

Saudi Arabia

Country:

[Saudi Arabia](#)

Year:

2016

Freedom Status:

Not Free

Political Rights:

7

Civil Liberties:

7

Aggregate Score:

10

Freedom Rating:

7.0

Overview:

Saudi Arabia confronted a number of domestic and regional challenges in 2015. King Abdullah died in late January and was succeeded by his brother Salman bin Abdulaziz, who began his reign with far-reaching changes to the line of succession and the cabinet that, among other things, empowered younger members of the royal family. Municipal elections held in December were the first in which women were eligible to vote and run for office. The government continued to exercise restrictions on dissent and freedom of expression, however, targeting a number of writers, activists, and dissidents. According to international watchdogs, Saudi Arabia carried out the highest number of executions since 1995, with estimates surpassing 150.

Beginning in March, Saudi Arabia led a coalition of Arab states in a military intervention in neighboring Yemen, where groups loyal to besieged President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi remained embroiled in a civil war against Houthi forces and other rebel factions. Although the intervention followed a request for help from President Hadi, the campaign was also influenced by Sunni-ruled Saudi Arabia's relations with Shiite-ruled Iran, whom the Saudi government has accused of aiding Houthi forces.

In December, amid growing fears about regional security, Saudi leaders announced the creation of a 34-country coalition against terrorism. Individuals with affiliations to terrorist organizations, including the Islamic State (IS) militant group, carried out a number of attacks in Saudi Arabia throughout the year, particularly targeting members of the country's Shiite minority. The declining price of oil, straining the financial health of Saudi Arabia and a number of its neighbors, also contributed to regional concerns. The kingdom recorded its largest budget deficit in 2015—approximately \$98 billion—and in December, officials announced plans to reduce subsidies.

Two separate incidents in September resulted in high civilian fatalities. During the hajj, the annual Islamic pilgrimage, a stampede on the outskirts of Mecca resulted in a high number of fatalities, with estimates reaching as high as 2,400. Earlier in the month, the collapse of a construction crane in Mecca led to more than 100 deaths.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 3 / 40 [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 0 / 12

The 1992 Basic Law declares that the Koran and the Sunna (the guidance set by the deeds and sayings of the prophet Muhammad) are the country's constitution. The cabinet, which is appointed by the king, passes legislation that becomes law once ratified by royal decree. The king also appoints the 150 members of the Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council), who serve in an advisory capacity, for four-year terms. Limited elections for advisory councils at the municipal level were introduced in 2005. In municipal elections held in December 2015, women were able to vote and stand as candidates for the first time—a right granted by a 2011 royal decree. Two-thirds of the seats on the 284 councils were open to voting, while the minister of municipal and rural affairs held responsibility for filling the remainder through appointment. Women won approximately 1 percent of contested seats.

In April, King Salman changed the line of succession, relieving his brother Muqrin bin Abdulaziz of the position of crown prince and appointing his nephew Muhammad bin Nayef instead—the first time that a grandson, rather than a son, of the kingdom's founder was given the title. King Salman's son Muhammad bin Salman was appointed deputy crown prince.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 0 / 16

Political parties are forbidden, and organized political opposition exists only outside the country. Political dissent is criminalized. Activists who challenge the kingdom's record on political inclusion or call for constitutional changes are treated harshly. Raef Badawi, a human rights activist and founder of the website Liberal Saudi Network, remained behind bars in 2015 on charges of "insulting Islam," serving a sentence of 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes. Badawi was subjected to a first round of flogging in January. Subsequent flogging was delayed following international criticism of the verdict. Although the Saudi Supreme Court upheld Badawi's punishment in June, reports emerged in August that the case was again under review. The kingdom's crackdown on one of the country's most prominent political rights organizations, the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), continued in 2015. Muhammad al-Bajadi, one of the founders of ACPRA, was sentenced to 10 years in prison in March, with five of them suspended; al-Bajadi faced a variety of charges, among them acquiring banned books and organizing protests by the families of prisoners. Several other ACPRA members remained imprisoned in 2015.

In 2014, authorities designated the Muslim Brotherhood and Hezbollah as terrorist organizations, a move that reflected official concerns about the domestic popularity of both organizations, which are considered threats to the regime.

C. Functioning of Government: 1 / 12

Corruption remains a significant problem, despite some earlier moves to hold certain officials accountable, and there is low transparency in the functioning of government. Following the

stampede during the hajj in September 2015, amid international criticism of the infrastructure and safety measures provided by Saudi authorities, officials ordered an investigation into the incident. The death toll from the stampede remained contested at the end of the year—while Saudi officials claimed that there had been 769 fatalities, estimates compiled by international news organizations reached as high as 2,400.

The Saudi state remains notably opaque in its financial practices. Although the government generates massive revenue from the sale of oil, which it redistributes through social welfare programs and as patronage, little is known about its accounting or the various direct ways in which the state's wealth becomes a source of private privilege for the royal family and its clients. Due to the financial strain caused by declining oil prices in 2015, the state was forced to draw on reserves and issue bonds, and in October, reports emerged that officials planned to take cost-cutting measures. In December, authorities announced plans to privatize several state-owned entities and gradually reduce subsidies for fuel, water, and electricity.

Discretionary Political Rights Question A: 2 / 4

In addition to drawing advice from the Consultative Council, the monarchy has a tradition of consulting with select members of Saudi society. However, the process is not equally open to all citizens. From the king to local governors, royal family officials periodically host meetings for citizens to air grievances and seek access to money or power. These meetings are irregular, and while they afford some citizens rare opportunities to meet with the powerful, the outcomes reinforce the personalized nature of authority.

Civil Liberties: 7 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 3 / 16

The government tightly controls domestic media content and dominates regional print and satellite-television coverage, with members of the royal family owning major stakes in news outlets in multiple countries. Government officials have banned journalists and editors who publish articles deemed offensive to the religious establishment or the ruling authorities. A 2011 royal decree amended the press law to criminalize, among other things, any criticism of the country's grand mufti, the Council of Senior Religious Scholars, or government officials; violations can result in fines and forced closure of media outlets.

The regime has taken steps to limit the influence of new media, blocking access to more than 400,000 websites that are considered immoral or politically sensitive. A 2011 law requires all blogs and websites, or anyone posting news or commentary online, to have a license from the Ministry of Information or face fines and possible closure of the website. In 2014, the General Commission for Audiovisual Media declared its intent to restrict all non-state-run YouTube programming.

Authorities continue to target writers and activists who use the internet to express their views. Prominent writer Zuhair Kutbi, a regular contributor to online news and informational platforms, was detained in July 2015 following a guest appearance on a talk show during which he discussed political reform in Saudi Arabia. Also in July, authorities arrested Waleed al-Hussein al-Dood, founder of a news website known for its criticism of the Sudanese government. A Sudanese citizen and longtime resident of Saudi Arabia, al-Dood remained in detention without charge as of late 2015.

Islam is the official religion, and all Saudis are required by law to be Muslims. A 2014 royal decree punishes atheism with up to 20 years in prison. The government prohibits the public practice of any religion other than Islam and restricts the religious practices of the Shiite and Sufi Muslim minority sects. Although the government recognizes the right of non-Muslims to worship in private, it does not always respect this right in practice. The building of Shiite mosques is banned.

In February 2015, a Saudi court sentenced a man to death for renouncing Islam and defacing a copy of the Koran in a video he published online. In November, Palestinian poet Ashraf Fayadh was sentenced to death in a retrial on charges of committing blasphemy and renouncing Islam. Fayadh had originally been sentenced to four years in prison and 800 lashes in 2014.

Academic freedom is restricted, and informers monitor classrooms for compliance with curriculum rules, such as a ban on teaching secular philosophy and religions other than Islam. Despite changes to textbooks in recent years, intolerance in the classroom remains a significant problem, as some educators continue to espouse discriminatory and hateful views of non-Muslims and Muslim minority sects.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 0 / 12

Freedoms of assembly and association are not upheld. The government frequently detains political activists who stage demonstrations or engage in other civic advocacy. While no large-scale protests have taken place in the kingdom, smaller demonstrations have become more common. The largest of these take place in the mainly Shiite Eastern Province. Authorities have responded by issuing a most-wanted list of activists and violently dispersing demonstrations. The prominent Shiite cleric and political dissident Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, who was arrested in 2012 for leading protests critical of the regime and calling for an end to sectarian discrimination, was sentenced to death in 2014 and remained in prison in 2015. His nephew Ali al-Nimr, arrested at age 17 in 2012 for participating in protests, also remained behind bars. He had received a sentence of execution and crucifixion in 2014 on charges of participating in antigovernment demonstrations, possessing weapons, and attacking security forces.

Saudi Arabia has no associations law and has historically approved licenses only for charitable organizations. No laws protect the rights to form independent labor unions, bargain collectively, or engage in strikes. Workers who engage in union activity are subject to dismissal or imprisonment.

F. Rule of Law: 2 / 16

The judiciary, which must coordinate its decisions with the executive branch, is not independent. A special commission of judicial experts writes law that serves as the foundation for verdicts in the court system, which is grounded in Sharia (Islamic law). While Saudi courts have historically relied on the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence, the commission incorporates all four Sunni Muslim legal schools in drafting new guidelines.

Defendants' rights are poorly protected by law and not respected in practice. Detainees are often denied access to legal counsel during interrogation, and lengthy pretrial detention and detention without charge are common. Capital punishment, usually carried out by beheading, is applied to a wide range of crimes; juveniles are not exempt from the penalty. According to international watchdogs, Saudi authorities carried out upward of 150 executions in 2015. A sweeping new antiterrorism law, which includes lengthy prison sentences for criticizing the monarchy or the government, went into effect in 2014. It also expanded the power of police to conduct raids against suspected antigovernment activity without judicial approval. The penal code bans torture, but

allegations of torture by police and prison officials are common, and access to prisoners by independent human rights and legal organizations is strictly limited.

Security concerns grew in 2015 amid a number of terrorist attacks. Local IS affiliates claimed responsibility for an explosion at a mosque in August that resulted in at least 15 deaths; the mosque, located near the border with Yemen, was frequented by members of the Saudi security forces.

Substantial prejudice against ethnic, religious, and national minorities prevails. Shiites, who make up 10 to 15 percent of the population, are underrepresented in major government positions, and Shiite activism has faced repression by security forces. Shiites have also been subject to physical assaults by both state and nonstate actors. In May 2015, individuals affiliated with IS claimed responsibility for two deadly attacks against Shiite mosques that killed at least 25 people.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 2 / 16

Freedom of movement is restricted in some cases. The government punishes activists and critics by limiting their ability to travel outside the country, and reform advocates are routinely stripped of their passports.

While a great deal of business activity is connected to members of the government, the ruling family, or other elite families, officials have given assurances that special industrial and commercial zones are free from interference by the royal family.

Women are not treated as equal members of society, and many laws discriminate against them. They are not permitted to drive cars and must obtain permission from a male guardian in order to travel within or outside of the country. According to interpretations of Sharia in Saudi Arabia, daughters generally receive half the inheritance awarded to their brothers, and the testimony of one man is equal to that of two women. Moreover, Saudi women seeking access to the courts must be represented by a male. The religious police enforce a strict policy of gender segregation and often harass women, using physical punishment to ensure compliance with conservative standards of dress in public. Same-sex marriage is not legal. All sexual activity outside of marriage, including same-sex activity, is criminalized, and the death penalty can be applied in certain circumstances. A 2013 law defines and criminalizes domestic abuse, prescribing fines and up to a year in prison for perpetrators. However, according to analysis by Human Rights Watch, the law lacks clarity on enforcement mechanisms.

Education and economic rights for Saudi women have improved somewhat in recent years. More than half of the country's university students are now female, although they do not enjoy equal access to classes and facilities. Women gained the right to hold commercial licenses in 2004. In 2008, the Saudi Human Rights Commission established a women's branch to investigate cases of human rights violations against women and children, but it has not consistently carried out serious investigations or brought cases against violators.

Saudi women continued to agitate for the right to drive in 2015. In February, authorities released Loujain al-Hathloul, who was arrested in 2014 by Saudi officials for attempting to drive into the country from the United Arab Emirates, and Maysaa al-Amoudi, who was detained after arriving at the border to support Hathloul.

A 2005 labor law that extended various protections and benefits to previously unregulated categories of workers also banned child labor and established a 75 percent quota for Saudi citizens in each company's workforce. Foreign workers—of whom there are more than six million in the country—have historically enjoyed virtually no legal protections and remain vulnerable to trafficking

and forced labor, primarily through the exploitation of the visa-sponsorship system. In a small victory, in 2014, the Ministry of Labor ruled that expatriate workers who are not paid their salaries for more than three consecutive months are free to switch their work sponsors without approval. A number of amendments to the labor law that went into effect in October 2015 contain broader rights and protections for workers in the private sector, although implementation remained unclear at year's end. The amendments do not apply to domestic workers, who remain particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology

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