, and the Keeper of the Two Holy Mosques – Mecca & Medina. He was born on December 31, 1935- one of Ibn Saud’s 45 sons. He took power on January 23, 2015, when his predecessor and brother, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz died of pneumonia. Prior to his ascension, he served as appointed Governor of Riyadh Province from 1963-2011. In 2011, he was appointed Second Deputy Prime Minister & Defense Minister. From 2012- 2015 he also served as Crown Prince (and thus 1<sup>st</sup> in Line to the throne). The current Crown Prince is Mohammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, who is also First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense. He was born on June 21, 1985. He is the son of King Salman. After graduating from King Saud University, from 2009-2015 he served in multiple advisory and ministerial positions, including Minister of the State. In 2015, when his father became King, he was appointed Deputy Crown Prince (2<sup>nd</sup> in line to the throne), Minister of Defense, Secretary General of the Royal Court. On June 21, 2017 his father deposed his cousin Muhammad bin Nayef, making him the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia and the heir to the throne. The House of Saud numbers 15,000 persons, but only 2,000 of the family possess power and wealth. The Royal Family has a combined net worth of \$1.4 trillion.

## Government (CIA Fact book)

The capital of Saudi Arabia is Riyadh. It is the country's most populous city, with over 5 million people. Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy that follows the ultra-conservative Wahabi-interpretation of Sharia Law. The King doubles as Prime Minister and presides over the royally appointed Council of Ministers (30 plus ministers responsible for the ratification and implementation of law), notably including the Crown Prince, who doubles as the Deputy Prime Minister. A Consultative Assembly of 150 royal appointees can propose legislation to the King; however only the King can pass or enforce laws. The Speaker of the Assembly is traditionally a member of the royal family. There is also a Council of Senior Scholars (Ulema), which is 21 clerical members appointed by the King and paid with government salaries to advise the King on all religious and Sharia matters. Wahabi/Salafi appointees are preferred members. However, recently the King has allowed for multiple Sunni sects to be represented. **The leadership, in order of influence, is: (1) King/ Prime Minister, (2) Crown Prince/ Deputy Prime Minister, (3) Second Deputy Prime Minister, (4A) Others in the Council of Ministers, (4B) Council of Senior Scholars, and then the (5) Consultative Assembly.**

## Demographics

- **Sunni Muslims** make up about 85% - 90% of the population.
- **Shia Muslims:** 10-15% of the Saudi population of 28 million is Shia Muslim. Most of the Shia live in the Eastern Province, or the Hasa region; where much of the oil is located. They [are discriminated](#) against religiously, and in the areas of education, the administration of justice, and employment. Saudi clerics have even sanctioned the killing of Shias by issuing fatwas. Shia tend to be poorer than the Sunni majority. They have been denied access to participation in political life in the kingdom – there have been no Shia cabinet ministers, no Shia Mayors, nor Shia police chiefs. They are barred from critical jobs in the armed forces and the security services. Shia [protested](#) during the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, when the city of Awamiya became a center of resistance. Awamiya was also the home of Nimr al-Nimr, a popular Shia sheikh. Nimr was eventually executed, supposedly for being a terrorist, in early 2016. The Saudi justice system has [meted](#) out draconian punishments against Shia following unfair trials, even handing down and carrying out death sentences. Recently, fighting has been raging in Awamiya, with entire neighborhoods being destroyed. Iran is [likely involved](#) in assisting the Shia Saudi terror groups by supplying them with EFPs. Another Shia sect makes up a majority in the Najran emirate, bordering Yemen. They also [are discriminated](#) against.
- **Immigrants:** Immigrants to Saudi Arabia [make up](#) 30% of the population, and come from Syria, India, Pakistan, among other nations. Immigrants, especially those who look physically different from Arab Saudis, are generally treated poorly, and there have been riots and attacks involving them. Some employers [illegally confiscate](#) passports of immigrant workers, withhold wages, and force migrants to work against their will. Domestic workers, predominantly women, are sometimes overworked, imprisoned, forced into slave labor, starved, and psychologically, physically, and sexually abused by their employers. Workers who attempted to report employer abuses sometimes face prosecution based on claims of theft, “black magic,” or “sorcery.”
- **Africans:** About 10% of the population is Afro-Arab. Saudi Arabia abolished slavery in 1962 under pressure from the U.S., and many Saudis discriminate against the Afro-Arab minority.

Roughly half the population is between 25-54 years old. The population is dramatically increasing.

## The Problem of Wahhabism

The majority of Sunnis are adherents of Wahhabism. Wahhabism [is an austere form of Sunni Islam](#) that insists on a literal interpretation of the Koran. Wahhabis believe that all those who don't practice their form of Islam are heathens and enemies, and thus view Shia and other Muslim minorities as

apostates. In Saudi Arabia, forms of public religious expression inconsistent with Wahhabi-Sunni interpretation is prohibited, and Shia places of worship are not allowed. Wahhabism [was identified](#) by the European Parliament as the main source of global terrorism. A 2017 poll of Saudi adults [indicates](#) that on the basic question of fundamentalism vs. reform, the Saudi public is divided. A quarter support the Muslim Brotherhood. A quarter of Saudis say it is “a good idea” to “listen to those among us who are trying to interpret Islam in a more modern, tolerant, and moderate direction.” And half of the Saudi public are somewhere in the middle. A [review](#) of the Saudi Ministry of Education’s school religion books available at the [portal for digital curriculum](#) (visited on September 25, 2017), shows that the Saudi curriculum still has violent and intolerant teachings. These books were published for the school year 2016-17. For example, at a very early stage - the fourth grade - the curriculum begins to teach Saudi children that Muslims are essentially different but superior to all non-Muslims. This has been a longstanding problem with the Saudis. Saudi Arabia also produces text books for Muslims overseas that encourage extremism.

### **Terrorism**

Official U.S. views of Saudi counterterrorism policy [have evolved](#) since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the U.S. government now credits its Saudi counterparts with taking terrorism threats seriously and praises Saudi cooperation in several cooperative initiatives. Nevertheless, the Saudis and their citizens still fund some terror groups, as indicated by the decision of the EU [to add](#) Saudi Arabia to a blacklist of nations seen as posing a threat because of lax controls on terrorism financing and money laundering.

### **Political Rights and Civil Liberties**

[Freedom House](#) ranks Saudi Arabia as the 10<sup>th</sup> worst country in the world for political rights and civil liberties. Amnesty International [has reported](#) the Saudis “harassed, arrested and prosecuted critics, including writers and online commentators, political and women’s rights activists, members of the Shia minority, and human rights defenders, imprisoning some after courts sentenced them to prison terms on vague charges.” Prisoners have few rights. Authorities do not always inform suspects of the crime with which they are charged, or allow them access to supporting evidence, sometimes even after trial sessions have begun. Those who are detained are held for long periods of time and cut off from the outside world, in many cases without an explanation of the crime they committed. Lawyers aren’t allowed to assist during interrogation and sometimes aren’t allowed to examine witnesses or present evidence at trial.

In 2015, Saudi Arabia legalized civil society groups, but the law still allows authorities to deny permits or to dissolve them on vague grounds. So far, there have been no independent groups registered. A Saudi law, the “Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing,” which was written under international pressure in 2015 to prosecute terrorists, is now used as a blanket law to arrest any activists and dissenters of the government without due process. Human Rights Watch [has reported](#) that over a dozen prominent activists convicted on charges related to peaceful activities in 2016 are serving long prison sentences. By mid-2016 the regime had jailed most of the founders of the banned Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association, with two of the jailed dissidents given 8-9 year prison sentences for peaceful and pro-reform advocacy. In March 2017, journalist Alaa Brinji was given 5 years in prison for criticizing religious authorities and supporting women’s and human rights on Twitter. One internationally prominent imprisoned activist is [Raif Badawi](#), who was sentenced to 1,000 lashes and 10 years imprisonment in May 2014, for violating Saudi Arabia’s information technology law and insulting Islam. Badawi had created ‘Saudi Arabian Liberals,’ a website meant for social and political debate in Saudi Arabia. The prosecution called for him to be tried for ‘apostasy’ or abandoning his religion, which carries the death penalty.

Starting in 2015, the number of executions in Saudi Arabia [jumped from](#) around 80 to over 150 per year. 153 executions were carried out in 2017. Stonings and beheadings are allowed.

Women's rights are largely non-existent. Women live under male guardianship; either the woman's husband, son, brother or father must give permission for her to marry, work, access healthcare, exit prison or obtain a passport, rent an apartment or file legalities. Women cannot file for divorce. They are considered inferior to men in accessing higher education and gaining custody over their children. 3,100 women currently serve on local councils in the country, but they are physically segregated from the male members – female councilmembers can only participate in council meetings via video link. [Until recently](#), Saudi women were barred from driving; this officially changed in September of 2017. Ironically, Saudi Arabia sits on the UN Commission for the Status of Women.

### **Saudi Arabia – U.S. relations**

- **Military Relations:** US-Saudi military relations include nearly \$100 billion in active foreign military sales (FMS). Within the FMS, the two states share [three key security assistance organizations](#) in Saudi Arabia. First, U.S. Military Training Mission allows training and advisory services and administers the U.S. military cooperation with Saudi Ministry of Defense. Second, the Office of Program Management-Saudi Arabian National Guard helps with modernizing the Ministry of National Guard. Third, the Office of Program Management-Ministry of Interior supports infrastructure protection and public security. Under the Trump Administration, the President signed a \$350 billion arms deal on May 20th, 2017.
- **Diplomatic Relations:** U.S.-Saudi relations are based on multiple interests' - oil, defense, business, and counterterrorism. The U.S. has provided security in the Persian Gulf since World War II, and one of the beneficiaries of this policy is Saudi Arabia. Saudi relations with the Obama administration were difficult. The Iran nuclear deal upset Saudi Arabia, as Iran is the premier threat to Saudi Arabia and the two are religious rivals. The Saudis were unaware of the initial secret negotiations and were never invited to any of the negotiating talks, secret or otherwise. Their interests were also largely disregarded by the U.S. Under the Trump administration, the relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia became closer, since the new administration took a stronger stance on Iran. However, the [disappearance and probable murder](#) of Saudi Arabian dissident, resident of the U.S., and *Washington Post* columnist, Jamal Khashoggi, by Saudi Arabia in Turkey has created major new problems.

### **Nuclear Power**

Saudi Arabia [claims](#) that it is seeking purely civilian capabilities, but it has also insisted on retaining its “right” to work on the fuel cycle and enrich uranium, which can lay the ground for a military nuclear capability. Crown Prince Bin Salman has noted that while Saudi Arabia does not want to acquire nuclear weapons, if Iran develops nuclear weapons, so would Saudi Arabia. Also, Saudi Arabia has [expanded](#) both its missile infrastructure and technology through purchases from China.

### **Saudi Arabia – Israel relations**

There are no formal relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. However, as Iran has emerged as a threat to Sunni-Arab and Israeli interests in the Middle East, intelligence sharing and behind-the-scenes military and diplomatic collaboration has increased.

### **Saudi Arabia – Iran relations**

Saudi Arabia and Iran are enemies. Iran has backed terror groups all over the Middle East, including the Houthis in Yemen whom Saudi Arabia has been fighting against. Iran [was behind attacks](#) on major Saudi oil facilities that cut oil supplies by 5%. A U.S. official [said](#) the attack on plants in Saudi Arabia's oil industry, including the world's biggest petroleum-processing facility at Abqaiq, came from the direction of Iran, and cruise missiles may have been used. Secretary of State Pompeo [said](#) there was no evidence the attack came from Yemen, and accused Iran of committing it.