



Saudi Arabia

Change, Continuity, and Controversy

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia, ruled by the Al Saud family since its founding in 1932, wields considerable global influence through its administration of the birthplace of the Islamic faith and by virtue of holding the world's second most proven oil reserves. In exchange for protection, advice, technology, and armaments from the United States, the Saudi government has welcomed American investment in the kingdom and has served as a security and counterterrorism partner. Since 2015, Saudi leaders' domestic and foreign policy decisions have renewed calls from some U.S. leaders for a reassessment of long-standing bilateral ties. Some in Congress have differed with successive Administrations over how to approach U.S.-Saudi relations in light of differences over human rights and the war in Yemen. The Biden Administration has stated that it seeks to recalibrate the U.S.-Saudi partnership while maintaining U.S. support for the kingdom's security.

Leadership and Public Confidence

King Salman bin Abd al Aziz Al Saud (age 86) assumed the throne in 2015 after the death of his half-brother, the late King Abdullah bin Abd al Aziz. King Salman has altered the responsibilities and relative power of leading members of the next generation of the Al Saud family, the grandsons of the kingdom's founder. King Salman's son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (age 36), is now the central figure in Saudi policymaking, having asserted control over key national security forces, sidelined potential rivals, and begun implementing ambitious policy changes.

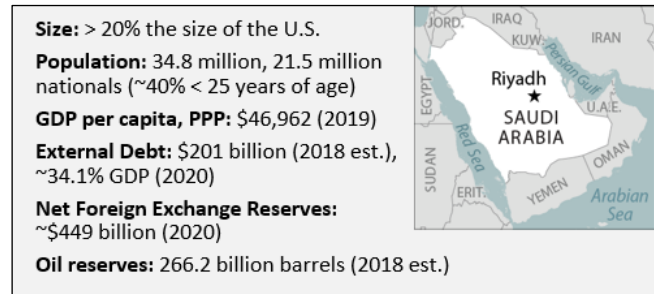
In parallel, channels for expressing dissent within the kingdom appear to have narrowed considerably. Since 2017, security forces have detained dozens of activists, clerics, Islamist figures, and journalists, releasing some during 2021. In late 2017, authorities imprisoned dozens of wealthy individuals (and potential family rivals of the crown prince) for months in the Ritz Carlton hotel in Riyadh as part of a nominal anticorruption campaign. Most of this latter group of detainees were released after reaching undisclosed financial settlement arrangements, amid accounts of abuse. Reports of additional detentions and questioning of leading royals since 2020 suggest that succession issues could remain contested.

Saudi decision-making has shifted from what had been a relatively risk-averse posture rooted in rulers' concerns for maintaining elite consensus, to one characterized by bolder, centrally directed changes. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's leadership has challenged key interest groups, including factions of the royal family, business elites, and conservative religious figures.

Vision 2030 and Social Change

The centerpiece of Saudi leaders' domestic agenda is the Vision 2030 initiative, which seeks to transform the kingdom's economy by diversifying the government's

Figure 1. Saudi Arabia



Source: CRS, using ESRI, and U.S. State Department data.

sources of revenue and reducing long-standing oil export dependence through investment and private sector growth. Authorities have reduced some consumer and industrial subsidies and have introduced and raised a value-added tax. Amid some domestic criticism, authorities also have offered some relief payments, salary increases, and tax exemptions. The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic slowed the kingdom's economy and reduced demand for Saudi oil exports during 2020, but Saudi leaders continued to implement reform plans, buoyed by economic recovery and higher oil revenues in 2021.

Economic transformation has driven social change in the kingdom since the early 20th century, and the Vision 2030 initiative is being accompanied by significant changes in the state's approach to some sensitive social matters. Authorities reversed the kingdom's long-standing ban on women driving in June 2018, in part to expand women's participation in the workforce. Parallel changes have created more public space for women in some social and cultural events. Authorities have partially amended male guardianship rules restricting women's autonomy and have acted to provide for more uniform judicial rulings in related cases. Many younger Saudis have welcomed changes made to date and call for more; roughly two-thirds of Saudi nationals are under the age of 35. Others express opposition or concern about the changes' potential effects on religious and social values. As it navigates these issues, the Saudi government's relationship with conservative religious figures is evolving, even as it continues to enlist religious leaders to counteract extremism and promote order.

Human Rights

More aggressive human rights restrictions have accompanied recent social change. The imprisonment and trial of several women's rights activists and other vocal figures has prompted congressional scrutiny of the kingdom's use of its Specialized Criminal Court and anti-terrorism laws to confront dissent. Since December 2020, Saudi courts have reduced or suspended sentences for some prominent detainees and released others conditionally.

In October 2018, Saudi officials killed Saudi journalist and U.S. resident Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, leading the U.S. government to impose travel and financial sanctions on some Saudi officials. The kingdom prosecuted some unidentified officials on related charges, convicting eight and sentencing five to death, before reducing the death sentences to varying prison terms. In February 2021, the U.S. intelligence community released a report assessing that the crown prince “approved an operation in Istanbul, Turkey to capture or kill” Khashoggi. Saudi officials disputed the report’s conclusions.

Saudi Nuclear Plans

Saudi leaders seek to recast the role of energy resources in the kingdom’s economy and plan to develop domestic civilian nuclear power infrastructure. They have solicited bids for the construction of two nuclear power reactors. The Trump Administration expedited consideration of required regulatory approvals for U.S. firms to provide marketing information to Saudi officials. Saudi officials have not forsworn uranium enrichment and state their intent to develop and use domestic resources. Saudi nuclear facilities are subject to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards, though some press reports have raised questions about possibly undeclared sites. The IAEA has reviewed declared Saudi nuclear infrastructure and recommends adoption and implementation of an Additional Protocol.

COVID-19

Saudi authorities have imposed border closures, visa restrictions, internal curfews, and travel limits, and reduced religious pilgrimage access in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including limiting the 2020 and 2021 Hajj pilgrimages. As of January 24, 2022, Saudi officials have reported more than 652,000 total cases of COVID-19, and more than 8,900 deaths due to COVID-19.

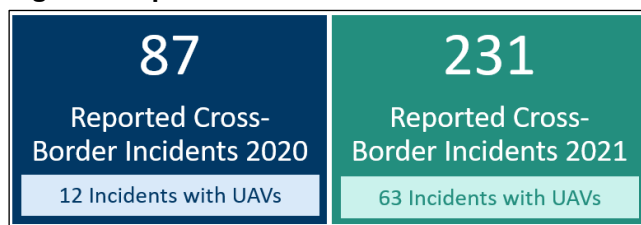
Saudi Foreign Policy

Iran and Yemen

Saudi officials praised the Trump Administration’s decision to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018, but have not expressed opposition to U.S. participation in renewed multilateral talks with Iran. Saudi officials remain concerned about Iranian support for various armed actors in the MENA region, especially the Ansarallah/Houthi movement in Yemen, Lebanon’s Hezbollah, and Shia militias in Iraq. The Saudi government engaged Iranian counterparts in “exploratory talks” during 2021, but the talks have not led to any new accords.

Saudi Arabia opposed the 2014-2015 Houthi campaign that ousted Yemeni President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, and, since March 2015, the kingdom has led a military coalition of mostly Arab states in efforts to reinstate Hadi. Iran has provided arms to the Houthis, who continue to use ballistic missiles and drones to attack Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Cross-border Houthi attacks reportedly are straining Saudi air and missile defenses. Saudi- and UAE-backed Yemeni forces continue to fight to reverse Houthi gains, with Saudi airstrikes and restrictions of air and sea access to Yemen drawing criticism from some in Congress. U.N. officials consider Yemen as one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises and cite Houthi and Saudi coalition policies as contributing factors.

Figure 2. Reported Attack Incidents from Yemen



Source: CRS using ACLED - Armed Conflict Location and Event Data on attacks in Saudi Arabia, January 2020-December 2021.

Notes: UAVs = unmanned aerial vehicles. Incident totals include reported single incidents involving multiple strikes/attacks.

Israeli-Palestinian Affairs

Saudi Arabia publicly supports key Palestinian demands, while Saudi leaders have engaged quietly with Israel based on shared concerns about Iran. Saudi officials continue to condition Saudi normalization with Israel on terms outlined in the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, specifically the establishment of a Palestinian state. In late 2020, Saudi Arabia granted Israel flyover rights within its airspace to facilitate Israeli airline travel to the UAE and Bahrain.

Relations with China and Russia

Greater Saudi energy exports to China have underwritten deepening Sino-Saudi economic and diplomatic ties, leading to new cooperation initiatives. Saudi leaders also maintain substantive dialogue with Russia, including coordination on oil policy and dialogue on Syria and other regional issues. Saudi Arabia buys some Chinese arms and has discussed weapons purchases from Russia. In 2021, media reports claimed the Saudi Arabia has acquired ballistic missile production technology from China.

Saudi-U.S. Relations

The Biden Administration ended U.S. support for the Saudi-led Coalition’s offensive military operations against the Houthis, but has pledged to continue defensive support and praised Saudi dialogue with Iran and parties to the Yemen conflict. The Administration proposed the sale of air-to-air missiles to bolster Saudi defense against cross-border attacks and opposed a congressional initiative to disapprove of the sale (S.J.Res. 31/H.J.Res. 63). The Administration directed the withdrawal of some U.S. Patriot air defense systems and personnel from the kingdom in 2021, but has approved the sale of Patriot missiles to Saudi Arabia by other U.S. partners.

As of December 2021, 2,120 U.S. military personnel were deployed to Saudi Arabia “to protect United States forces and interests in the region against hostile action by Iran and Iran-backed groups.” Other U.S. troops and contractors implement longstanding defense and security cooperation programs in the kingdom.

For more information, see CRS Report RL33533, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*.

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