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Saudi Arabia








Saudi Arabia,^[d] officially the **Kingdom of Saudi Arabia** (KSA),^[e] is a country in West Asia. Located in the centre of the Middle East, it covers the bulk of the Arabian Peninsula and has a land area of about 2,150,000 km² (830,000 sq mi), making it the fifth-largest country in Asia, the largest in the Middle East, and the twelfth-largest in the world. It is bordered by the Red Sea to the west; Jordan, Iraq, and Kuwait to the north; the Persian Gulf, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates to the east; Oman to the southeast; and Yemen to the south. The Gulf of Aqaba in the northwest separates Saudi Arabia from Egypt and Israel.^{[15][16]} Saudi Arabia is the only country with a coastline along both the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, and most of its terrain consists of arid desert, lowland, steppe, and mountains. The capital and largest city is Riyadh; other major cities include Jeddah and the two holiest cities in Islam, Mecca and Medina. With a population of almost 32.2 million, Saudi Arabia is the fourth most populous country in the Arab world.

Pre-Islamic Arabia, the territory that constitutes modern-day Saudi Arabia, was the site of several ancient cultures and civilizations; the prehistory of Saudi Arabia shows some of the earliest traces of human activity outside Africa.^[17] Islam, the world's second-largest religion,^[18] emerged in what is now Saudi Arabia in the early seventh century. Islamic prophet Muhammad united the population of the Arabian Peninsula and created a single Islamic religious polity. Following his death in 632, his followers expanded Muslim rule beyond Arabia, conquering territories in North Africa, Central, South Asia and Iberia within decades.^{[19][20][21]} Arab dynasties originating from modern-day Saudi Arabia founded the Rashidun (632–661), Umayyad (661–750), Abbasid (750–1517), and Fatimid (909–1171) caliphates, as well as numerous other Muslim states in Asia, Africa, and Europe.

<h1>Kingdom of Saudi Arabia</h1> <p>المملكة العربية السعودية (Arabic) <i>al-Mamlaka al-ʿArabiyya as-Suʿūdiyya</i></p>	
 <p>Flag of Saudi Arabia</p>	 <p>Emblem of Saudi Arabia</p>
<p><u>Flag</u></p>	<p><u>Emblem</u></p>
<p>Motto: لا إله إلا الله، محمد رسول الله <i>Lā ilāha illa allāh, Muḥammadun rasūlu allāh</i> "There is no god but God, Muhammad is the Messenger of God"^[1]^[a] (<i>shahada</i>)</p>	
<p>Anthem: النشيد الوطني السعودي "<i>an-Našīd al-Waṭaniyy as-Suʿūdiyy</i>" "Chant of the Saudi Nation"</p> <p>0:39</p>	
<div></div> <div><input checked="" type="radio"/> Show globe <input type="radio"/> Show map of Saudi Arabia <input type="radio"/> Show all</div>	
Capital and largest city	<u>Riyadh</u> <u>24°39'N 46°46'E</u>
Official languages	<u>Arabic</u> ^[5]
Religion	<u>Sunni Islam</u> (official) ^[6]
Demonym(s)	<u>Saudi</u> Saudi Arabian

Saudi Arabia was founded in 1932 by King Abdulaziz (also known as Ibn Saud), who united the regions of Hejaz, Najd, parts of Eastern Arabia (Al-Ahsa) and South Arabia (Asir) into a single state through a series of conquests, beginning in 1902 with the capture of Riyadh. Saudi Arabia has since been an absolute monarchy governed by an authoritarian regime without public input.^[22] In its Basic Law, Saudi Arabia defines itself as a sovereign Arab Islamic state with Islam as its official religion and Arabic as its official language. The ultraconservative Wahhabi religious movement within Sunni Islam was the prevailing political and cultural force in the country until the 2000s.^{[23][24]} The Saudi government has attracted criticism for various policies such as its intervention in the Yemeni Civil War and widespread use of capital punishment.^{[25][26]} In 2024, the Human Freedom Index compiled by the Cato Institute ranked Saudi Arabia 155 out of 165 countries.^[27]

Saudi Arabia is considered both a regional and middle power.^{[28][29]} Since petroleum was discovered in the country in 1938,^{[30][31]} the kingdom has become the world's second-largest oil producer and leading oil exporter, controlling the world's second-largest oil reserves and sixth-largest gas reserves.^[32] Saudi Arabia is categorized as a World Bank high-income economy and is the only Arab country among the G20 major economies.^{[33][34]} The Saudi economy is the largest in the Middle East and the world's nineteenth-largest by nominal GDP and seventeenth-largest by PPP. Ranking very high in the Human Development Index,^[35] Saudi Arabia offers free university tuition, no personal income tax,^[36] and free universal health care. With its dependence on foreign labour, Saudi Arabia has the world's third-largest immigrant population, with foreign-born residents comprising roughly 40% of the population. Saudi Arabians are among the world's youngest people, with approximately half being under 25 years old.^{[37][38]} Saudi Arabia is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council, United Nations, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, Arab League, and OPEC, as well as a dialogue partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

Government	<u>Unitary Islamic absolute monarchy</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <u>King</u>• <u>Crown Prince and Prime Minister</u>	<u>Salman</u> <u>Mohammed bin Salman</u>
Legislature	<u>Consultative Assembly</u> ^[b]
Establishment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <u>Emirate of Diriyah</u>22 February 1727• <u>Emirate of Nejd</u>1824• <u>Emirate of Riyadh</u>13 January 1902• <u>Emirate of Nejd and Hasa</u>15 January 1913• <u>Sultanate of Nejd</u>29 November 1921• <u>Kingdom of Hejaz and Nejd</u>8 January 1926• <u>Unification and Proclamation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia</u>23 September 1932• <u>Current constitution</u>31 January 1992
Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <u>Total</u>2,149,690^[9] km² (830,000 sq mi) (12th)• <u>Water (%)</u>0.7
Population	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <u>2022 census</u>Neutral increase 32,175,224^[10] (48th)• <u>Density</u>15/km² (38.8/sq mi) (218th)
GDP (PPP)	<u>2025 estimate</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <u>Total</u>Increase \$2.230 trillion^[11] (18th)• <u>Per capita</u>Increase \$61,923^[11] (30th)
GDP (nominal)	<u>2025 estimate</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <u>Total</u>Decrease \$1.084 trillion^[11] (19th)• <u>Per capita</u>Decrease \$30,099^[11] (39th)
Gini (2013)	 Steady 45.9 ^[12] medium inequality
HDI (2023)	 Increase 0.900 ^[13] very high (37th)

Etymology

Following the amalgamation of the Kingdom of Hejaz and Nejd, Abdulaziz issued a royal decree on 23 September 1932 naming the new state *al-Mamlaka al-ʿArabiyya as-Su ʿūdiyya* (Arabic المملكة العربية السعودية), which is normally translated as "the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia" in English,^[39] but literally means "the **Saudi Arab Kingdom**",^[40] or "the **Saudi Kingdom of Arabia**" (compare the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan).

Currency	Saudi riyal (SR) ^[c] <div>(SAR)</div>
Time zone	UTC+3 (SAST)
Calling code	+966
ISO 3166 code	SA
Internet TLD	.sa <div>السعودية</div>

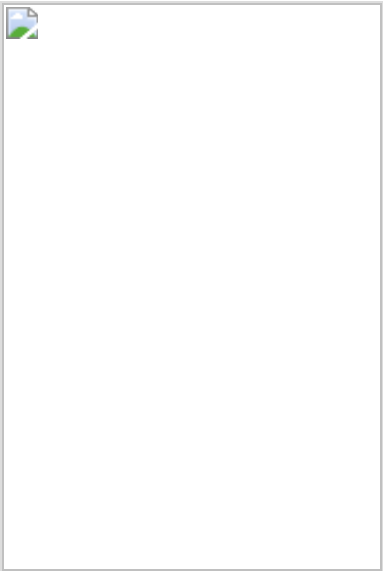
The word "Saudi" is derived from the element *as-Su ʿūdiyya* in the Arabic name of the country, which is a type of adjective known as a *nisba*, formed from the dynastic name of the Saudi royal family, the Al Saud (Arabic: آل سعود). Its inclusion expresses the view that the country is the personal possession of the royal family.^{[41][42]} *Al Saud* is an Arabic name formed by adding the word *Al*, meaning "family of" or "House of",^[43] to the personal name of an ancestor. In the case of Al Saud, this is Saud ibn Muhammad ibn Muqrin, the father of the dynasty's 18th-century founder, Muhammad bin Saud.^[44]

History

Prehistory

There is evidence that human habitation in the Arabian Peninsula dates back to about 125,000 years ago.^[45] A 2011 study found that the first modern humans to spread east across Asia left Africa about 75,000 years ago across the Bab-el-Mandeb connecting the Horn of Africa and Arabia.^[46] The Arabian Peninsula is regarded as central to the understanding of evolution and dispersals of humanity. Arabia underwent an extreme environmental fluctuation in the Quaternary that led to profound evolutionary and demographic changes. Arabia has a rich Lower Paleolithic record, and the quantity of Oldowan-like sites in the region indicate a significant role that Arabia had played in the early hominin colonization of Eurasia.^[47]

In the Neolithic period, prominent cultures such as Al-Magar, whose centre lay in modern-day southwestern Najd, flourished. Al-Magar could be considered a "Neolithic Revolution" in human knowledge and handicraft skills.^[48] The culture is characterized as being one of the world's first to involve the widespread domestication of animals, particularly the horse, during the Neolithic period.^{[49][50]} Al-Magar statues were made from local stone, and it seems that the statues were fixed in a central building that might have had a significant role in the social and religious life of the inhabitants.^[51]



Anthropomorphic stela (4th millennium BC), sandstone, 57x27 cm, from El-Maakir-Qaryat al-Kaafa (National Museum of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh)

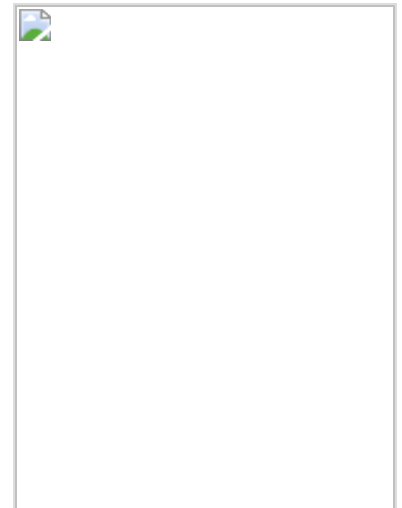
In November 2017, hunting scenes showing images of most likely domesticated dogs (resembling the Canaan Dog) and wearing leashes were discovered in Shuwaymis, a hilly region of northwestern Saudi Arabia. These rock engravings date back more than 8 000 years, making them the earliest depictions of dogs in the world.^[52]

At the end of the 4th millennium BC, Arabia entered the Bronze Age; metals were widely used, and the period was characterized by its 2 m high burials which were simultaneously followed by the existence of numerous temples that included many free-standing sculptures originally painted with red colours.^[53]

In May 2021, archaeologists announced that a 350,000-year-old Acheulean site named An Nasim in the Hail region could be the oldest human habitation site in northern Saudi Arabia. 354 artefacts, including hand axes and stone tools, provided information about the tool-making traditions of the earliest living man who inhabited southwest Asia. Paleolithic artefacts are similar to material remains uncovered at the Acheulean sites in the Nefud Desert.^{[54][55][56][57]}

Pre-Islamic

The earliest sedentary culture in Saudi Arabia dates back to the Ubaid period at Dosariyah. Climatic change and the onset of aridity may have brought about the end of this phase of settlement, as little archaeological evidence exists from the succeeding millennium.^[59] The settlement of the region picks up again in the period of Dilmun in the early 3rd millennium. Known records from Uruk refer to a place called Dilmun, associated on several occasions with copper, and in later periods it was a source of imported woods in southern Mesopotamia. Scholars have suggested that Dilmun originally designated the Eastern Province, notably linked with the major Dilmunite settlements of Umm an-Nussi and Umm ar-Ramadh in the interior and Tarout on the coast. It is likely that Tarout Island was the main port and the capital of Dilmun.^[58] Mesopotamian inscribed clay tablets suggest that, in the early period of Dilmun, a form of hierarchical organized political structure existed. In 1966, an earthwork in Tarout exposed an ancient burial field that yielded a large statue dating to the Dilmunite period (mid 3rd millennium BC). The statue was locally made under the strong Mesopotamian influence on the artistic principle of Dilmun.^[58]



The "Worshipping Servant" statue (2500 BC), above one metre (3 ft 3 in) in height, is much taller than any possible Mesopotamian or Harappan models. Photo courtesy of the National Museum of Korea.^[58]

By 2200 BC, the centre of Dilmun shifted for unknown reasons from Tarout and the Saudi Arabian mainland to the island of Bahrain, and a highly developed settlement emerged there, where a laborious temple complex and thousands of burial mounds dating to this period were discovered.^[58]

By the late Bronze Age, a historically recorded people and land (Midian and the Midianites) in the north-western portion of Saudi Arabia are well-documented in the Bible. Centred in Tabouk, it stretched from Wadi Arabah in the north to the area of al-Wejh in the south.^[60] The capital of Midian



Qaşr Al-Farīd, the largest of the 131 rock-cut monumental tombs built from the 1st century BC to the 1st century AD, with their elaborately ornamented façades, at the extensive ancient Nabatean archaeological site of Hegra located in the area of Al-'Ula within Al Madinah Region in the Hejaz. A UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2008.

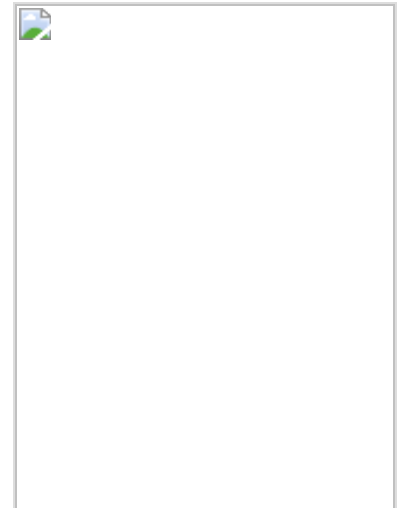
was Qurayyah,^[61] it consists of a large, fortified citadel encompassing 35 hectares and below it lies a walled settlement of 15 hectares. The city hosted as many as 12,000 inhabitants.^[62] The Bible recounts Israel's two wars with Midian, somewhere in the early 11th century BC. Politically, the Midianites were described as having a decentralized structure headed by five kings (Evi, Rekem, Tsur, Hur, and Reba); the names appear to be toponyms of important Midianite settlements.^[63] It is common to view that Midian designated a confederation of tribes, the sedentary element settled in the Hijaz while its nomadic affiliates pastured and sometimes pillaged as far away as Palestine.^[64] The nomadic Midianites were one of the earliest exploiters of the domestication of camels that enabled them to navigate through the harsh terrains of the region.^[64]

At the end of the 7th century BC, an emerging kingdom appeared in north-western Arabia. It started as a sheikdom of Dedan, which developed into the kingdom of Lihyān.^{[66][67]} During this period, Dedan transformed into a kingdom that encompassed a much wider domain.^[66] In the early 3rd century BC, with bustling economic activity between the south and north, Lihyān acquired large influence suitable to its strategic position on the caravan road.^[68] The Lihyānites ruled over a large domain from Yathrib in the south and parts of the Levant in the north.^[69] In antiquity, Gulf of Aqaba used to be called Gulf of Lihyān, a testimony to the extensive influence that Lihyān acquired.^[70]

The Lihyānites fell into the hands of the Nabataeans around 65 BC upon their seizure of Hegra then marching to Tayma, and to their capital Dedan in 9 BC. The Nabataeans ruled large portions of north Arabia until their domain was annexed by the Roman Empire, which renamed it Arabia Petraea, and remained under the rule of the Romans until 630.^[71]

Middle Ages and rise of Islam

Shortly before the advent of Islam, apart from urban trading settlements (such as Mecca and Medina), much of what was to become Saudi Arabia was populated by nomadic pastoral tribal societies.^[74] The Islamic prophet Muhammad was born in Mecca in about 570 CE. In the early 7th century, Muhammad united the various tribes of the peninsula and created a single Islamic religious polity.^[75] Following his death in 632, his followers expanded the territory under Muslim rule beyond Arabia, conquering territory in the Iberian Peninsula in the west, to parts of Central and South Asia in the east, in a matter of decades.^{[19][20][21]} Arabia became a more politically peripheral region of the Muslim world as the focus shifted to the newly conquered lands.^[75]



Colossal statue from Al-'Ula in the Hejaz (6th–4th century BC), it followed the standardized artistic sculpting of the Lihyānite kingdom. The original statue was painted with white. (Louvre Museum, Paris)^[65]



At its greatest extent, the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750) covered 11 100 000 km² (4 300 000 sq mi)^[72] and 62 million people (29 per cent of the world's population),^[73] making it one of the largest empires in history in both area and proportion of the world's population. It was also larger than any previous empire in history.

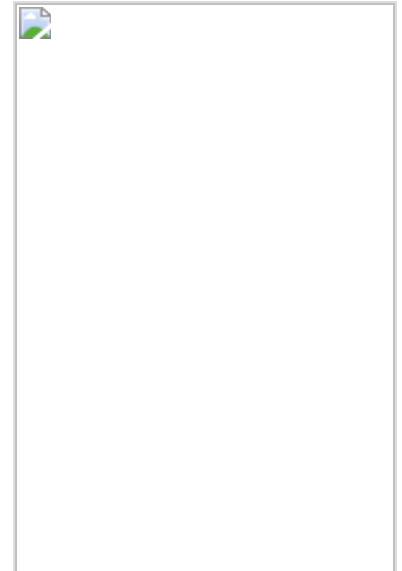
the Black Stone.^[78] In 1077–1078, an Arab sheikh named Abdullah bin Ali Al Uyuni defeated the Qarmatians in Bahrain and al-Hasa with the help of the Seljuq Empire and founded the Uyunid dynasty.^{[79][80]} The Uyunid Emirate later underwent expansion with its territory stretching from Najd to the Syrian Desert.^[81] They were overthrown by the Usfurids in 1253.^[82] Usfurid rule was weakened after Persian rulers of Hormuz captured Bahrain and Qatif in 1320.^[83] The vassals of Ormuz, the Shia Jarwanid dynasty came to rule eastern Arabia in the 14th century.^{[84][85]} The Jabrids took control of the region after overthrowing the Jarwanids in the 15th century and clashed with Hormuz for more than two decades over the region for its economic revenues, until finally agreeing to pay tribute in 1507.^[84] Al-Muntafiq tribe later took over the region and came under Ottoman suzerainty. The Bani Khalid tribe later revolted against them in the 17th century and took control.^[86] Their rule extended from Iraq to Oman at its height, and they too came under Ottoman suzerainty.^{[87][88]}

Ottoman Hejaz and Portuguese era

In the 16th century, the Ottomans added the Red Sea and Persian Gulf coast (the Hejaz, Aseer and Al-Ahsa) to the empire and claimed suzerainty over the interior. One reason was to thwart Portuguese attempts to attack the Red Sea (hence the Hejaz) and the Indian Ocean.^[89] The Ottoman degree of control over these lands varied over the next four centuries with the fluctuating strength or weakness of the empire's central authority.^{[90][91]} These changes contributed to later uncertainties, such as the dispute with Transjordan over the inclusion of the sanjak of Ma'an, including the cities of Ma'an and Aqaba.

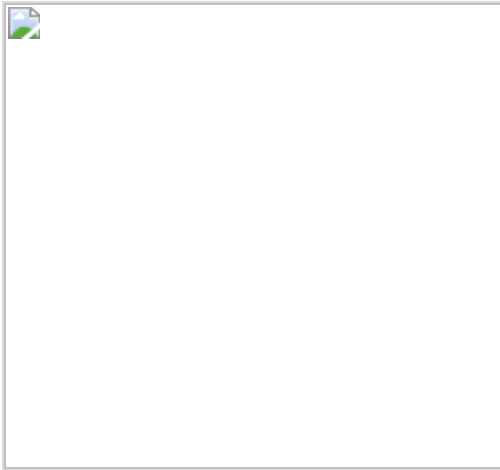
Arabs originating from modern-day Saudi Arabia, the Hejaz in particular, founded the Rashidun (632–661), Umayyad (661–750), Abbasid (750–1517), and the Fatimid (909–1171) caliphates. From the 10th century to the early 20th century, Mecca and Medina were under the control of a local Arab ruler known as the Sharif of Mecca, but at most times the sharif owed allegiance to the ruler of one of the major Islamic empires based in Baghdad, Cairo or Istanbul. Most of the remainder of what became Saudi Arabia reverted to traditional tribal rule.^{[76][77]}

For much of the 10th century, the Isma'ili-Shi'ite Qarmatians were the most powerful force in the Persian Gulf. In 930, the Qarmatians pillaged Mecca, outraging the Muslim world, particularly with their theft of



The Battle of Badr, 13 March 624 CE

Saud dynasty and unification



Expansion of the first Saudi State in 1810

The emergence of what was to become the Saudi royal family, known as the Al Saud, began at the town of Diriyah in Nejd in central Arabia with the accession as emir of Muhammad bin Saud on 22 February 1727.^{[92][93]} In 1744 he joined forces with the religious leader Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab,^[94] founder of the Wahhabi movement, a strict puritanical form of Sunni Islam.^[95] This alliance provided the ideological impetus to Saudi expansion and remains the basis of Saudi Arabian dynastic rule today.^[96]

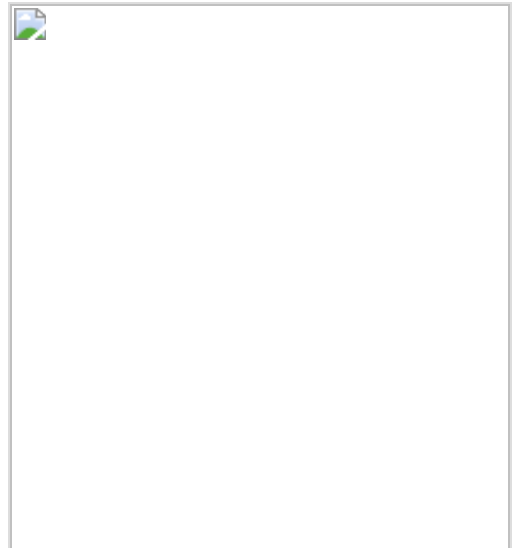
The Emirate of Diriyah established in the area around Riyadh rapidly expanded and briefly controlled most of the present-day territory of Saudi Arabia, sacking Karbala in 1802, and capturing Mecca in 1803. In 1818, it was destroyed by the

Ottoman viceroy of Egypt, Mohammed Ali Pasha.^[97] The much smaller Emirate of Nejd was established in 1824. Throughout the rest of the 19th century, the Al Saud contested control of the interior of what was to become Saudi Arabia with another Arabian ruling family, the Al Rashid, who ruled the Emirate of Jabal Shammar. By 1891, the Al Rashid were victorious and the Al Saud were driven into exile in Kuwait.^[76]

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Ottoman Empire continued to control or have a suzerainty over most of the peninsula. Subject to this suzerainty, Arabia was ruled by a patchwork of tribal rulers,^{[98][99]} with the Sharif of Mecca having pre-eminence and ruling the Hejaz.^[100] In 1902, Abdul Rahman's son, Abdulaziz—later known as Ibn Saud—recaptured control of Riyadh bringing the Al Saud back to Nejd, creating the third "Saudi state".^[76] Ibn Saud gained the support of the Ikhwan, a tribal army inspired by Wahhabism and led by Faisal Al-Dawish, and which had grown quickly after its foundation in 1912.^[101] With the aid of the Ikhwan, Ibn Saud captured Al-Ahsa from the Ottomans in 1913.

In 1916, with the encouragement and support of Britain (which was fighting the Ottomans in World War I), the Sharif of Mecca, Hussein bin Ali, led a pan-Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire to create a united Arab state.^[102] Although the revolt failed in its objective, the Allied victory in World War I resulted in the end of Ottoman suzerainty and control in Arabia, and Hussein bin Ali became King of Hejaz.^[103]

Ibn Saud avoided involvement in the Arab Revolt and instead continued his struggle with the Al Rashid. Following the latter's final defeat, he took the title Sultan of Nejd in 1921. With the help of the Ikhwan, the Kingdom of Hejaz was conquered in 1924–25, and on 10 January 1926, Ibn Saud declared



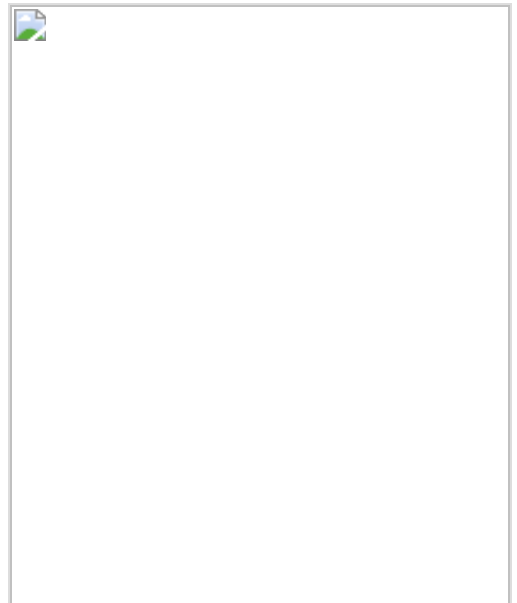
British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Ibn Saud, the founding father and first king of Saudi Arabia, in Egypt in 1945

himself king of Hejaz.^[104] For the next five years, he administered the two parts of his dual kingdom as separate units.^[76]

After the conquest of the Hejaz, the Ikhwan leadership's objective switched to expansion of the Wahhabist realm into the British protectorates of Transjordan, Iraq and Kuwait, and began raiding those territories. This met with Ibn Saud's opposition, as he recognized the danger of a direct conflict with the British. At the same time, the Ikhwan became disenchanted with Ibn Saud's domestic policies which appeared to favour modernization and the increase in the number of non-Muslim foreigners in the country. As a result, they turned against Ibn Saud and, after a two-year struggle, were defeated in 1929 at the Battle of Sabilla, where their leaders were massacred.^[105] On Ibn Saud's behalf, Prince Faisal declared the unification on 23 September 1932, and the two kingdoms of Hejaz and Nejd were unified as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.^[76] That date is now a national holiday called Saudi National Day.^[106]

20th century


The new kingdom was reliant on limited agriculture and pilgrimage revenues.^[107] In 1938, vast reserves of oil were discovered in the Al-Ahsa region along the coast of the Persian Gulf, and full-scale development of the oil fields began in 1941 under the US-controlled Aramco (Arabian American Oil Company). Oil provided Saudi Arabia with economic prosperity and substantial political leverage internationally.^[76] Cultural life rapidly developed, primarily in the Hejaz, which was the centre for newspapers and radio. However, the large influx of foreign workers in Saudi Arabia in the oil industry increased the pre-existing propensity for xenophobia. At the same time, the government became increasingly wasteful and extravagant. By the 1950s this had led to large governmental deficits and excessive foreign borrowing.^[76] In 1953, Saud of Saudi Arabia succeeded as the king of Saudi Arabia. In 1964 he was deposed in favour of his half brother Faisal of Saudi Arabia, after an intense rivalry, fuelled by doubts in the royal family over Saud's competence. In 1972, Saudi Arabia gained a 20% control in Aramco, thereby decreasing US control over Saudi oil.^[108] In 1973, Saudi Arabia led an oil boycott against the Western countries that supported Israel in the Yom Kippur War against Egypt and Syria, leading to the quadrupling of oil prices.^[76] In 1975, Faisal was assassinated by his nephew, Prince Faisal bin Musaid and was succeeded by his half-brother King Khalid.^[109]



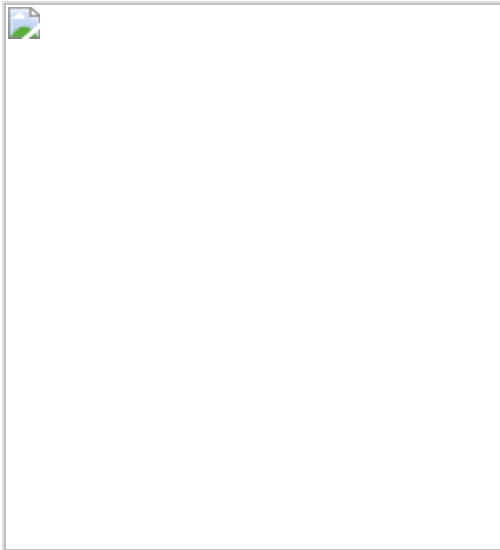
The oil well Dammam No. 7 on March 4, 1938, the day it struck oil in commercial quantities, becoming the first in Saudi Arabia to do so

By 1976, Saudi Arabia had become the largest oil producer in the world.^[110] Khalid's reign saw economic and social development progress at an extremely rapid rate, transforming the infrastructure and educational system of the country;^[76] in foreign policy, close ties with the US were developed.^[109] In 1979, two events occurred which greatly concerned the government^[111] and had a long-term influence on Saudi foreign and domestic policy. The first was the Iranian Islamic

Revolution. It was feared that the country's Shi'ite minority in the Eastern Province (which is also the location of the oil fields) might rebel under the influence of their Iranian co-religionists. There were several anti-government uprisings in the region such as the 1979 Qatif Uprising.^[112] The second event was the Grand Mosque Seizure in Mecca by Islamist extremists. The militants involved were in part angered by what they considered to be the corruption and un-Islamic nature of the Saudi government.^[112] The government regained control of the mosque after 10 days, and those captured were executed. Part of the response of the royal family was to enforce the much stricter observance of traditional religious and social norms in the country (for example, the closure of cinemas) and to give the ulema a greater role in government.^[113] Neither entirely succeeded as Islamism continued to grow in strength.^[114]

 Nasser and Faisal

Faisal (left) with
Egypt's President
Gamal Abdel Nasser in
Cairo, 1969



Map of Saudi Arabian administrative
regions and roadways

In 1980, Saudi Arabia bought out the American interests in Aramco.^[115] King Khalid died of a heart attack in June 1982. He was succeeded by his brother, King Fahd, who added the title "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques" to his name in 1986 in response to considerable fundamentalist pressure to avoid the use of "majesty" in association with anything except God. Fahd continued to develop close relations with the United States and increased the purchase of American and British military equipment.^[76] The vast wealth generated by oil revenues was beginning to have an even greater impact on Saudi society. It led to rapid technological (but not cultural) modernization, urbanization, mass public education, and the creation of new media. This and the presence of increasingly large numbers of foreign workers greatly affected traditional Saudi norms and values. Although there was a dramatic change in the social and economic life of the country, political power continued to be monopolized by the royal family.^[76]

leading to discontent among many Saudis who began to look for wider participation in government.^[116]

In the 1980s, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait spent \$25 billion in support of Saddam Hussein in the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988);^[117] however, Saudi Arabia condemned the invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and asked the United States to intervene.^[76] King Fahd allowed American and coalition troops to be stationed in Saudi Arabia. He invited the Kuwaiti government and many of its citizens to stay in Saudi Arabia, but expelled citizens of Yemen and Jordan because of their governments' support of Iraq. In 1991, Saudi Arabian forces were involved both in bombing raids on Iraq and in the land invasion that helped to liberate Kuwait, which became known as the Gulf War (1990–1991).^[108]

Saudi Arabia's relations with the West was one of the issues that led to an increase in Islamist terrorism in Saudi Arabia, as well as Islamist terrorist attacks in Western countries by Saudi nationals. Osama bin Laden was a Saudi citizen (until stripped of his citizenship in 1994) and was responsible for the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in East Africa and the 2000 USS Cole bombing near

the port of Aden, Yemen. 15 of the hijackers involved in the September 11 attacks were Saudi nationals.^[118] Many Saudis who did not support the Islamist terrorists were nevertheless deeply unhappy with the government's policies.^[119]

Islamism was not the only source of hostility to the government. Although extremely wealthy by the 21st century, Saudi Arabia's economy was near stagnant. High taxes and a growth in unemployment have contributed to discontent and have been reflected in a rise in civil unrest, and discontent with the royal family. In response, a number of limited reforms were initiated by King Fahd. In March 1992, he introduced the "Basic Law", which emphasized the duties and responsibilities of a ruler. In December 1993, the Consultative Council was inaugurated. It is composed of a chairman and 60 members—all chosen by the King. Fahd made it clear that he did not have democracy in mind, saying: "A system based on elections is not consistent with our Islamic creed, which [approves of] government by consultation [shūrā]."^[76]

In 1995, Fahd suffered a debilitating stroke, and the Crown Prince, Abdullah, assumed the role of *de facto* regent; however, his authority was hindered by conflict with Fahd's full brothers (known, with Fahd, as the "Sudairi Seven").^[120]

21st century

Signs of discontent included, in 2003 and 2004, a series of bombings and armed violence in Riyadh, Jeddah, Yanbu and Khobar.^[121] In February–April 2005, the first-ever nationwide municipal elections were held in Saudi Arabia. Women were not allowed to take part.^[76]

In 2005, King Fahd died and was succeeded by Abdullah, who continued the policy of minimum reform and clamping down on protests. The king introduced economic reforms aimed at reducing the country's reliance on oil revenue: limited deregulation, encouragement of foreign investment, and privatization. In February 2009, Abdullah announced a series of governmental changes to the judiciary, armed forces, and various ministries to modernize these institutions including the replacement of senior appointees in the judiciary and the Mutaween (religious police) with more moderate individuals and the appointment of the country's first female deputy minister.^[76]

On 29 January 2011, hundreds of protesters gathered in Jeddah in a rare display of criticism against the city's poor infrastructure after flooding killed 11 people.^[122] Police stopped the demonstration after about 15 minutes and arrested 30 to 50 people.^[123]

Since 2011, Saudi Arabia has been affected by its own Arab Spring protests.^[124] In response, King Abdullah announced on 22 February 2011 a series of benefits for citizens amounting to \$36 billion, of which \$10.7 billion was earmarked for housing.^{[125][126][127]} No political reforms were included, though some prisoners indicted for financial crimes were pardoned.^[128] Abdullah also announced a package of \$93 billion, which included 500,000 new homes to a cost of \$67 billion, in addition to creating 60 000 new security jobs.^{[129][130]} Although male-only municipal elections were held on 29 September 2011,^{[131][132]} Abdullah allowed women to vote and be elected in the 2015 municipal elections, and also to be nominated to the Shura Council.^[133]

Geography



Saudi Arabia topography



Harrat Khaybar seen from the International Space Station. Saudi Arabia is home to more than 2000 dormant volcanoes.^[134] Lava fields in Hejaz, known locally by their Arabic name of harrat (the singular is harrah), form one of Earth's largest alkali basalt regions, covering some 180,000 square kilometres (69,000 sq mi).^[135]

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Except for the southwestern regions such as Aseer, Saudi Arabia has a desert climate with very high day-time temperatures during the summer and a sharp temperature drop at night. Average summer temperatures are around 45 °C (113 °F) but can be as high as 54 °C (129 °F). In the winter the temperature rarely drops below 0 °C (32 °F) with the exception of mostly the northern regions of the

Saudi Arabia occupies about 80% of the Arabian Peninsula (the world's largest peninsula),^[136] lying between latitudes 16° and 33° N, and longitudes 34° and 56° E. Because the country's southeastern and southern borders with the United Arab Emirates and Oman are not precisely marked, the exact size of the country is undefined.^[136] The United Nations Statistics Division estimates 2 149 690 km² (830 000 sq mi) and lists Saudi Arabia as the world's 12th largest state. It is geographically the largest country in the Middle East and on the Arabian Plate.^[137]

Saudi Arabia's geography is dominated by the Arabian Desert, associated semi-desert, shrubland, steppes, several mountain ranges, volcanic lava fields and highlands. The 647 500 km² (250 001 sq mi) Rub' al Khali ("Empty Quarter") in the southeastern part of the country is the world's largest contiguous sand desert.^{[138][139]} Though there are lakes in the country, Saudi Arabia is the largest country in the world by area with no permanent rivers. Wadis, non-permanent rivers, however, are very numerous throughout the kingdom. The fertile areas are to be found in the alluvial deposits in wadis, basins, and oases.^[138] There are approximately 1,300 islands in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf.^[140]

The main topographical feature is the central plateau which rises abruptly from the Red Sea and gradually descends into the Nejd and toward the Persian Gulf. On the Red Sea coast, there is a narrow coastal plain, known as the Tihamah, parallel to which runs along an imposing escarpment. The southwest province of Aseer is mountainous and contains the 3 002 m (9 849 ft) Jabal Ferwa, which is the highest point in the country.^[138] Saudi Arabia is home to more than 2,000

country where annual snowfall, in particular in the mountainous regions of Tabuk Province, is not uncommon.^[141] The lowest recorded temperature, −12.0 °C (10.4 °F), was measured in Turaif.^[142] Of the Gulf states, Saudi Arabia is likely to experience snowfalls most frequently.^[143]

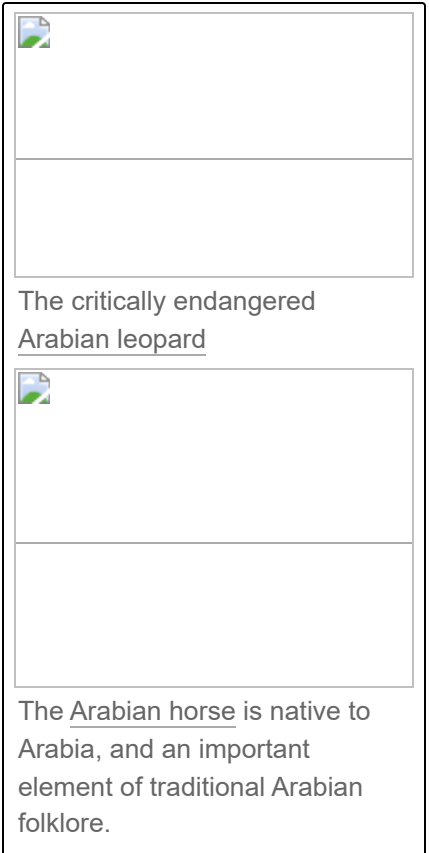
In the spring and autumn the heat is temperate, temperatures average around 29 °C (84 °F). Annual rainfall is very low. The southern regions differ in that they are influenced by the Indian Ocean monsoons, usually occurring between October and March. An average of 300 mm (12 in) of rainfall occurs during this period, which is about 60% of the annual precipitation.^[144]

Biodiversity

Saudi Arabia is home to five terrestrial ecoregions: Arabian Peninsula coastal fog desert, Southwestern Arabian foothills savanna, Southwestern Arabian montane woodlands, Arabian Desert, and Red Sea Nubo-Sindian tropical desert and semi-desert.^[145] Wildlife includes the Arabian leopard,^{[146][147]} Arabian wolf, striped hyena, mongoose, baboon, Cape hare, sand cat, and jerboa. Animals such as gazelles, oryx, leopards and cheetahs^[148] were relatively numerous until the 19th century, when extensive hunting reduced these animals almost to extinction. The culturally important Asiatic lion occurred in Saudi Arabia until the late 19th century before it was hunted to extinction in the wild.^[149] Birds include falcons (which are caught and trained for hunting), eagles, hawks, vultures, sandgrouse, and bulbuls. There are several species of snakes, many of which are venomous. Domesticated animals include the legendary Arabian horse, Arabian camel, sheep, goats, cattle, donkeys, chickens, etc.



The Red Sea is a rich and diverse ecosystem with more than 1,200 species of fish^[150] around 10% of which are endemic.^[151] This also includes 42 species of deep water fish.^[150] The rich diversity is partly owed to the 2 000 km (1 240 mi) of coral reef extending along the coastline; these fringing reefs are largely formed of stony acropora and porites corals. The reefs form platforms and sometimes lagoons along the coast and occasional other features such as cylinders (such as the Blue Hole at Dahab). These coastal reefs are also visited by pelagic species, including some of the 44 species of shark. There are many offshore reefs including several atolls. Many of the unusual offshore reef formations defy classic (i.e., Darwinian) coral reef classification schemes and are generally attributed to the high levels of tectonic activity that characterize the area.

Reflecting the country's dominant desert conditions, plant life mostly consists of herbs, plants, and shrubs that require little water. The date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) is widespread.^[138]



Government and politics

Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy;^[152] however, according to the Basic Law of Saudi Arabia adopted by royal decree in 1992, the king must comply with Sharia (Islamic law) and the Quran, while the Quran and the Sunnah (the traditions of Muhammad) are declared to be the country's constitution.^[153] No political parties or national elections are permitted.^[152] While some critics consider it to be a totalitarian state,^{[154][155]} others regard it as lacking aspects of totalitarianism but nevertheless classify it as an authoritarian regime.^{[156][157][158]} *The Economist* ranked the Saudi government 150th out of 167 in its 2022 Democracy Index,^[159] and Freedom House gave it its lowest "Not Free" rating, giving it a score of 8 out of 100 for 2023.^[160] According to the 2023 V-Dem Democracy Indices, Saudi Arabia is the least democratic country in the Middle East.^[161]

	
<div>Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud</div> <div>King (r. 2015–present)</div>	<div>Mohammed bin Salman</div> <div>Crown Prince and Prime Minister</div>

In the absence of national elections and political parties,^[152] politics in Saudi Arabia takes place in two distinct arenas: within the royal family, the Al Saud, and between the royal family and the rest of Saudi society.^[162] Outside of the Al Saud, participation in the political process is limited to a relatively small segment of the population and takes the form of the royal family consulting with the ulema, tribal sheikhs, and members of important commercial families on major decisions.^[138] This process is not reported by the Saudi media.^[163]

By custom, all males of full age have a right to petition the king directly through the traditional tribal meeting known as the *majlis*.^[164] In many ways the approach to government differs little from the traditional system of tribal rule. Tribal identity remains strong, and outside of the royal family, political influence is frequently determined by tribal affiliation, with tribal sheikhs maintaining a considerable degree of influence over local and national events.^[138] In recent years there have been limited steps to widen political participation such as the establishment of the Consultative Council in the early 1990s and the National Dialogue Forum in 2003.^[165] In 2005, the first municipal elections were held. In 2007, the Allegiance Council was created to regulate the succession.^[165] In 2009, the king made significant personnel changes to the government by appointing reformers to key positions and the first woman to a ministerial post;^{[166][167]} however, these changes have been criticized as being too slow or merely cosmetic.^[168]

Saudi and Kharij
King Khalid (right) meeting Egypt's president Anwar Sadat with crown prince Fahd in the background at Cairo Airport in 1975

The rule of the Al Saud faces political opposition from four sources: Sunni Islamist activism; liberal critics; the Shi'ite minority—particularly in the Eastern Province; and long-standing tribal and regionalist particularistic opponents (for example in the Hejaz).^[169] Of these, the minority activists have been the most prominent threat to the government and have in recent years been involved in violent incidents in the country.^[121] However, open protest against the government, even if peaceful, is not tolerated.^[170]

Monarchy and royal family

The king combines legislative, executive, and judicial functions^[138] and royal decrees form the basis of the country's legislation.^[171] The prime minister presides over the Council of Ministers of Saudi Arabia and Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia. The king has usually been also the prime minister, with two exceptions: Crown Prince Faisal, who was prime minister during the reign of King Saud,^[172] and Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, the current prime minister since 2022.^[173] The royal family dominates the political system. The family's vast numbers allows it to control most of the kingdom's important posts and to have an involvement and presence at all levels of government.^[174] The number of princes is estimated to be at least 7 000, with most power and influence being wielded by the 200 or so male descendants of Ibn Saud.^[175] The key ministries are generally reserved for the royal family,^[152] as are the 13 regional governorships.^[176]



King Fahd with US President Ronald Reagan and future US President Donald Trump in 1985. The US and Saudi Arabia supplied money and arms to the anti-Soviet *mujahideen* fighters in Afghanistan.



As many as 500 princes, government ministers, and business people, including Prince Fahd bin Abdullah, were arrested by Saudi Arabian authorities as part of the 2017 Saudi Arabian purge.

The Saudi government^{[177][178][179]} and the royal family^{[180][181][182]} have often been accused of corruption over many years,^[183] and this continues into the 21st century.^[184] In a country that is said to "belong" to the royal family and is named for them,^[42] the lines between state assets and the personal wealth of senior princes are blurred.^[175] The extent of corruption has been described as systemic^[185] and endemic,^[186] and its existence was acknowledged^[187] and defended^[188] by Prince Bandar bin Sultan (a senior member of the royal family)^[189] in an interview in 2001.^[190]

In its Corruption Perceptions Index for 2010, Transparency International gave Saudi Arabia a score of 4.7 (on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 is "highly corrupt" and 10 is "highly clean").^[191] Saudi Arabia has undergone a process of political

and social reform, such as to increase public transparency and good governance, but nepotism and patronage are widespread when doing business in the country; the enforcement of the anti-corruption laws is selective and public officials engage in corruption with impunity. As many as 500 people, including prominent Saudi Arabian princes, government ministers, and businesspeople, were arrested in an anti-corruption campaign in November 2017.^[192]

Al ash-Sheikh and role of the ulema

Saudi Arabia is unique in giving the ulema (the body of Islamic religious leaders and jurists) a direct role in government.^[193] The preferred ulema are of the Salafi movement. The ulema have been a key influence in major government decisions, for example the imposition of the oil embargo in 1973 and

the invitation to foreign troops to Saudi Arabia in 1990.^[194] In addition, they have had a major role in the judicial and education systems^[195] and a monopoly of authority in religious and social morals.^[196]

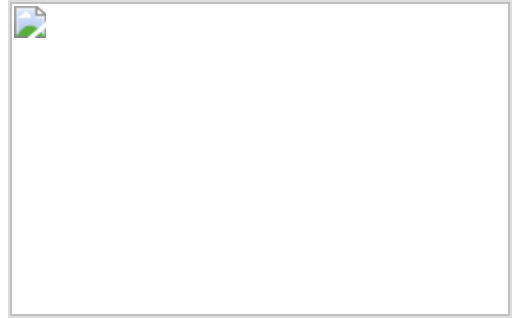
By the 1970s, as a result of oil wealth and the modernization initiated by King Faisal, important changes to Saudi society were underway, and the power of the ulema was in decline.^[197] However, this changed following the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 by Islamist radicals.^[198] The government's response to the crisis included strengthening the ulema's powers and increasing their financial support:^[113] in particular, they were given greater control over the education system^[198] and allowed to enforce the stricter observance of Wahhabi rules of moral and social behaviour.^[113] After his accession to the throne in 2005, King Abdullah took steps to reduce the powers of the ulema, for instance transferring control over girls' education to the Ministry of Education.^[199]

The ulema have historically been led by the Al ash-Sheikh,^[200] the country's leading religious family.^[196] The Al ash-Sheikh are the descendants of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the 18th-century founder of the Wahhabi form of Sunni Islam which is today dominant in Saudi Arabia.^[201] The family is second in prestige only to the Al Saud (the royal family)^[202] with whom they formed a "mutual support pact"^[203] and power-sharing arrangement nearly 300 years ago.^[194] The pact, which persists to this day,^[203] is based on the Al Saud maintaining the Al ash-Sheikh's authority in religious matters and upholding and propagating Wahhabi doctrine. In return, the Al ash-Sheikh support the Al Saud's political authority^[204] thereby using its religious-moral authority to legitimize the royal family's rule.^[205] Although the Al ash-Sheikh's domination of the ulema has diminished in recent decades,^[206] they still hold the most important religious posts and are closely linked to the Al Saud by a high degree of intermarriage.^[196]

Legal system

The primary source of law is the Islamic Sharia derived from the teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah (the traditions of the Prophet).^[171] Saudi Arabia is unique among modern Muslim states in that Sharia is not codified and there is no system of judicial precedent, allowing judges to use independent legal reasoning to make a decision. Thus, divergent judgments arise even in apparently identical cases,^[208] making predictability of legal interpretation difficult.^[209] Saudi judges tend to follow the principles of the Hanbali school of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) found in pre-modern texts^[210] and noted for its literalist interpretation of the Qur'an and hadith.^[211] However, in 2021, Saudi Arabia announced judicial reforms which will lead to an entirely codified law that eliminates discrepancies.^[212]

Royal decrees are the other main source of law but are referred to as *regulations* rather than *laws* because they are subordinate to the Sharia.^[171] Royal decrees supplement Sharia in areas such as labour, commercial and corporate law. Additionally, traditional tribal law and custom remain



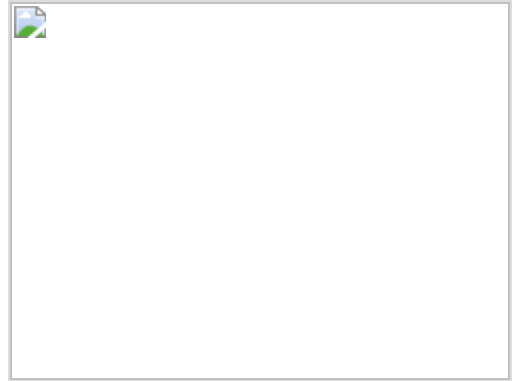
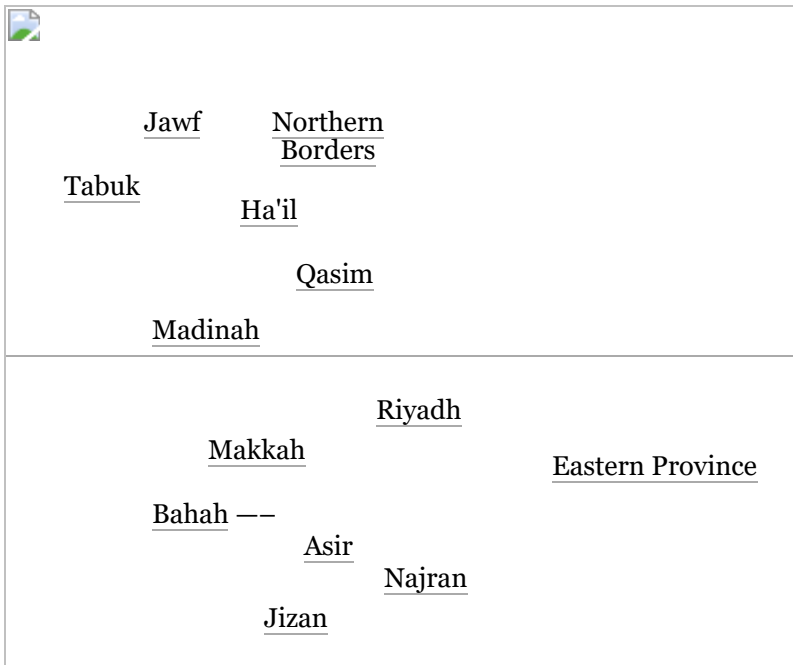
Abdullah ibn Muhammad Al ash-Sheikh with Bogdan Borusewicz in the Polish Senate, 26 May 2014

significant.^[213] Extra-Sharia government tribunals usually handle disputes relating to specific royal decrees.^[214] Final appeal from both Sharia courts and government tribunals is to the king, and all courts and tribunals follow Sharia rules of evidence and procedure.^[215]

Retaliatory punishments, or Qisas, are practised: for instance, an eye can be surgically removed at the insistence of a victim who lost his own eye.^[216] Families of someone unlawfully killed can choose between demanding the death penalty or granting clemency in return for a payment of diyya (blood money), by the perpetrator.^[217]

Administrative divisions

Saudi Arabia is divided into 13 regions^[218] (Arabic: مناطق إدارية; *manatiq idāriyya*, sing. منطقة إدارية; *mintaqah idariyya*). The regions are further divided into 118 governorates (Arabic: محافظات; *muhafazat*, sing. محافظة; *muhafazah*). This number includes the 13 regional capitals, which have a different status as municipalities (Arabic: أمانة; *amanah*) headed by mayors (Arabic: أمين; *amin*). The governorates are further subdivided into sub-governorates (Arabic: مراكز; *marakiz*, sing. مركز; *markaz*).



Verses from the Quran. The Quran is the official constitution of the country and a primary source of law. Saudi Arabia is unique in enshrining a religious text as a political document.^[207]

Foreign relations

The foreign policy of Saudi Arabia is officially focused on cooperation with the oil-exporting Gulf States, the unity of the Arab world, Islamic solidarity, and support for the United Nations and multilateralism. It joined the UN in 1945^{[39][219]} and is a founding member of the Arab League, Gulf Cooperation Council, Muslim World League, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.^{[f][220]}

Saudi Arabia joined the World Trade Organization in 2005 and plays a prominent role in the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the G20.^[39] Although part of the Non-Aligned Movement, Saudi Arabia is generally considered pro-Western.^[221]

Since co-founding OPEC in 1960, Saudi Arabia's oil pricing policy has officially aimed to stabilize the world oil market and moderate sharp price movements so as not to jeopardize Western economies.^{[39][222]} In 1973, Saudi Arabia and other Arab nations imposed an oil embargo against the United States, United Kingdom, Japan, and other Western nations that supported Israel in the Yom Kippur War.^[223] The embargo caused an oil crisis with many short- and long-term effects on global politics and the global economy.^[224]

Saudi Arabia and the United States are strategic allies;^{[225][226][227]} the U.S. has been the most influential foreign power in the kingdom since the end of World War II.^[228] Saudi Arabia's role in the 1991 Gulf War, particularly the stationing of American troops on Saudi soil from 1991, prompted the development of a hostile Islamist response internally.^[229] As a result, Saudi Arabia has, to some extent, distanced itself from the U.S.; for example, it refused to support or participate in the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.^[138] Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia remains a key strategic ally of the U.S. and a leading importer of American arms.^[230] In 2017, President Donald Trump and King Salman signed a series of letters of intent for Saudi Arabia to purchase arms from the United States totaling \$350 billion over 10 years.^{[231][232]}

China and Saudi Arabia's relationship has grown significantly in recent decades. A significant number of Saudi Arabians have also expressed a positive view of China.^{[233][234][235]} In February 2019, Crown Prince Mohammad defended China's Xinjiang internment camps for Uyghur Muslims.^{[236][237]} According to *The Diplomat*, Saudi Arabia's human rights record has "come under frequent attack abroad and so defending China becomes a roundabout way of defending themselves."^[238]

Saudi Arabia has traditionally sought to preserve the regional status quo by using its financial, diplomatic, and military resources to limit the effects of revolutionary uprisings in neighboring countries.^[239] It has been engaged in a proxy conflict with Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which had called for the overthrow of monarchies and secular governments. The consequences of the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the Arab Spring (2010–2012) led to increasing alarm within the Saudi monarchy over the rise of Iran's influence in the region.^[240] These fears were reflected in comments of King Abdullah,^[199] who privately urged the United States to attack Iran and "cut off the head of the snake".^[241]

Saudi Arabia has been seen as a moderating influence in the Arab–Israeli conflict, periodically putting forward a peace plan between Israel and the Palestinians and condemning Hezbollah.^[242]

In 2017, as part of its nuclear power programme, Saudi Arabia planned to extract uranium domestically, taking a step towards self-sufficiency in producing nuclear fuel.^[243] Subsequently, the kingdom has been exploring foreign partnerships for constructing its first civil nuclear reactors, including with the United States, China, Russia, South Korea, and France.^[244]