



Migration profile

Saudi Arabia

A. Executive Summary

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the largest Arab country, located in the Middle East. Its origins date back to 1744 with the establishment of the first Saudi State. In 1932 the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was proclaimed.ⁱ The country is known to be the birthplace of Islam and home to Islam's two holiest shrines, located in Mecca and Medina.ⁱⁱ

As of 2020, there were 13,454,842 foreigners living in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and their main countries of origin were India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen.ⁱⁱⁱ The country is the arrival point of one of the most crowded maritime migration routes in the world, the so-called Eastern Migration Route, which involves significant risks.^{ivv} The primary pull factors for migrants are the good economic conditions and job opportunities present in the country.^{vi} However, on many occasions they experience abusive situations as well as labour trafficking.^{vii viii} Internal migration is mainly a rural-to-urban movement targeting the capital city, Riyadh.^{ix}

Saudi Arabia also hosts refugees from Syria, Eritrea, Iraq, and Somalia, mostly fleeing war and violence in their countries of origin.^{x xi} Their main issues are limited access to employment, lack of documentation, or ability to obtain permits to work legally in the country.^{xii} Internally, 606 forced displacements took place in Saudi Arabia due to floods and wildfires.^{xiii} Moreover, in 2022, 1,988 refugees coming from Saudi Arabia were recorded abroad in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Germany.^{xiv} Saudi Arabia is also a sending country for migration. In 2019, there were 303,904 emigrants who moved abroad, mainly in the United States, Libya, the United Kingdom, the State of Palestine, and Canada.^{xv}

Fueled by exceptional revenues coming from oil exports, the economy boomed in the 1970s. During those years, the government established most transport and communication facilities. In the 1990s, world oil prices stagnated while the government was implementing policies to encourage the presence of large families, leading to an increase of population. GDP per capita began to fall in real terms, and the Saudi young, highly educated workforce began to experience high levels of unemployment. Those trends reversed as oil prices again rose, although the country kept being highly dependent on exports.^{xvi} In 2021, Saudi Arabia's GDP amounted to US\$ 833,541,236,570, experiencing an annual growth rate of 3.2%, compared to -4.1% in the previous year. The inflation rate was 6.7%, and the foreign direct investment accounted for 2.3% of its GDP.^{xvii}

B. Country Profile

I. Basic Information

Saudi Arabia is a Southwestern Asian country which occupies roughly 80% of the Arabian Peninsula.^{xviii} It borders Jordan, Iraq and Kuwait to the north; the Arabian Gulf, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates to the east; Oman and Yemen to the south; and the coast along the Red Sea to the west.^{xix} It is an arid plateau rising from the Red Sea and descending towards the Persian Gulf. The country is administratively divided into 13 provinces that are subdivided into 118 governorates.^{xx}

It is the largest country in Arabia, with an area of 2,215,000 sq. km,^{xxi} and a population of 36,826,159.^{xxii} Its capital city is Riyadh.^{xxiii} Arabic is the official language, although English is also used especially in trade relations.^{xxiv} Concerning religion, almost the entire population is Muslim (Sunnis comprise about 85-90%; the remaining ones are Shiites). Other religious groups include Orthodox, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Hindus, Buddhist, and Sikh.^{xxv} Regarding the local ethnicity, Arabs comprise 90% of the population, followed by Afro-Asians (10%).^{xxvi}

II. International and Internal Migration (3500 characters including spaces)

According to the UN DESA's International Migrant Stock estimates, as of 2020, there were 13,454,842 foreigners living in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, representing up to 37.37% of the country's population. The migrant stock was mostly male, including 9,235,130 of them (68.64% of the stock), while only 4,219,712 (31.34% of the stock) were female. It has been consistently growing in absolute numbers during the last decades. In 1990, the number of foreigners living in Saudi territory amounted to 4,998,445 (31.24% of the country's population of the time), while in 2005, it encompassed 6,501,819 people (26.65% of the population). As of 2020, their main countries of origin were India (2,502,337 people, 18.6% of the country's migrant stock), Indonesia (1,701,318 people, 12.64% of the stock), Pakistan (1,483,737 people, 11.03% of the stock), Bangladesh (1,277,624 people, 9.5% of the stock), Egypt (962,432 people, 7.15% of the stock), Syria (823,261 people, 6.12% of the stock), and Yemen (769,945 people, 5.72% of the stock).^{xxvii}

Saudi Arabia is the arrival point of one of the most crowded maritime migration routes in the world, the so-called Eastern Migration Route. It involves people leaving the Horn of Africa (primarily, but not only Ethiopia) and crossing the Red Sea into the shores of Saudi Arabia. This route presents significant risks, but many East Africans keep using it anyway as they perceive it as their only chance for job opportunities and economic stability. Its use is actually increasing. Between 2017 and 2020, there were 400,000 arrivals recorded along the route, while in 2022 alone it amounted to 440,000.^{xxviii}^{xxix}

The most important pushing factors for international migrants is access to job opportunities and finding a place in the expanding and dynamic Saudi economy. 2022 was the year with more hiring of new Indian migrant workers in Saudi Arabia.^{xxx} Workers from a wide range of countries move there every year, despite the many issues and abusive situations they often endure while living in Saudi territory. Most of them are brought into the country through the kafala (sponsorship) system, which enforces that domestic workers and other unskilled migrants need a Saudi sponsor (normally their employer) in order to enter the country and work there. The sponsor holds their passports and has the right to deport the worker at any

time. The worker is only allowed to change employers under certain conditions; therefore, the power the latter holds over the former is nearly absolute.^{xxxix} Furthermore, during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants were held in inhumane conditions for months in overcrowded places, often deprived of the basic services they needed.^{xxxiii}

In the specific case of South Asian communities (Indians, Pakistanis, Bengalis, Nepalis), they are sometimes the main targets of xenophobia and bigotry. They are all labelled under the racial category of “Indian”, disregarding their actual nationality, and are often abused by locals. The lives of South Asian workers in Saudi Arabia, often socioeconomically vulnerable, are completely permeated by prejudices the natives hold against them.^{xxxiv}

Internal migration in Saudi Arabia follows the rural-to-urban pattern, and people mostly move into the capital city, Riyadh. Investment, dynamic economy, and employment opportunities are the elements easily found in this metropolitan area, enticing huge and increasing numbers of young people from all over the country. Other cities which also attract work-related internal migrants (even if not at the same rate as Riyadh) include Jeddah or the Dammam-Khobar-Dhahran metropolitan area.^{xxxv}

III. Emigration and Skilled Migration

As far as migration, Saudi Arabia is also a sending country. In 2019, there were 303,904 emigrants recorded abroad. The leading destination countries were the United States (94,883 emigrants), Libya (37,639), the United Kingdom (29,894), the State of Palestine (21,626), and Canada (21,385).^{xxxvi} Emigration trends have increased since 2013, when only 171,896 emigrants were recorded abroad.^{xxxvii}

Despite the number of emigrants, there is no official data on migrants’ profile and their sociodemographic and economic conditions. Due to a lack of resources and a dispersed diaspora worldwide, there is no specific information regarding migration routes or the condition of Saudis abroad.

IV. Forced Migrants (Internally Displaced Persons, Asylum Seekers, Refugees, and Climate Displaced Persons)

In 2022, 335 persons with refugee status and 13,483 asylum seekers were registered in Saudi Arabia.^{xxxviii} They mainly came from Syria (57.91%), Eritrea (10.75%), Iraq (9.55%), and Somalia (4.78%),^{xxxix} and most of them were fleeing war and violence.^{xl xli xlii}

The Saudi Arabian law states that the “State shall grant political asylum if the public interest so requires.” There is no codified asylum system for those fleeing persecution, and the country is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Nevertheless, the Saudi government allowed refugees recognised by UNHCR to remain in the country only temporarily, pending a durable solution, including resettlement to a third country or voluntary repatriation.^{xliii} In addition, the government has neither granted asylum nor accepted refugees for resettlement from third countries, as the government’s policy denies refugee status to persons who are irregularly present in the country. Because of that, these people face the danger of deportation.^{xliv}

The main barriers encountered by refugees and asylum seekers in Saudi Arabia relate to access to employment, as refugees and asylum seekers are generally unable to work legally except in the case of Syrians and Yemenis who hold a temporary visa and can access a visitor’s card from the Ministry of Interior, allowing them to work. Rohingya refugees in the country

also need proper documentation and have to obtain residence permits to work in the country.^{xlv} The government provides citizens and proven legal residents preferential access to education, health, public housing, and other social services.^{xlvi}

In 2022, 1,988 refugees arriving from Saudi Arabia were recorded abroad.^{xlvii} The leading destination countries were the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Germany.^{xlviii} In this regard, the government has not recognised the right of its citizens to apply for asylum or refugee status in foreign countries; in fact, the law prosecutes citizens seeking asylum in foreign countries.^{xlix}

Finally in 2020, 606 internal displacements were reported, mainly caused by natural disasters like floods and wildfires.¹

V. Victims of Human Trafficking

Saudi is Tier 2 in the U.S. Trafficking in Persons Report, since it does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking. Still, it is making significant efforts to do so. As far as human trafficking, migrant workers are the largest group at risk. Many low-skilled migrants coming from South and Southeast Asia and East Africa are employed in substandard conditions that heighten their risk of forced labour in Saudi Arabia. Traffickers recruit migrants to work and subsequently exploit them in domestic service. Female migrants employed as domestic workers are especially vulnerable due to their isolation inside private residences. The pandemic increased their vulnerability, and migrants encountered serious obstacles while trying to get assistance from police stations, hospitals, and NGOs. NGOs and media sources reported increasing concerns about harassment and discrimination among Christian African migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, making them vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and trafficking. Media sources and human rights groups reported the detention and deportation of Ethiopian returnees sent to internment camps across Ethiopia, where abuse, forced labour and forced disappearances were reported. Cuban and Chinese nationals residing in Saudi Arabia have also been forced to work by their own countries of origin. In previous years, media also made allegations regarding families that bribed Sudanese officers associated with Sudan's Rapid Support Forces to unlawfully recruit and use children as combatants in Yemen. In 2021, the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen established a "Child Protection Unit" that worked with the UN to provide care to Houthi-recruited child soldiers.^{li}

In 2021, the government investigated 346 potential trafficking cases involving 377 alleged traffickers (18 for sex trafficking, 162 for forced labour, and 197 for forced begging and slavery-like practices). Furthermore, it prosecuted 90 individuals in 64 cases and convicted 64 traffickers under the 2009 Saudi law. 30 convictions involved forced labour, 19 for sex trafficking, and 13 for forced begging. Likewise, courts acquitted 38 traffickers in 15 cases. The government continued using electronic communications to investigate, prosecute, and convict criminal cases, and digitally deliver memoranda, court documents, and judgments. This year, the government identified 1,175 potential victims and referred 185 to government-operated shelters for care. Of the 1,175 potential victims identified, 505 were involved in forced labour, 54 in sex trafficking, and 616 in forced begging and "slavery-like practices." Victims were mostly coming from Asian and African countries. MHRSD operated shelters for child victims of forced begging in Mecca, Jeddah, Dammam, Medina, Qassim, and Abha, in addition to welfare centres for vulnerable female domestic workers and trafficking victims in 13 locations

throughout Saudi Arabia. Victims could access accommodation, social services, psychological counselling, education, health care, and legal assistance.^{lii}

The government kept using its National Referral Mechanism, first launched in March 2020, to identify potential victims and refer them to care. It also approved a 2021-2023 National Action Plan in collaboration with international organisations. However, despite all of these efforts, in 2021 the government referred to care significantly fewer trafficking victims and did not consistently screen vulnerable populations for trafficking indicators. This may have resulted in the penalisation of victims for unlawful acts that traffickers forced them to do. Finally, authorities did not consistently give significant sentences to all convicted traffickers, by charging them with prison terms of one year or more.^{liii}

VI. National Legal Framework

The Saudi Arabian Nationality System regulates the right of citizenship in the country. The system includes transitional and general provisions, a statement of what is meant by Saudis, provisions for granting, acquiring, forfeiting and withdrawing Saudi nationality, restrictions and requirements for naturalising a Saudi holding another nationality, a statement of the penalty for making false statements or submitting incorrect papers with the intent of proving or denying Saudi Arabian nationality. In 2023, the Executive Regulations for the Arabian Nationality System amended the law.^{liv}

Saudi Arabia does not have a domestic law governing the status determination or registration of refugees. The 1952 Residence Law and the 1992 Basic Law of Governance allow foreigners to seek asylum in Saudi Arabia.^{lv} However, Saudi Arabia has not ratified yet the UN 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees.^{lvi}

The 2009 Anti-Trafficking Law criminalised sex and labour trafficking. In 2021, the committee completed a review of seven suggested amendments to the law, which included penalties that combined imprisonment and fines for convicted traffickers and criminalisation of personal document confiscation, such as passports. The government established a committee to consider amendments to the 2009 Anti-Trafficking law. The amendments remained under review by the Council of Ministers at the close of the reporting period.^{lvii}

Saudi Arabia also ratified the ILO conventions: Forced Labour Convention, the Equal Remuneration Convention, the ILO Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, the Minimum Age Convention, and the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention.^{lviii} However, it did not sign or ratify the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime.^{lix}

Saudi Arabia is not a party to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons or the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. The country is a party to only three international human rights regulations: the Genocide Convention, the Slavery Convention, and the Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery.^{lx}

VII. Main Actors

The State

The Ministry of Interior (MOI) is responsible for the security and stability of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It reinforces security relations with neighbouring Arab countries and

cooperates with the Countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council to maintain safety within the country and abroad, control crime and drug smuggling, exchange security information, organise citizenship regulations and systems, and other issues. The General Directorate of Passports provides residential services in Saudi Arabia, including arriving and departing from the country, and issuing a Saudi passport.^{lxi}

The National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking (NCCHT) combats trafficking in persons in all its forms.^{lxii} The NCCHT works with the Ministry of Health and Red Crescent Authority to treat all potential trafficking victims as emergency cases to enable victims to receive priority medical treatment. The NCCHT also works with the Saudi Bar Association to provide *pro bono* legal services to victims and secure access into the shelter to victims' attorneys to discuss criminal and civil cases.^{lxiii}

Saudi Arabia is a Member State of the United Nations and the International Labour Organisation (which supports governments to improve their legal labour framework), as well as an Observer State to the International Organisation for Migration.^{lxiv}

International Organisations

The UNHCR office in Saudi Arabia does not provide direct or regular assistance to refugees. UNHCR offers, on a very limited scale, medical services, legal advice, or cash assistance, only after the competent committee studies and assesses the situation of people on a case-by-case basis. The committee has the responsibility to take an appropriate decision in line with procedural standards. Regarding medical services, in extremely limited circumstances and due to lack of resources, UNHCR can assist a limited number of urgent medical cases by referring them to one of its medical partners to get treated for just a specific period of time.^{lxv}

IOM Saudi Arabia provides support to the Human Rights Council in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to address anti-terrorism issues with a focus on anti-trafficking activities in the country. The organisation works on prosecution, protection, prevention, cooperation and partnership to combat human trafficking.^{lxvi}

The final observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the periodic reports of the Gulf States have also expressed concern that some forms of child labour persist, particularly for females involved in domestic labour and child sexual abuse.

UNICEF works in Saudi Arabia through the UNICEF Gulf Area Office. Its program focuses on strengthening government capacities to generate data to better analyse the causes and extent of violence and exploitation against children.^{lxvii}

The Red Cross and Red Crescent Middle East & North Africa Migration Network (MENA Migration Network) was established in March 2021 by 15 Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies, the IFRC MENA Regional Office, and the ICRC Near Middle East Regional Office. Within the MENA Migration Network, the Saudi Red Crescent Authority provides all medical, human and training equipment, and offers emergency medical services to those needing attention and care with the participation of military and civilian forces.^{lxviii}

NGOs and Other Organisations

Unfortunately, there is almost no publicly available information about NGOs working on behalf of migrants, refugees, or otherwise displaced populations within the territory of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, nor about NGOs working with Saudi migrants abroad. A

September 2021 coverage for Gulf News attested to the existence in Saudi Arabia of a lively net of small NGOs run by South Asian migrants focused on assisting those in most and desperate need within their own communities. According to that report, these organisations do invaluable work in the country. It even shared two examples of involvement of such organisations, mentioning specifically how groups of Indian workers have been helped by them: Jubail Helpdesk and the Tamil Nadu Fishermen Development Trust (TN FIDET).^{lxxix} Regrettably, no further information could be found regarding these two agencies.

In addition, according to a March 2022 report on the Arab Trade Unions Confederation's website, the global organisation Migrants Rights seems to have provided public advocacy on behalf of the rights of Asian workers. The NGO denounced the abnormally high death-rate affecting those groups of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, claiming closer attention and deeper concern by employers and public authorities.^{lxxx}

The European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights (ESOHR) has also been working to raise concern, and voice out complaints and information regarding inhumane living and working conditions of foreign workers, human trafficking of Vietnamese women in Saudi territory, or mistreatment of Saudi asylum seekers.^{lxxxi lxxii lxxiii}

The Catholic Church

The government does not allow non-Muslim organisations, and there are no Catholic or denominational organisations officially working in the country.^{lxxiv lxxv}

However, Saudi Arabia allows Catholics and Christians of other denominations to enter the country as foreign workers for temporary work.^{lxxvi} Therefore, the Catholic Church is present in Saudi Arabia under the responsibility of the Apostolic Vicariate of North Arabia.^{lxxvii} In particular, the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin has been entrusted with the pastoral care of the growing immigrant population in the country. The church focuses on providing spiritual assistance through sacramental services to the quite large Catholic immigrant community.^{lxxviii}

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D. Endnotes

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