

Saudi Arabia - Human Rights Scorecard ¹

Saudi Arabia, officially known as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, is the largest Arab state in Western Asia by land area, and the second-largest in the Arab world after Algeria.²

Official language: Arabic

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

Government: Unitary Islamic absolute monarchy

- King: Salman bin Abdulaziz
- Crown Prince: Muqrin bin Abdulaziz
- Deputy Crown Prince: Muhammad bin Nayef

Death penalty: Retentionist

Population: 28.1 million

Life expectancy: 73.9 years

Under-5 mortality: 21 per 1000

Adult literacy: 86.1 percent



Section 1: Respect for the Integrity of the Person

Respect for the integrity of the individual is the most fundamental of human rights groupings. It guarantees protection of the person to ensure the right to life, and freedom from torture. It also prevents arbitrary detention, and disappearances, and ensures the right to a free and fair trial when accused.

Freedom from arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life



Partially respected ³

While there are no reports of recent political killings, the country lacks a written penal code listing criminal offenses and associated penalties. As a result, capital punishment can and is, in fact, imposed as a penalty for crimes such as sorcery or homosexuality, among others.

Freedom from disappearance



Partially respected ⁴

There are no reports of politically motivated disappearances in Saudi Arabia. However, the government has arrested or detained individuals while refusing to either acknowledge the detention or provide the person's whereabouts for long periods of time.

Freedom from torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment



Largely disrespected ^{5 6}

There have been many reports of torture at the hands of Saudi security officials. Moreover, the courts continue to administer corporal punishment as a judicial sentence, usually in the form of floggings and amputations. Executions are occasionally carried out in the form of beheadings.

Freedom from arbitrary arrest or detention



Largely disrespected ⁷

While laws exist to prevent arbitrary arrest or detention, the government's application of these laws is inconsistent. There are reports of individuals being detained indefinitely without awareness of their rights or access to legal counsel.

Freedom from denial of fair public trial



Largely disrespected ⁸

Since the judiciary must work in partnership with the King and his executive branch, it is not independent. Numerous irregularities have been noted in the cases of political dissidents.

Freedom from arbitrary interference with privacy, family, home or correspondence



Largely disrespected ⁹

Contrary to Saudi law, the government often employs surveillance practices to monitor or suppress demonstrations and other political dissidence.

Section 2: Respect for Civil Liberties

Civil liberties are a basic category of internationally recognized human rights. They include the freedoms of expression, assembly, association, education, and religion. These are inalienable rights which should not be breached by government, and should ensure the rights of all, including women and minority groups.

Freedom of speech and press (*Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index*)¹⁰



Score: 56.88, Rank: 163 / 179 – Highly controlled, limited or intimidated^{11 12}

Neither freedom of speech nor freedom of the press are protected under Saudi civil law. As a result, the state often censors the dissemination of information which is critical of the government. Most media are controlled by government-friendly actors, resulting in self-censorship.

Freedom from academic censorship



Partially respected¹³

The government often coerces academics into practicing self-censorship and prohibits conferences with foreign academics at public universities. However, there are cases where academics have been allowed to express their own opinions while retaining their positions.

Freedom of peaceful assembly and association



Largely disrespected¹⁴

Neither freedom of peaceful assembly nor freedom of association are protected under Saudi law. The government strictly prohibits the creation of political parties and limits organized public assembly of any type.

Freedom of religion



Largely disrespected¹⁵

The official religion of Saudi Arabia is Sunni Islam, which forms the basis of the country's constitution and its legal system. It is strictly prohibited to publicly practice any other religion, and religious minorities often face political, economic, legal, and social discrimination.

Protection of refugees and stateless persons



Largely disrespected¹⁶

Only individuals who have a Saudi father are granted citizenship. As a result, many individuals face issues of statelessness. Refugee and asylum issues are managed by UNHCR though there are numerous barriers to obtaining refugee status or naturalization. Employment and access to basic services are reserved for Saudi citizens.

Overall protection of civil liberties (*FreedomHouse Civil Liberties Index*)^{17 18}



7 / 7 – Not free^{19 20}

The government engages in large-scale suppression of political dissidents and activists. Individuals have few civil rights (for example, freedom of assembly) and the country lacks an independent judiciary. Religious minorities, such as Shi'ite Muslims, are often subject to discrimination.

Section 3: Respect for Political Rights

Political rights ensure all members of society are able to influence the political process. The assessment of political rights includes an examination of the electoral process and the selection of representatives, the political empowerment of the general public, the tolerance of dissent, the accountability of government, etc..

Overall protection of political rights (*FreedomHouse Political Rights Index*)²¹



7 / 7 – Not free²²

Political parties and organized political dissent are prohibited by the state. The King effectively controls the government and legislation can only be ratified by royal decree. While there has been minor progress in recent years, women are generally excluded from the political sphere.

Section 4: Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The civil, political, economic and social rights exercised within a country are often modulated by the degree of transparency and freedom from corruption. Various international metrics assess transparency and corruption, including the OECD anti-bribery convention, the Bribe Payers Index, and the Open Budget Index.

Transparency and freedom from corruption (*Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index*)²³



Score: 49%, Rank: 55 / 175 – Some corruption^{24 25}

Though the monarchy established an anticorruption commission in 2011, it has been largely ineffective and corruption is relatively widespread. Oil revenues are often used as a source of patronage and it is unclear what portion becomes a source of private wealth for the royal family.

Section 5: Governmental Response to Criticism

This section deals specifically with the response heads of state have to civil society or international human rights reports.

Governmental attitudes vis-à-vis independent investigations of alleged human rights violations



Largely disrespected²⁶

The government forbids international human rights NGOs from being based within the country. International representatives may visit on a limited basis, but the government makes little commitment to transparency. Human rights groups are often regarded suspiciously.

Section 6: Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Legal and social discriminatory practices related to sex, race, creed or sexual orientation, are violations of human rights. Countries with strong civil liberty traditions should have a fair legal system that ensures the rule of law, allows free economic activity, and ensures equality of opportunity for all.

Rights of women (World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index)²⁷



Score: 60.6%, Rank: 130 / 142 – Very unequal rights^{28 29}

Women and girls face severe inequality in Saudi Arabia. They are prohibited from traveling, engaging in business transactions, undergoing medical procedures, or getting married without the consent of a male guardian. Women are also banned from driving.

Rights of Children (KidsRights Index Overall Score)³⁰



Score: 72.9%, Rank: 61 / 165 – Protected^{31 32}

According to KidsRights, children are overall relatively well-protected in Saudi Arabia. There are some cases of child marriage, but they are generally limited to rural areas. Unfortunately, Saudi Arabia is also 1 of only 4 countries worldwide that allows for the execution of child offenders.

Rights of persons with disabilities



Partially respected³³

Saudi Arabia has no laws forbidding discrimination against those with disabilities. However, persons with disabilities can participate in civic affairs and there has been government-sponsored research on quality of life issues. Vocational projects often bring the disabled into the mainstream.

Rights of national/racial/ethnic minorities (e.g. discrimination, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism etc.)



Largely disrespected³⁴

There is widespread discrimination against members of national, racial, or ethnic minorities, many of whom are migrant workers. Persons from Africa and Asia face particular social and economic discrimination, including assault. There is also prejudice based on tribal and non-tribal lineage.

Freedom from abuse and discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity



Largely disrespected^{35 36}

Homosexual acts are illegal and punishable by death.

Section 7: Workers' Rights

Workers' rights are a group of legal rights relating to labour relations between workers and their employers. At their core are things like the ability to negotiate pay, benefits, terms of employment, and safe working conditions. These rights often devolve from the right to unionize and access to collective bargaining.

Rights to freedom of association and to collective bargaining



Largely disrespected³⁷

Saudi law does not allow for independent unions, nor does it protect the right to engage in collective bargaining. No labour unions currently exist and workers can face termination or imprisonment if they demand representation. Migrant workers can be deported for union-related actions.

Freedom from forced or compulsory labour



Largely disrespected³⁸

Laws prohibiting forced labour are rarely enforced, which primarily affects migrant workers. Migrant workers may have their passports withheld, their movements restricted, and regularly suffer under various forms of abuse from their employer.

Freedom from forced labour for children, and a minimum age of employment



Partially respected³⁹

Minimum age of employment and protection of children from child labour is generally respected. However, laws did not fully protect children from foreign countries, many of whom come to Saudi Arabia from poorer economies in the region.

Right to acceptable conditions of work



Partially respected⁴⁰

The state enforces a minimum wage, however, it is not applicable to migrant workers. The state employs labour/health inspectors and provides legal recourse for workers engaged in disputes. Illegal, noncitizen workers often face difficult working conditions.

Right to employment



5.5% – Reasonable unemployment^{41 42}

Saudi Arabia's unemployment rate has remained relatively steady at a reasonable level. However, unemployment is comparatively higher amongst its youth population, many of whom lack the skills and education necessary to compete in the private sector.

¹ A hybrid human rights and freedoms model, leveraging both legal principles and intuitive classifications, has been used for this human rights assessment. The CJPME Foundation has sought to integrate as many independent sources and metrics into its summary analysis as possible. In many cases, for qualitative material pertaining to the respect for a particular right in a country, the CJPME Foundation has drawn on material from Human Rights Watch and the US State Department country reports. Human Rights Watch (HRW) publishes a World Report which assesses the respect for human rights in each country. HRW uses a methodology of local reporting and interviewing, combined with research and analysis to assess the level of respect of human rights. The U.S State Department keeps an updated publication on the state of human rights internationally. Their system of research and accountability draws from the research of official US State Department officials, as well as local civil-society and international human rights organizations.

² Commonly-known information on the country is drawn from various Internet sources, including Google country pages, and Amnesty International.

³ "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013 Saudi Arabia." U.S Department of State. Accessed January 12, 2015.

<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper>.

⁴ Ibid. U.S Department of State. For purposes of the present analysis, a "disappearance" is different than simple arbitrary detention because a "disappearance" is considered permanent.

⁵ Ibid. U.S Department of State.

⁶ "Saudi Arabia." World Report 2014: Saudi Arabia. Accessed January 12, 2015. <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/saudi-arabia>

⁷ "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013 Saudi Arabia." U.S Department of State. Accessed January 12, 2015.

<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper>.

⁸ Ibid. U.S Department of State.

⁹ Ibid. U.S Department of State.

¹⁰ The Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders ranks the level of freedom of information in 179 countries. This is determined through the polling of local NGOs and freedom of expression civil society organizations across the globe. This index is also determined by local correspondents and follow-up work done on reports of infringement to press freedom where ever it takes place. Their methodology looks at six different indicators: 1) Media pluralism, 2) Media independence, 3) Media atmosphere and self-censorship, 4) the Law around media, 5) Media transparency, and 6) Media infrastructure. The score from these six indicators is combined with a rating for the violence against journalists in the country to create an overall score. The CJPME Foundation classifies the Press Freedom Index as follows: 0 – 14.99 (25 countries), Largely free, diverse and independent; 15 – 24.99 (29 countries), Mostly free, diverse and independent; 25 – 29.99 (32 countries), Partially free, diverse and independent; 30 – 39.99 (49 countries), Partially controlled, limited or intimidated; 40 & higher (42 countries), Highly controlled, limited or intimidated.

¹¹ "World Press Freedom Index." Reporters Without Borders: For Freedom of Information. Accessed November 23, 2014. <http://rsf.org/index2014/en-index2014.php>.

¹² "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013 Saudi Arabia." U.S Department of State. Accessed January 12, 2015.

<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper>.

¹³ Ibid. U.S. Department of State.

¹⁴ Ibid. U.S. Department of State.

¹⁵ "International Religious Freedom Report for 2013 Saudi Arabia." U.S. Department of State. Accessed January 12, 2015.

<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>.

¹⁶ Ibid. U.S. Department of State.

¹⁷ Freedom House is an internationally recognized NGO based in the U.S which documents and rates the quality of democratic practice in a given country. Freedom House splits its grading system between the two areas of civil and political rights in a country. On each scale, the Freedom House rating is 1-2.5 (free), 3-5.5 (partly free) and 6-7 (not free).

¹⁸ Freedom House's Civil Liberties index measures things such as a) freedom of expression and belief, b) associational and organizational rights, c) the rule of law, and d) personal autonomy and individual rights. Freedom House rates countries as 1-2.5 (free), 3-5.5 (partly free) and 6-7 (not free). Accessed Dec. 9, 2014

<https://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world-2014/methodology#.VldwWzHF98F>

¹⁹ "Saudi Arabia." Freedom in the World 2014: Saudi Arabia. Accessed January 12, 2015, 2014. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/saudi-arabia-0#.VLQwW2TF-lw>

²⁰ "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013 Saudi Arabia." U.S Department of State. Accessed January 12, 2015.

<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper>.

²¹ See footnote about the Freedom House organization above. The Freedom House Political Rights assessment looks at a) the electoral process, b) political pluralism and participation, and c) the functioning of government. Accessed Dec. 9, 2014 <https://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world-2014/methodology#.VldwWzHF98F>

²² "Saudi Arabia." Freedom in the World 2014: Saudi Arabia. Accessed January 12, 2015, 2014. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/saudi-arabia-0#.VLQwW2TF-lw>

²³ Transparency International (TI) publishes a "Corruption Perceptions Index" annually, which is based on independent research and polling. The main categories of corruption are broken down within the index to provide particulars on issues including things such as perceptions of corruption, control of corruption, and financial secrecy. A country receives a score on 100; the higher the score, the less corrupt the society. The CJPME foundation has classified them into categories as follows: 80-100 (11 countries): Very limited corruption; 60-79 (27 countries): Limited corruption; 40-59 (41 countries): Some corruption; 20-39 (80 countries): Highly corrupt; 0-19 (15 countries): Extremely corrupt

²⁴ "Saudi Arabia." Corruption by Country. Accessed January 12, 2015. <http://www.transparency.org/country#SAU>.

²⁵ "Saudi Arabia." Freedom in the World 2014: Saudi Arabia. Accessed January 12, 2015. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/saudi-arabia-0#.VLQwW2TF-lw>

²⁶ "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013 Saudi Arabia." U.S Department of State. Accessed January 12, 2015. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper>.

²⁷ This metric is based on the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index. 0.00 denotes inequality between the sexes, and 1.00 denotes fully equality between the sexes. This index looks at four subdomains: economic participation and opportunity; educational attainment; health and survival; and political empowerment. Each country is given a percentage score; the higher the percentage, the better the protections. The CJPME Foundation classed the percentages as follows: 80-100% (5 countries): Almost equal rights; 70-79% (60 countries): Somewhat unequal rights; 0-69% (77 countries): Very unequal rights

²⁸ "Saudi Arabia." World Economic Forum. Accessed January 12, 2015. <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2014/economies/#economy=SAU>

²⁹ "Saudi Arabia." World Report 2014: Saudi Arabia. Accessed January 12, 2015. <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/saudi-arabia>

³⁰ This metric is based on the KidsRights Index Overall Score. This index has five subdomains: life expectancy and maternal mortality; health; education; protection; and child rights environment. Each country is given a percentage score; the higher the percentage, the better the protections. KidsRights classes the countries according to these percentages, and the CJPME Foundation has given each class a term as follows: 70-100% (77 countries): Protected; 60-70% (29 countries): Somewhat protected; 45-50% (33 countries): Slightly vulnerable; 30-45% (12 countries): Highly vulnerable; Lower than 30% (11 countries): Extremely vulnerable

³¹ "The KidsRights Index: Overall Score." The KidsRights Index. January 1, 2014. Accessed January 12, 2015. <http://www.kidsrightsindex.org/Index/Overallscore.aspx>

³² "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013 Saudi Arabia." U.S Department of State. Accessed January 12, 2015. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper>.

³³ Ibid. U.S. Department of State.

³⁴ Ibid. U.S. Department of State.

³⁵ "State-Sponsored Homophobia: A World Survey of Laws." International Lesbian Gay and Intersex Association. Accessed January 12, 2015. http://old.ilga.org/Statehomophobia/ILGA_SSHR_2014_Eng.pdf

³⁶ ILGA, the International, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, was founded in 1978 on the principle of highlighting state sponsored homophobia where it exists around the world. ILGA annually publishes a map with an accompanying report on sexual and gender based harassment, which focuses on both the legal and non-legal acts of state sponsored discrimination.

³⁷ "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013 Saudi Arabia." U.S Department of State. Accessed January 12, 2015. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper>.

³⁸ Ibid. U.S. Department of State.

³⁹ Ibid. U.S. Department of State.

⁴⁰ Ibid. U.S. Department of State. See also a well-done Wikipedia comparison of wage, income and work week metrics across countries at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_minimum_wages_by_country

⁴¹ "Global Employment Trends." International Labour Organization. January 1, 2013. Accessed December 7, 2014. http://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/global-employment-trends/2014/WCMS_233936/lang--en/index.htm.

⁴² "Saudi Arabia, Economy." Central Intelligence Agency. Accessed January 13, 2015. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html>