

World Watch Research

# Saudi Arabia: Background Information

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**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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## Map of country



Saudi Arabia: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
37,474,000	2,274,000	6.1

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

## Recent history

Founded in 1932, Saudi Arabia has been transformed from an under-developed tribal kingdom into one of the richest and most modern nations in the region thanks to the exploitation of its extensive oil reserves. The oil industry grew in the 1950s and drew large numbers of foreign workers to the country, including Christians.

The Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 had minimal impact in Saudi Arabia, where the government banned small-scale protests by the Shiite minority, raised public sector salaries and provided increased benefits for the religious authorities as well as for low-paid workers. Some minor reforms, including easing restrictions on women, were introduced, and women were allowed to vote and run in municipal elections for the first time in 2015. Following King Abdullah's death in 2015, King Salman bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud initiated a military campaign in Yemen together with ten other countries to restore the

government of Yemen which had been expelled by the Shiite Houthis. The ongoing war in Yemen has resulted in a high number of civilian casualties and a humanitarian crisis, leading to worldwide criticism.

King Salman's struggle to manage a young population led to appointing his son, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), as Crown Prince in 2017, who presents himself as a reformer but is consolidating power towards an absolute monarchy. MBS's initiatives have included anti-corruption measures, a war in Yemen, a temporary blockade on Qatar, alongside reforms such as granting women the right to drive, travel without a male escort (although many families still do not permit this) and mix with men that are not relatives. In addition, the religious police have virtually disappeared from the streets, and entertainment in the form of music and cinema is becoming more common. Tourist visas are also now available which contribute to a feeling of increased freedom. These changes have made MBS popular among Saudi youth; however, his involvement in the killing of Mohammed Khashoggi and Saudi Arabia's role in the war in Yemen have been met with widespread criticism internationally.

In 2021 and 2022, cross-border attacks involving Houthi militia and the Saudi-led coalition ceased after a ceasefire was extended twice but ultimately ended in October 2022, leading to renewed hostilities. Saudi Arabia initially explored potential business ties and security arrangements with Israel but in November 2023, hosted a joint summit of the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) launching a humanitarian aid campaign for Gaza and condemning "Israeli aggression". Saudi Arabia refrained from voting for concrete measures and stated that the possibility of normalization with Israel depended on a peaceful resolution of the Palestinian question.

In September 2022, King Salman bin Abdulaziz promoted Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) from Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister to Prime Minister, continuing the generational transfer of power. In a groundbreaking move, Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed to restore diplomatic relations after seven years in March 2023. In May 2023 it was announced that Saudi Arabia was also strengthening diplomatic ties with Syria. Diplomatic missions between the two countries are to re-open after 11 years of closure.

In December 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran reaffirmed their commitment to normalizing relations, and Riyadh asked the USA to show restraint in responding to Houthi attacks in the Red Sea amid tensions in the Gaza conflict. In January 2024, Riyadh made normalization with Israel contingent on Palestinian statehood. In March 2024, Saudi Arabia continued diplomatic efforts to end the war in Gaza and continued US-Saudi talks on normalizing relations with Israel.

In January 2024, it was announced that Saudi Arabia had opened a liquor store for non-Muslims in the diplomatic quarter of the capital Riyadh, the first commercial outlet for alcoholic beverages in the kingdom since the ban on the public sale and consumption of alcohol was imposed in 1952. The liberalization of alcohol laws for non-Muslims is part of social reforms under the Vision 2030 development plan, which includes the development of the tourism sector with large hotels, resorts, entertainment venues, sports venues and (currently alcohol-free) restaurants and bars.

In general, there seems to be more openness in society to expressing and exploring new ideas, including ideas different to those within traditional Islam. One of the options being explored by some citizens is the Christian faith. There are also reports that many of the younger generation would not be against allowing the presence of churches in Saudi Arabia.

## Political and legal landscape

The country is an authoritarian state and absolute monarchy. Its royal family – the House of Saud – includes approximately 15,000 members, of whom about 200 have political influence and have held key positions for many years. King Salman is both chief of state and head of government. Political parties are not allowed and there are no national democratic elections to choose political leaders. Every four years the king appoints a Council of Ministers that functions as a cabinet and includes many royal family members. The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index ([EIU 2023](#)) therefore classifies the government of Saudi Arabia as 'authoritarian'.

The relationship between the religious establishment and the House of Saud is uneasy and determined by conflicting and complying interests, but both power elements are important to successfully unite the traditionally tribal Saudi society. However, the religious authorities are losing credibility among the population. Whereas they had previously banned satellite TV, Internet, camera phones and travelling abroad, now they are using these technological advances themselves. On the one hand, they have gained in popularity by using these means (e.g. social media), on the other hand it has led to criticism of their being inconsistent. Additionally, the unpopular religious police were stripped of their power to arrest from 2016 onwards, possibly in an attempt to please citizens. The recent changes and reforms implemented by MBS are welcomed by the youth, but have caused dissatisfaction with the religious establishment. More changes are likely to come due to a combination of the authoritarian style of the king and MBS, the call for change by the younger generation and the need for reforms from an economic perspective. This is likely to further reduce the partnership between the religious authorities and the government.

The Quran and Sunna (literally "Traditions") are declared to be the Constitution of Saudi Arabia, interpreted according to the strict Hanbali school by religious elders. Saudi Arabia's legal system is based on Islamic law (Sharia). On this basis, only the officially recognized Wahhabi Islam is permitted to be practiced publicly and it is forbidden to openly practice any other religion. All Saudi citizens are assumed to be Muslim and expatriates of other faiths can only practice their faith privately. The death penalty for apostasy from Islam is in force, though there have been no known examples of judicial executions for apostasy in recent years. Humanists International ranks Saudi Arabia's government and constitution (along with "Education and Children's Rights," "Society and Community," and "Expression and Advocacy of Humanist Values") in the category of "serious violations," making the Saudi kingdom one of the worst-scoring countries in the [Freedom of Thought Index 2021](#). By leaving Islam, Saudi Christians are punishable under the apostasy law, which carries the death penalty. However, courts have not carried out a death sentence for apostasy in recent years.

### Gender perspective

Saudi Arabia was also one of the worst performing country on Georgetown's [Women, Peace and Security Index \(2019/20\)](#) in respect to legal discrimination against women. It performed better in the 2021/22 Index, driven in part by legal reforms that eased restrictions on women's employment ([GIWPS Saudi Arabia](#), accessed 30 July 2024). Other positive reforms in recent years include an [easing of travel restrictions for women](#) (BBC News, 2 August, 2019), as well as reports announcing that women can attend the Hajj without a male guardian ([Middle East Eye, 11 October 2022](#)) and can now take up [specific roles](#) within the armed forces (Saudi Moments, 27 April 2023). Significant gender inequalities

remain, however. Without [permission](#) from a male guardian, women remain unable to leave prison or obtain certain forms of healthcare ([HRW 2023 Saudi Arabia country chapter](#)). Also, although women can now travel without a male relative, many families do not consider this to be proper behavior for their daughters and would punish them if they went against the family's wishes. Within Saudi culture many would consider a female travelling alone to be a prostitute. Guardians can file cases against their female relative for 'disobedience', which can lead to forced returns to the family home, or imprisonment. While an amendment to the Legal Pleadings System in June 2021 suggests that there is no longer enforcement power for court orders to return women to a male relative in such cases, it failed to prevent courts from penalizing women financially and has been insufficiently implemented ([HRW 2023 Saudi Arabia country chapter](#)).

Whilst Saudi Arabia ratified CEDAW in 2000, it made a general reservation, whereby precedence was given to the provisions of Sharia in any areas of conflict with the Convention ([CEDAW, 2006](#)). Family laws continue to discriminate against women, serving to trap women in marriages ([UNFPA, 2019](#)). For example, domestic violence legislation is insufficient and marital rape is not criminalized. By law, a man has the right to divorce his wife without giving a reason, whereas a woman must file for divorce through the courts, which is hard to achieve and will likely result in her losing custody of her children.

## Religious landscape

Saudi Arabia: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	2,274,000	6.1
Muslim	33,817,000	90.2
Hindu	775,000	2.1
Buddhist	131,000	0.3
Ethnic religionist	72,800	0.2
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	7,500	0.0
Atheist	11,700	0.0
Agnostic	252,000	0.7
Other	134,600	0.4
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

The desert kingdom controls the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina (the traditional birth and burial place of Mohammed, the main prophet of Islam) and is defined by Wahhabism, a purist and strict interpretation of Islam. Other religions are not allowed to be practiced openly. A Shiite minority

of approximately 10% exists and suffers discrimination. It is estimated that there are close to 2.3 million Christians in Saudi Arabia. However, these are not Saudi Arabian citizens but mostly expatriate Asians working temporarily in the country. There are also Christians from other parts of the world. No official churches are allowed in Saudi Arabia of any Christian denomination. The small number of Saudi Arabian Christians meet in secret, but a larger number have no Christian community to participate in. For some this is due to fear, but for others it is because they do not know that there are other Christians besides expatriates (with whom it would not be wise to mix for reasons of security).

Saudi Arabia finances missionary efforts beyond its own borders through the Islamic missionary organization, "Muslim World League", based in Mecca. Islamic proselytizing literature and missionaries are sent abroad and the construction of Wahhabi mosques in various countries is being financed through oil dollars. Also, the country sponsors academic institutions on condition that centers for Islamic Studies are also built. Apart from numerous copies of the Quran, large amounts of literature promoting hatred towards non-Muslims are also shipped abroad every year, for instance to countries in Africa, Southeast Asia and Western Europe.

### Gender perspective

Against this religious backdrop, daily life is challenging for both Christian men and women and many live out their faith in secret, especially [converts](#) (USIRF 2022 Saudi Arabia). Conversion from Islam to Christianity is unacceptable under Islamic law. If discovered, men and boys are more likely to be forced out of the home, whereas women and girls are usually isolated and abused within the home. Both genders risk being killed to 'restore' the family honor.

### Economic landscape

According to [UNDP Human Development Report](#) Saudi Arabia:

- **Life expectancy at birth:** 77.2 years ([CIA World Factbook](#), 2024 est.)
- **Expected years of schooling (2022):** 15.2
- **Gross national income (GNI) per capita:** \$46,130

Other information:

- **Unemployment rate:** 7.7% (Source: [General Authority for Statistics, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia - GASTAT](#), Q4/2023, 25 June 2024)
- **Youth unemployment:** 15.6% (World Bank, quoted by [Statistica](#), June 2024)

A country expert states that not every Saudi has the desire nor the necessity to work. It is very likely that a large part of the 7.7% unemployment figure is represented by people who do not have to work because their family supports them.

According to [World Bank's Macro Poverty Outlook 2024](#) Saudi Arabia (accessed 30 July 2024):

- "Subsequent OPEC+ decisions of cutting oil production is adversely affecting Saudi Arabia's overall GDP, fiscal, and external balance positions. Meanwhile, the performance of non-oil private sector is robust and continue to reap benefits from reform implementation. Inflation remains

contained supported by generous subsidies, tight monetary policy, and cheaper imports. An escalation in regional and global armed conflicts, volatility in oil prices, and tighter-than needed global financial conditions are key risks to the outlook."

Saudi Arabia has the largest economy in the Middle East and North Africa, with a GDP of over \$1 trillion. Saudi Arabia ranks as the largest exporter of petroleum and plays a leading role in OPEC. It holds some 16% of the world's known petroleum reserves and the petroleum sector accounts for the majority of export earnings and budget revenues. This success has created an economic interdependence with the West, which is where the main consumer demand is found. This has led to a strong political and military relationship, with a series of US military bases being allowed to continue operating in the country.

Under its Vision 2030 plan, the country is actively pursuing economic diversification, investing in sectors such as tourism, manufacturing, and technology. The non-oil sector has grown significantly, accounting for [50% of GDP](#) in 2023, a historic high (Arab News, 15 March 2024). Despite these efforts, the economy remains vulnerable to oil price fluctuations, as reflected in the recent economic performance with growth of 8.7% in 2022 followed by a slowdown to 0.8% in 2023. The government is pursuing an expansionary fiscal policy to support non-oil economic growth, which is expected to lead to budget deficits in the coming years.

Many expatriates left the country in 2019, including a large number of Asian Christians, due to the introduction of a new tax making it less attractive for expatriates to live and work in Saudi Arabia. As a result of COVID-19 and its impact on the economy, the number of expatriates in Saudi Arabia decreased further in 2020. On the other hand, the number of Saudi citizens employed in the labor market rose. In the fourth quarter of 2023, the unemployment rate in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia saw a further decline for both Saudis and expatriates.

### **Gender perspective**

Whilst Saudi Arabia is one of the richest countries in the world, women are often economically dependent on men, in part due to patrilineal inheritance practices. Although girls enjoy gender parity in education, they are restricted from assuming jobs in certain fields, and can only begin a position with the consent of their male guardian, which is often denied. The female labor force participation rate was 27.8% in 2022, compared to 80% for men; an increase from 24.6% in 2019 for the former ([World Bank data Saudi Arabia](#)). The increase in female labor force participation can be linked, in part, to the [Vision 2030](#) female empowerment reforms which have brought about various legal amendments aimed at expanding women's rights in the workplace, including enhanced protection against employment discrimination (Saudi Government, Vision 2030, accessed 30 July 2024). Labor market data from the first quarter of 2023 showed an increased participation rate of 36% for Saudi women (34% for non-Saudi women), and 68.3% for Saudi men (92.9% for non-Saudi men). Even if in the workplace, women earn significantly less than men; according the World Economic Forum, women earn only 24% of an average man's salary (WEF, [Global Gender Gap Report 2021](#), p. 26). Research indicates that Saudi men privately believe that women should be allowed the right to work, but underestimate the extent to which other men will share this viewpoint ([UBS Center Policy Brief, 2019](#)). Some authorities are offering incentives to employers to hire women, and the government has opened up new opportunities for women in the workplace. Highlighting the eagerness of women to work, a

recent job application for female train drivers (a role previously denied to women) drew over 28,000 applicants ([CNN, 17 February 2022](#)). Female unemployment rate fell to its lowest in 20 years in March of 2022 ([Bloomberg, 29 September 2022](#)). The objective of the Vision 2030 reform plan, among others, is to create 1 million jobs for women, reduce the female unemployment rate to 7 percent by 2030, and increase the female labor force participation rate to over 30% ([World Trade Organization, 30 June 2021](#)).

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Saudi Arabia](#) (accessed 30 July 2024):

- **Population and median age:** 36.5 million / 32.4 years (2024 est.)
- **Main ethnic groups:** Arab 90%, Afro-Asian 10%
- **Main language:** Arabic (official)
- **Urban population:** 85% of total population (2023)
- **Literacy rate:** 98.6%

According to [UNDP HDR Saudi Arabia](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Human Development Index (HDI) (2022):** Saudi Arabia ranks 40 out of 193 countries and territories with a HDI of 0.875 and is thus in the category of countries with a very high human development (e.g. with good education, long life expectancy and high income per capita)
- **Gender inequality Index (GII):** 0.229 ranking it 55 out of 166 countries in 2022.

The UN Development Program summarizes the main areas which improved as follows: "Between 1990 and 2022, Saudi Arabia's life expectancy at birth changed by 9.0 years, expected years of schooling changed by 4.1 years and mean years of schooling changed by 5.7 years. Saudi Arabia's GNI per capita changed by about 15.6 percent between 1990 and 2022."

Saudi Arabia's social and cultural outlook is changing. The increased role of the Internet, social media and satellite TV has radically influenced Saudi youth culture. The majority of the population is under thirty and they (especially women) are longing for more freedom. Social reforms introduced by the young Crown Prince who was appointed in 2017, are a step forward in that respect. He has [allowed women drivers](#) and various forms of entertainment (Reuters, 27 September 2017). At the end of 2018, a series of concerts were organized alongside the Formula E race in Riyadh. For the first time, dancing was allowed with no gender segregation and about 1,000 foreign tourists were allowed into the country with a special visa to attend these events. Since September 2019, about 50 countries can obtain tourist visas. In January 2024, it was announced that Saudi Arabia had opened a store selling alcoholic beverages for non-Muslims in the diplomatic quarter of the capital Riyadh, as part of social reforms to develop the tourism sector.

But at the same time, there is still hardly any freedom of speech. According to [Freedom House's Global Freedom Index 2024](#):

- "Saudis can engage in some degree of private discussion on political and other topics, including criticism of certain aspects of government performance, but the climate for free expression has

deteriorated sharply since the 2018 assassination of Jamal Khashoggi and the arrests of many prominent writers and activists, which served as warnings to ordinary Saudis to avoid dissent. Self-censorship is virtually ubiquitous."

Social dissatisfaction has been in existence for at least twenty years and has been bought off with large sums of money, for example in the form of allocations for housing finance. However, plans to cut civil servant allowances and triple sales tax could stir popular discontent. Changes in the social and cultural landscape have also resulted in more open condemnation of conservative opinions on social media. However, criticism of the government and authorities still comes with high risk. Also, for former Muslims to talk openly about their conversion to Christianity is still not possible without facing the same levels of persecution as in previous years. But there is hope that over time even this will become more possible.

### Gender perspective

Internet and social media are also impacting the situation of women in the Wahhabi kingdom. Never before have they stood up for their rights on this scale. Saudi women are starting to study and travel abroad and are sharing their experiences on social media, which is exceptional for a country where until August 2019, women needed the permission of a male family member to travel. In addition, [personal status laws changed](#) in March 2022, so that women no longer need approval to marry and it is more difficult to force them into marriage (The National News, 9 March 2022). Yet this is still a problem in many families, as the family often still determines the choice of the marriage partner and women prefer not to risk damaging their relationship with family. Also, according to [USCIRF 2023 Saudi Arabia CPC](#), the March 2022 Saudi Personal Status Law "codifies systematic religious freedom restrictions affecting women, including the male guardianship system and a legal prohibition on Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men." Due to the economic situation, women are also needed for joining the workforce. As a result, gender segregation is gradually disappearing. Time will tell how far women can go in this still very conservative Islamic society.

Much like its legal system, Saudi Arabia's social and cultural norms remain heavily patriarchal. Social expectations place women in the domestic sphere, whereas men are expected to assume the role of breadwinner and decision maker. As detailed above (in: *Political and legal landscape*), the actions and decisions of women are still heavily controlled by their male guardian.

### Technological landscape

According to DataReportal [Digital 2024: Saudi Arabia](#) (23 February 2024) / Survey date: January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 99% penetration rate
- **Social media usage:** 94.3% of the total population. According to [Napoleon Cat](#), in May 2024 there were 66% male Facebook users compared to 34% female.

- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 134.1% of the total population. According to Georgetown, a similar proportion of men and women own mobile phones ([GIWPS Saudi Arabia](#), accessed 30 July 2024). The rate of men and women utilizing smart phones to access the Internet is also more or less equal ([Statista, 2019](#)). Male guardians may, however, monitor women's cell phone usage and use mobile apps to control their movements. For example, the Saudi app Absher has been used to prevent a woman leaving the country without her guardian's permission ([Human Rights Watch, 6 May 2019](#)).

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (publication date: July 2024):

- "Saudi Arabia's telecom and ICT sectors continue to benefit from the range of programs aimed at diversifying the economy away from a dependence on oil, and establishing a wider digital transformation over the next decade."
- The further development of 5G is "aimed at generating additional revenue from mobile data services, while it also forms part of their collective effort to realize the ambitions of the Vision 2030 program."
- "While Saudi Arabia's fixed broadband penetration remains relatively low, there has been a concentration of fiber infrastructure and the Kingdom has developed one of the fastest services in the region."

Global Media Insight reports in their [KSA social media statistics 2024](#) (6 March 2023):

- "Today, Saudi Arabia has the largest social media presence in the world."
- The average time a Saudi spends on social media via any device is 3 hours and 2 minutes daily.
- The social media advertising audience profile is made up of almost twice as many men as women (65.3% versus 34.7%).

According to Freedom House ([Freedom on the Net 2023 Saudi Arabia](#)):

- Internet freedom remained highly restricted in Saudi Arabia, which is listed as 'not free' and scores 25 on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free).
- "Internet users in Saudi Arabia face extensive censorship and surveillance, which limits their ability to access diverse content or speak freely online. While internet access is widespread and most social media and communications platforms are available, authorities routinely block websites, remove content, and deliberately manipulate online information to positively portray the government and its policies. Criticism of the government is not tolerated and the threat of harassment or prosecution under broadly worded laws forces many Saudi social media users to self-censor. During the coverage period, local courts handed down multiple multidecade prison sentences for peaceful online expression or activism."
- "Saudi Arabia's absolute monarchy restricts almost all political rights and civil liberties. No officials at the national level are elected. The regime relies on extensive surveillance, the criminalization of dissent, appeals to sectarianism and ethnicity, and public spending supported by oil revenues to maintain power. Women and religious minorities face extensive discrimination in law and in practice. Working conditions for the large expatriate labor force are often exploitative."

## Security situation

Travel in the regions bordering Yemen and Iraq has serious security risks. Ever since Saudi Arabia initiated the coalition military action in Yemen, Saudi national infrastructure, in particular aviation interests, have been targeted from Yemen by missiles, drones and water borne IEDs. Saudi air-defense systems intercepted and destroyed most of these.

The Saudi government is combating Islamic militancy on a national level because it is considered a threat to the reign of the royal family. Terrorist groups like the Saudi branch of the Islamic State group (IS) and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), although weakened, still pose a threat, particularly to Shia sites and security forces. These groups oppose the Saudi Islamic monarchy for being insufficiently Islamic, aim to overthrow it and want to eradicate all Western influence in the kingdom. Despite this, private Saudi funds are known to support Islamic militant groups outside the country and are one of the main sources of finance for Sunni-armed conflict in the world, e.g. in Syria and elsewhere.

According to UK Government Travel Advice (accessed 27 June 2024), "[terrorists have threatened to carry out attacks](#) in the Gulf region, including on:

- residential compounds
- military, oil, transport and aviation interests
- public places, including restaurants, hotels, beaches, shopping centers and mosques".

As there are no visible churches in Saudi Arabia and Christians mostly gather in private residences in compounds, Christian church services are less likely to be targeted by radical Islamic activity. Nevertheless, Western compounds in general could become targets.

In the past, Saudi religious police have raided Christian meetings and arrested Christians who attended them. With the curbing of the influence of the religious police, these raids have occurred less often during the past few years.

### Gender perspective

In terms of criminality, Saudi Arabia is a relatively safe country. Violations of law carry harsh punishments according to strict Sharia law, resulting in a very low crime rate. An example of this is the cutting-off of hands in cases of theft. Also, Saudi law allows for capital punishment for many crimes, such as murder, drug trafficking and possession, adultery, apostasy, homosexuality, rape and in some cases burglary, robbery and arson. However, Georgetown's 2019/20 [Women, Peace and Security Index](#) noted a decrease in community safety in Saudi Arabia over the past years, due to an increase of organized violence. Within the home, too, the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in domestic violence, as victims were forced to spend more time at home with their abusers ([Amnesty International, 8 March 2021](#)). According to Georgetown's more recent Index ([GIWPS Saudi Arabia](#), accessed 30 July 2024), 18% of women report intimate partner violence. With the third largest migrant population [globally](#), foreign nationals, especially female domestic workers, are vulnerable to a range of discriminatory practices at the hands of their employers, including trafficking and slave labor (Monitor, 20 December 2022).

## Christian origins

There are various traditions about how Christianity came to the Arabian Peninsula. According to one tradition, a merchant from Najran (on the southern tip of Saudi Arabia) converted to Christianity during one of his trips to modern day Iraq and formed a house-church at the beginning of the 5th century. Another tradition concerns an envoy of the Roman emperor, Constantius, who preached to the Himyarite king of South Arabia, who as a result converted to Christianity. Both traditions indicate that churches were built in South Arabia centuries long before the advent of Islam. After the arrival of Nestorianism, Christianity continued to grow in the 4th century and even flourished in the 5th century.

By the end of the 6th and 7th century, Saudi Arabia had considerable numbers of Jews and synagogues, Christians (probably mostly Nestorians) and church buildings. They were mostly living in what is today the Western Province around the cities of Medina, Khaybar and Tayma. Even today, there are [ruins of a church near Jubail](#) in Eastern Province. It dates from the 4th century and is one of the oldest church sites in the world (Arab News, 13 December 2022).

For hundreds of years, Christian merchants and tribes were living in and travelling through the vast plains of the Arabian Peninsula. This changed with the arrival of Islam (7th - 10th centuries), when Jews and Christians converted to Islam either voluntarily or under duress, with many others being killed or driven from their homes.

In the course of the next few centuries, the Arabian Peninsula became overwhelmingly Islamic and Christianity lost significance. The historical role of Christianity in the region was forgotten for almost 13 centuries. This changed in the 19th century after Britain concluded protection treaties in the eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula; Christian expatriate workers started to enter Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE. Along with them came church buildings in the Gulf states - with the exception of Saudi Arabia, where still no church buildings are allowed.

## Church spectrum today

No accurate breakdown of church groups can be published. WCD statistics show the dominant expatriate Christian denomination to be Roman Catholic (over 90%).

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Saudi Arabia>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

## External Links

- Political and legal landscape: EIU 2023 - [https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/Democracy-Index-2023-Final-report.pdf?version=0&mkt\\_tok=NzUzLVJJUS00MzgAAAGTi\\_KRlg2z3iyqIY8D6Hujgu7AAmdB0IQHSXBRSPqm3ubFL2QiYELHjtdSB916rixNUKw-2ecw6ApiH2Q9I5WnlEsjprNGECVxly8HM6Vnm9A0A](https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/Democracy-Index-2023-Final-report.pdf?version=0&mkt_tok=NzUzLVJJUS00MzgAAAGTi_KRlg2z3iyqIY8D6Hujgu7AAmdB0IQHSXBRSPqm3ubFL2QiYELHjtdSB916rixNUKw-2ecw6ApiH2Q9I5WnlEsjprNGECVxly8HM6Vnm9A0A)

- Political and legal landscape: Freedom of Thought Index 2021 - <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/asia-western-asia/saudi-arabia/>
- Political and legal landscape: Women, Peace and Security Index (2019/20) - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>
- Political and legal landscape: GIWPS Saudi Arabia - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/saudi-arabia/>
- Political and legal landscape: easing of travel restrictions for women - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-49201019>
- Political and legal landscape: Middle East Eye, 11 October 2022 - <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-hajj-umrah-women-no-male-guardian-required>
- Political and legal landscape: specific roles - <https://www.saudimoments.com/saudi-arabian-women-can-join-the-military-in-these-positions-580443.html>
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