



Saudi Arabia

cultural note

guests in Saudi Arabia, whatever their nationality, are subject to the same rigorous Islamic law as

Saudis. It is not uncommon for Westerners to be imprisoned in Saudi Arabia for possessing an illegal substance. (Alcohol, pornography, pork, and narcotics are all highly illegal.) Saudi law is draconian; thieves still have their hands amputated, and capital crimes are punished by public beheadings. Not surprisingly, the populace is quite law-abiding.

Country Background

History

Although the Arabian Peninsula has been occupied for thousands of years, the Saudi Arabian nation was only founded in 1932. In that year, after thirty years of fighting, Abdul-Aziz al-Saud united the tribes of the Peninsula.

Most of the day-to-day running of Saudi Arabia is left in the hands of foreign workers. Technical and managerial workers tend to come from North America, Europe, and Japan-. Manual and unskilled laborers are primarily from Africa and Asia. The Saudis have been replacing the Middle Eastern workers that formerly constituted a large part of their foreign workforce; these Palestinians and Lebanese are not considered politically reliable by the Saudi government. Guest workers may not become citizens, no matter how long they stay in Saudi Arabia.

While most of the citizens of Saudi Arabia are quite well off, some segments of the population have not benefited from the country's wealth. Some nomadic Bedouins still maintain their traditional lifestyle. But the Bedouins are given the opportunity to change, whereas the Shiite minority is not. Fearful of the Shiite power in Iran, the Saudi government keeps its Shiite citizenry poor and powerless.

The 1990 invasion of neighboring Kuwait by Iraq proved a traumatic experience for Saudi Arabia. Iraqi Scud missiles struck Saudi territory, and a Saudi border town was briefly occupied by Iraqi troops.

To support the allied liberation of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia found itself hosting troops from thirty-three nations. Both foreign troops and Saudis had to adjust. (In deference to Western sensibilities, public beheadings were delayed until after the effective conclusion of the war; upon resumption of the executions, sixteen men were beheaded in

one day.) Contrary to the expectations of some observers, however, the Saudi government did not find itself forced to initiate liberal reforms.

Type of Government

Saudi Arabia is an Islamic monarchy. It was united, is ruled, and is run by the house of Saud (al-Saud). There is no written constitution, although it is traditional to say that the Koran is the constitution of Saudi Arabia.

Abdul-Aziz al-Saud (known incorrectly in the West as Ibn Saud) united the Arabian peninsula in 1932. Saudi Arabia was named after him, and he became the new country's first king. All of the successive kings have been sons of Abdul-Aziz; indeed, the majority of government officials are members of the al-Saud family (Abdul-Aziz united his kingdom by marriage and by conquest. He married more than 300 times and has thousands of descendants.)

The king of Saudi Arabia is also prime minister, making him both the head of state and head of government. An appointed Council of Ministers advises the king. There is no elected government. The only codified restraint on the power of the king is Islamic law. In practice, however, the king is careful not to alienate either the religious fundamentalists or his people.

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while Saudis are thankful for the protection of the United States and the Western Alliance in the Gulf War with Iraq, the government and much of the populace are ambivalent about the West. Western values are seen as decadent and threatening to the Saudi way of life. Any change in this attitude will come very slowly.

Language

Arabic is the official language. Foreign-educated Saudis usually speak English.

Education

A massive education campaign has raised the literacy level to 57 percent. Many older, rural Saudis are still illiterate; most post offices are surrounded by scribes who write letters for the illiterate. Educational levels for males are far above those for females, as Wahabi tradition dismissed education for girls as counterproductive.

Religion

Saudi Arabia is an Islamic nation. Saudi citizens are Muslim and are not permitted to change religions. Westerners are frequently surprised to learn that Saudi Arabia is a more fundamentalist nation than the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The official religion of Saudi Arabia is the Wahabi branch of Sunni Islam. Wahabism is a rigid, ultrapuritanical sect that reflects Islam as it was practiced during the lifetime of Mohammed, over 1,300 years ago.

Many Western observers believe that Wahabism is insufficiently flexible for the wealthy, modern state that Saudi Arabia has become. However, it is firmly entrenched, and adherence to its precepts is enforced daily by the *Matawain* (religious police).

Saudi Arabia is home to the two holiest cities of Islam: *Makkah* (Mecca) and *Madinah* (Medina). Hundreds of thousands of Muslims from all over the world make the

pilgrimage to *Makkah* each year. Entry into *Makkah* and *Madinah* is prohibited to non-Muslims.

Demographics

The population is just over fourteen million, not including more than two million guest workers. About 90 percent of the citizens are Arabs, the majority belonging to the Wahabi branch of Sunni Islam. The remaining 10 percent are mostly African or Asian, descendants of Islamic settlers who have been coming to the Arabian Peninsula for generations. (Modern guest workers, Islamic or not, are not permitted to become citizens.)

Cultural Orientation

Cognitive Styles: How Saudi Arabians Organize and Process Information

Saudis find it difficult to accept any outside information that does not reflect Islamic values. Most Saudis are trained to think associatively. However, the majority of Saudis complete their higher education in the United States, where they learn to process information conceptually and analytically. They do become personally involved in all situations rather than using rules or laws to solve problems.

Negotiation Strategies: What Saudi Arabians Accept as Evidence

Generally, a Saudi's faith in Islamic ideologies shapes the truth, but it is also affected by the immediate feelings of the participants. Objective facts seldom overrule one's thinking.

Value Systems: The Basis for Behavior

Saudi Arabia is a very strong Islamic state and finds it difficult to integrate Western ideas into its value systems. The following three sections identify the Value Systems in the predominant culture-their methods of dividing right from wrong, good from evil, and so forth.

Locus of Decision-Making

The male leader is the decision maker, but he does so through consensus of the group or collective. The individual is always subordinate to the family, tribe, or collective. Solutions to all problems are found in the correct interpretation and application of divine law. Leadership and identity come from one's lineage and one's ability to protect the honor of the extended family.

Sources of Anxiety Reduction

Tribal membership remains the cornerstone of the individual's social identity, and security is found in family loyalty and absolute submission to Islamic law. There is a strong sense of fatalism, with one's destiny in the hands of Allah. One can do nothing about this, so one tends to accept the status quo. Loyalty to the house of Saud, not nationality, brings a feeling of national security.

Issues of Equality/Inequality

Within Islam all believers are equal and united in the *ulma*. There is cultural homogeneity among tribes. Most are Sunni Muslims adhering to Wahabi religious tenets. There are a great number of foreign workers who are accepted with varying

degrees of bias. Men and women are seen as qualitatively different in emotion and intellect. Public life is the exclusive domain of men. There are very few occupations open to Saudi women.

Business Practices

Appointments



punctuality

- Punctuality is not considered a virtue in Saudi Arabia. Your client may be late for an appointment or not show up at all. You, however, should endeavor to be prompt,
- It is standard practice to keep supplicants, including foreign business people, waiting. Do not expect to be able to keep more than one appointment per day.
- You will need a Saudi sponsor before you may enter Saudi Arabia. This sponsor will act as intermediary and arrange appointments with the appropriate individuals.

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non-Muslims may not enter Saudi Arabia without an invitation, which usually involves being sponsored by a prominent Saudi. Once you enter the country, realize that you are beyond the protection of your government. You are subject to Saudi Islamic law, and something as innocuous (to Westerners) as dressing immodestly in public can result in your being arrested or even whipped. Study the rules for acceptable behavior carefully. Also be aware that you may not leave Saudi Arabia without an exit permit, no matter what the emergency.

As for businesswomen, the limitations on allowable behavior are so stringent that, even if a businesswoman is given a visa, there will be little that she will be permitted to do.

- An appointment is rarely private. Expect your visit to be interrupted by phone calls and visits from your client's friends and family. Westerners frequently find these distractions infuriating; try to maintain your equanimity.
- Saudi officials are prohibited by tradition from working more than six hours per day. Mornings are usually best for appointments.
- Because of the summer heat, some Saudi business people work after dark. They may request an evening appointment at any time up to midnight.
- Friday is the Muslim holy day; no business is conducted. Most people do not work on Thursdays, either. The workweek runs from Saturday through Wednesday.
- Government hours are 7:30 A.M. to 2:30 P.M., Saturday through Wednesday.
- Banking hours tend to be 8:30 A.M. to 12 noon and 5:00 to 7:00 P.M., Saturday through Wednesday. Some banks keep Thursday morning hours as well.
- Business hours vary widely, but most businesses close for much of the afternoon and reopen for a few hours in late afternoon.
- Holidays: Remember that the Islamic calendar uses lunar months of 28 days, so an Islamic year of 12 months is only 354 days long. Holidays will thus be on different dates by the Western calendar every year. Paperwork should carry two dates, the Gregorian (Western) date and the Hijrah (Arabic) date.

- Check with your Saudi sponsor as to which holidays will be observed by the persons you intend to meet. However, two important holidays are observed by everyone, and no business will be conducted during them. They are Aid-al-Fitr-The festival of breaking fast. This is a three-day feast celebrating the end of the fasting of the month of *Ramadan*. Aid-al-Adha-The feast of the sacrifice. This is a three-day festival beginning on the tenth day of the month of Zul-Hijjah.



Negotiating

- The pace of business is much slower in Saudi Arabia than in the West. Be patient.
- Business meetings always start slowly, with long inquiries into one's health and journey.
- Decisions will take a long time to be made. A clever Saudi contact will sound out the opinions of various decision makers before you meet with them. Then, he will put you in contact only with the ones most likely to favor your proposal. Do not rush your contact into introducing you to decision makers. To do so is to risk having your proposal turned down because you met with the wrong persons.
- Your Saudi contact-sponsor is the single most important key to success in Saudi Arabia. You must find one that has the right temperament and influential friends or relatives. If you do not yet have a contact, inquire about one through banks doing business in Saudi Arabia or the U.S. International Trade Administration. Once you choose a sponsor, you will not be permitted to switch.
- Business cards should be printed in English on one side and in Arabic on the other.
- Many Saudis have unlisted telephone numbers. When a Saudi gives you his business card, record all the information on the card.
- Be prepared to leave multiple copies of all brochures and materials. The person you spoke to might not be the real decision maker, and your proposal may have to be relayed to one or more persons.
- Saudis speak at a much closer distance than North Americans are used to. Do not back up or shy away. There is also more physical contact. Conversations usually involve touching.
- Coffee is often served toward the end of a business meeting. This is a signal that the meeting will soon conclude. Incense is often lit at this time as well.
- Saudi men often walk hand in hand. If a Saudi holds your hand, take it as a sign of friendship.
- Arabic is a language of hyperbole. When a Saudi says "yes," it usually means "possibly." Be encouraged by this, but do not assume that the negotiating is over.
- Saving face and the avoidance of shame are vital to Saudis. You may have to compromise on some issue to protect someone's dignity even if there is no substantive reason to do so.
- Do not bring up the subject of women unless your Saudi counterpart does so first. Do not even inquire as to the health of a Saudi's wife or daughter.
- The topic of Israel should similarly be avoided.
- Sports are a good topic of conversation. Soccer (football), horse and camel racing (with betting prohibited), hunting, and falconry are the most popular Saudi sports.



Business Entertaining

- Hosting visitors is considered a virtue among Saudis, so they will take care of all of the entertaining within their country.
- Be prepared to remove your shoes before entering a building. Follow the lead of your host.
- Remember that alcohol and pork are illegal, and that eating is done with the right hand only. Even if you are left-handed, eat with your right hand.
- If you cannot keep up with Saudi appetites during a meal, try to nibble on something while they finish eating.
- Expect to encounter eating utensils only in the most Westernized of Saudi homes.
- Also expect constant inquiries of "How are you?" Your host will be concerned that you have everything you want to eat or drink, and this is a common way of asking.

Time

- Saudi Arabia is three hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (G.M.T. + 3) or eight hours ahead of U.S. Eastern Standard Time (E.S.T. + 8).

Protocol



Greetings

- As there are several styles of greeting currently in use in Saudi Arabia, it is safest to wait for your Saudi counterpart to initiate the greeting, especially at a first meeting.
- Westernized Saudi men shake hands with other men.
- Some Saudi men will shake hands with Western women. Saudi women take no part in business. When a veiled Saudi woman is with a Saudi man, it is not traditional to introduce her. Again, follow the Saudi's lead.
- A more traditional Saudi greeting between men involves each grasping the other's right hand, placing the left hand on the other's right shoulder, and exchanging kisses on each cheek.



Titles / Forms of Address

- Westerners frequently find Arabic names confusing. The best solution is to ask your Saudi sponsor to provide you with the names-written in English-of any Saudis you will have to meet, speak to, or correspond with. Find out their full names for correspondence and how they are to be addressed in person.
- Saudi names are written in Arabic. In part because short vowels are not written in Arabic, translating from Arabic to other alphabets is not an exact science. Arabic names may be spelled several different ways in English (e.g., the leader of Libya's name is variously rendered Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi, Mu'ammarr al-Qadhafi, and so forth).
- In general, Saudi names are written in the same order as English names: tide, given name, middle name (often a patronymic), and surname (family name). Thus, the

current ruler of Saudi Arabia is King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud; his title is King, his given name is Fahd, *bin* Abdul-Aziz is a patronymic meaning "son of Abdul-Aziz," and al-Saud is the family name.

- The term *bin* (sometimes spelled *ibn*) literally means "from" in Arabic, so it is not immediately apparent whether a name like *bin* Mubarak indicates "son of Mubarak" or "from the town of Mubarak." However, most Saudis use it as a patronymic.
- If an Arab's grandfather is (or was) a famous person, he sometimes adds his grandfather's name. Thus, Dr. Mahmoud *bin* Sultan *bin* Hamad Al Muqrin is "Dr. Mahmoud, son of Sultan, grandson of Hamad, of the House (family) of Muqrin."
- Westerners frequently mistake *bin* for the name Ben, short for Benjamin. Obviously, *bin* has no meaning by itself, and one cannot address a Saudi as *bin*.
- The female version of *bin* is *bint*. Thus, Princess Fatima bint Ibrahim al-Saud is "Princess Fatima, daughter of Ibrahim, of the house of Saud."
- Most Saudis should be addressed by title and given name (e.g., Prince Khalil), just as you would address a member of the British aristocracy (e.g., Sir John). They can also be addressed as "Your Excellency." In writing, use their full name.
- In Saudi Arabia, the title *Sheikh* (pronounced "shake") is used by any important leader well versed in the Koran; it does not designate membership in the royal family.



Gestures

- The left hand is considered unclean in the Arab world. Always use the right hand in preference to the left (unless you are handling something considered unclean). Never eat with the left hand; eat only with your right hand. Avoid gesturing with the left hand.
- Although Arabs constantly gesture with their hands while speaking, they do not point at another person. This would be considered impolite.
- As a general rule, keep both feet on the ground. Arabs do not cross their legs when sitting. Never show the bottom of your foot to an Arab; this is considered offensive.
- The "thumbs up" gesture is offensive throughout the Arab world.



Gifts

- Saudi hospitality is legendary. However, you are not expected to bring any gift when invited into a Saudi home.
- Traditionally, every Saudi who must broker or approve a business deal takes a percentage. Be careful that you do not run afoul of the U.S. Foreign Corrupt Practices Act.



Dress

- While foreigners are not exempt from Saudi standards of dress, do not adopt native clothing [for men, a *ghotra* (headdress) and *thobe* (flowing white robe); for women, a veil and an *abaya* (black head-to-foot robe)]. Saudis may find it offensive to see foreigners dressed in their traditional clothes.

- Foreigners should wear Western clothes that approach the modesty of Saudi dress. Despite the heat of the desert, most of the body must remain covered.
- Men should wear long trousers and a shirt, preferably long-sleeved. A jacket and tie are usually required for business meetings. Keep shirts buttoned up to the collarbone. Saudi law prohibits the wearing of neck jewelry by men, and Westerners have been arrested for violating such rules.
- Women must wear modest clothing. The neckline should be high, and the sleeves should come to at least the elbows. Hemlines should be well below the knee, if not ankle-length. The overall effect should be one of baggy concealment; a full-length outfit that is tight and revealing is not acceptable. Therefore, pants or pantsuits are not recommended. While a hat or scarf is not always required, it is wise to keep a scarf at hand. The suitability of your attire will be apparent as soon as you venture out; if Saudi men stare lewdly at you, your dress is not sufficiently modest. These same stares are used to determine when a Saudi girl is old enough to start wearing an abaya.

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the Matowain (religious police) enforce the modesty of dress in public. They have full civil authority to arrest violators. Indeed, where the jurisdiction of the civil and religious police overlap, the civil authorities generally defer to the Matowain. While the ranks of the Matawain include a surprising number of foreign-educated Saudis, the ones enforcing Islamic law on street corners-and there are many-are usually uneducated zealots brandishing camel whips. Western women with skirts that are too short can expect to have their legs whipped by a Matawah. Most Westerners fall afoul of them sooner or later. The Matawain can be neither reasoned with nor bribed, only endured.