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Saudi Arabia, Human Rights

## **Saudi Arabia: Authoritarianism, Gender Equality, and Human Rights**

Saudi Arabia has a population of 39.94 million. According to the World Bank, and in terms of rural and urban population, 16.67% is rural, and 88.3% is urban. All people living in Saudi Arabia have access to electricity, even if they are in a rural or urban location, and the average life expectancy is 74.56 years.

Saudi Arabia is a monarchy, and this is primarily controlled over the Al Sa'ud, which is a royal family founded by their support for the Wahhabi religious establishment. This country's main religion is Islam, and as a result of that, Sharia Law is what mainly dictates governance and legislation; it is the religious law of Islam. The sovereignty is divided into thirteen administrative regions. Regional governors are elected from the royal family, and they have the authority over municipal councils. In these councils, governors are responsible for departments such as agriculture, health, and finance. Overall participation in political operations are limited to a small percentage of the country, primarily consisting of the royal family and others appointed by them. Women participating in government is also a rare occurrence. Due to Sharia Law, the punishments for crimes committed in Saudi Arabia can be extremely severe.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, with a total area of about 2.15 million km<sup>2</sup>, is by far the largest country on the Arabian Peninsula. Saudi Arabia lies in the tropical and subtropical desert region. The winds reaching the country are generally dry, and almost all the area is arid. Because of the aridity, and hence the relatively cloudless skies, there are great extremes of temperature, but there are also wide variations between the seasons and regions. A consensus from 2014 showed that 80.78% of Saudi Arabia is arable, or agricultural land. Major crops and exports include millet, tomato, citrus, grapes, wheat, and barley.

In terms of farm relation to these agricultural statistics, very large private societies, such as National Agricultural Development Societies and Companies, are owned by private firms belonging to one or several owners. Some of these farms have an area of tens of square kilometers. Large to medium size farms of a few hundred hectares owned by private individuals. Medium to small farms, most of which existed prior to the agricultural development boom that started in the mid-1970s.

A typical family size is of around 5 people. The types of dwellings the Saudi Arabians may live in can vary from traditional black tents to mud-brick homes located in agrarian towns to lofty townhouses located in busy metropolitan areas. Houses that are newly built have access to technology, internet, and water. Houses built in rural areas may not have those necessities.

People in Saudi Arabia typically eat very traditional food that has been consumed for centuries. Many staple foods in this country include but are not limited to: wheat, rice, yogurt, fava beans, dates, and chicken. Globally, Saudis consume the most amounts of broiler chicken compared to anywhere else in the world. Since religion has a large presence in their lifestyle, they have to butcher animals in certain ways and bless the food before it can be consumed. In terms of food restrictions founded on Islam, they cannot eat pork or drink alcohol of any kind.

Since Saudi Arabia became modernized, they have been able to develop a stronger industry in agriculture. They produce all of their dairy and vegetable products all on their own. Most food is prepared traditionally with many meals being an important part of culture. Foreigners in the country may eat foreign foods and order from fast food chains, while the Saudis may not.

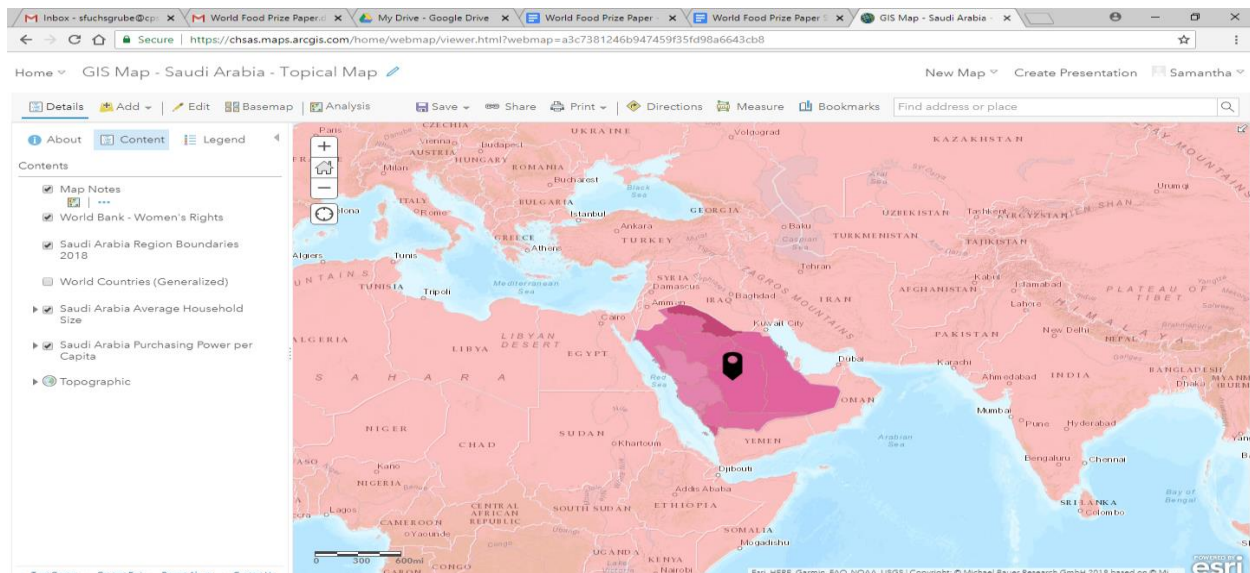
Types of jobs in Saudi Arabia can include but are not limited to: petroleum engineer, being part of a multinational company, surgeon, banker, being part of the IT industry, project management, public relations, creative designing, real estate dealer, or an English teacher. The salaries for different careers range from \$11,012 to \$31,615.

Families seem to have a decent level of access to health care. Previous health plans in this country established a large part of the infrastructure for health services, yielding exceptional results. However, in the future, a balance between preemptive and curative services will have to be implemented. Administrative skills in this field will also need to be improved in order to give Saudi citizens the best health care that is possible. The goal of the Saudi educational system is to ensure people are prepared for life outside of school, especially meeting the country's religious, social, and economic standards. They want to completely eradicate adult illiteracy. There is a very wide variety of options for people in this country. Students can complete general education, pursue higher education, attend universities, go to school overseas, special education, and adult education.

Most of the population of Saudi Arabia is urban, so this means most people live in a large metropolitan area and have high access to electricity, roads, clean water, local markets, toilets, and telephones. Anyone living in the rural areas may have a much more limited accessibility to these necessities. There are not many barriers to obtaining food here, and as Saudi Arabia is a desert country, almost all food commodities are imported from other countries. If for some reason they are not able to import food, problems may arise. Limiting factors of agriculture include land and water, so that by 2050, Saudi Arabia may have to import all of its domestic necessities. The promotion of hydroponics, traditional crops, greenhouse farming, and seawater harvesting are all helping to meet domestic energy requirements.

I feel very passionate about Human Rights. All over the world, people are very limited on what they are permitted to do. This type of oppression and mistreatment did not occur over a few days, this has been growing over hundreds of years. Strict laws established by harsh governments, intolerable societal beliefs, and discriminatory practices that have been in place over many years are negatively impacting the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The country has a relatively stable economy, infrastructure, educational system, government, and agricultural industry. However, people seem to be very lacking in freedoms and rights in the country, especially women. Saudi Arabia is an Islamic theocratic absolute monarchy, and only people with Muslim citizenship can live in this country. With that being said, Sharia Law is extremely prevalent here and can put women in a very uncomfortable position of becoming discriminated and oppressed by their own religion- the only reason they are allowed to live in Saudi Arabia in the first place. This is something that instantly allows me to consider some solutions to this major challenge in the country, which is equal rights and freedoms that should be given to people when they are born. If a problem of this magnitude can be solved in one country, Saudi Arabia being the major world region I am focusing on, then solutions for equal rights all over the world can be discovered.

Currently, women in Saudi Arabia are treated like second-class citizens. In law, women face a great amount of discrimination and are seen as inferior to their male counterparts. They must have a “male guardian” to give them permission to participate in certain practices. Girls need permission from their male guardian to vote, marry, work, or travel. Women in this country face alarming rate of abuse and domestic violence. It is a requirement for women to wear an *abaya*, which is a form of clothing that covers the entire body except the hands and face. As a result, women may often be seen wearing a *niqab*, which is a veil that covers their entire face except for the eyes. Men do not have to cover their face. It is very clear that Islam is the only established religion, which means that Sharia Law influences legislation practices. Homosexuality in a country like this will result in the death penalty. Islam is a strict religion with conservative and extremely traditional values. Often times, things such as being homosexual would not be considered a crime in many parts of the world today. On the subject of crimes, people that are accused of any such crime many not be informed of what they are said to have committed. There is no trial by jury in Saudi Arabia. Even if a trial has taken place, it is done in secret and there is always a presumption of guilt even if no legal defense is present. Most of the time, people are taken in and are subject to torture if they do not state a confession. The lack of religious freedom and prevalence of religious discrimination in the Middle East, specifically in Saudi Arabia, is becoming a consequential matter that the world must address. The Arc GIS map below shows information about Saudi Arabia.



The political issue of human rights in Saudi Arabia primarily involving women is slowly getting better, however, even that statement is a stretch. There is still much to be done in the country. In June of 2018, the country lifted the ban on women not being able to drive. Before this happened, they were dependent on male guardians or chauffeurs for them to travel anywhere by car. This change in atmosphere was met by approval from all sides in the country. Many people, including men, were cheering and supporting women’s right to drive. Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is the man who planned and organized for this to happen. It is known that if women become more involved in Middle Eastern society, the economy will grow and become more stable since more people will be participating. As the nation is moving away from its dependence on oil, households are going to need the extra income that would come from women.

The fact that Saudi Arabia is developing fast and has a relatively stable infrastructure may be what is the main force behind wanting to have women become more involved in society. According to the National Public Radio, because women have started driving, they are given more leadership roles to take on. Prince Muhammad hopes to reduce the country's reliance on oil and diversify their economy with public service sectors such as health and education. However, there is some opposition to these various changes Prince Muhammad is planning to make. In a strict, conservative society such as Saudi Arabia, these new ideas go against traditional values and therefore may not be accepted. Although it seems there are many challenges to transforming Saudi Arabian society, the support and accepting attitudes given by citizens outweighs any negative consequences. This topic equally affects people living in rural or urban populations- the law of Saudi Arabia is the same wherever one goes. If women need a male guardian to accompany her in the city, she also would be required to have one in any rural. Again, the country has very strict and traditional laws that must be followed by all citizens.

Men are not affected nearly as much as women are in terms of human rights. Men do not face oppression in Saudi Arabia, however, everyone is still subject to the same law. This includes children and the elderly. However, it is a religious duty for children to take care of their elderly parents. Elderly people that do not have children or decided not to get married can gain residency in a nursing home. Although it is rare, the country's values seem to be changing, and more homes are starting to appear. Unfortunately, children seem to have very limited rights, and families that live in poverty are common. Before age 5, about 21% of children die as a result of malnutrition and healthcare barriers. Education in this country can be extremely expensive, and therefore, families cannot afford to send their children to school, not to mention the fact that school is not compulsory. Young girls and boys go to school separately, and because the country relies on men to support the economy, discrimination begins at a young age for girls. Children cannot travel without the consent of a male guardian. Speaking of this, males are the ones who pass down their nationality to children and the citizenship can be given to them only if: there is childbirth after the marriage of his parents, and they must have their papers. This process results in a large number of stateless children (children with no defined identity or identification) and they have no access to medical care or free education.

Foreigners that move to Saudi Arabia may have some more freedoms than natural-born Saudi citizens, but for the most part, the same laws apply to anyone living in the country. Women and homosexuals are of two groups that face heavy oppression in the Middle East and can feel very marginalized. Women are often victims of domestic violence, and homosexuality in Saudi Arabia is a crime punishable by death. This topic does not require an explanation on how it affects the environment as Human Rights is a fundamental idea practiced in law. Legislation based on the equality of humans does not have any impact on the environment. However, some observations can be made. Since Saudi Arabia has a large population, over 30 million at the time of this composition, the country is a large contributor to air pollution, water pollution, and desertification. This country is a leading world producer in crude oil. Refining oil adds toxins to the air and this has been happening for years. Saudi Arabia is one of the worst polluting nations on the planet. Water pollution happens when water is desalinated, however, the water may still have too high of a salt or metal concentration. The water that cannot be used is then thrown back into the ocean, which alters the ecology of aquatic life. Desertification simply means that Saudi Arabia's land is 98% desert, and there is only about 1.6 % available land for agriculture and there is little to no groundwater. This means a great portion of the goods, food, and necessities people need must be imported from other countries.

There are a multitude of solutions that can address the challenge of ending authoritarianism, enforcing gender equality, and ensuring all people have the same human rights in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Three different solutions could be: the government could allow for more religious freedom and the acceptance of different religions, people could make the decision to ban Sharia Law but still include Islam as an allowed religion, and make laws that benefit men, women, and children. These are promising solutions, however, many people will have to make sacrifices and compromise with others in order for this to succeed. If gender equality becomes a reality in Saudi Arabia, many people might find that life is easier to manage without so many unfair restrictions. Also, a change in one country may spark change in the other Middle Eastern countries. Unfortunately, a major setback would definitely be the fact that the traditional values of Islamic culture may have to be altered in order to assist new societal changes. Gender equality, the end of authoritarianism, and ensuring human rights for all groups of people will not be possible with current religious legislation in place.

According to the United Nations, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a large document that covers the basic rights of people living in various countries. It was drafted by representatives from all parts of the world, and it essentially sets the standard for what the human rights are. This declaration was adopted in 1948 by the United Nations General Assembly. This document is supposed to protect all people, however, that idea does not seem to hold true in the modern world. People all over the world are being exploited, mistreated, discriminated, and oppressed. In Saudi Arabia, that is very present. If the declaration was held to a higher value and enforced, then maybe all these people around the world would not be facing so much inequality. I believe these solutions could greatly improve the lives of all people living in this country. The only thing that would be changed is the way citizens and people in positions of power look at laws and religion. Sharia Law might have to be replaced if women are given proper treatment in this country.

A specific solution to this problem would be a large-scale movement supported by the majority of the country. A large portion of the population would be required for this idea to work to its full potential. Only the country of Saudi Arabia can address these problems of injustice that its people are facing. Any help from outside countries could have the potential to increase conflict in the area, or even start a war. Throughout history, the trend shows that getting involved in other nation's problems always ends in a large number of casualties. This solution to this issue should be solved by Saudi Arabia, but they can be given a small amount of assistance from the United Nations if that is a necessary option. As there has been previous support in Saudi Arabia for gender equality, there is a possibility that the United Nations can help in a small way to assist in ensuring all people have their basic human rights. If that is not enough, then people in Saudi Arabia can start protesting and advocating for their government to change. A non-profit organization, or some type of large-scale movement could also lead to change. This project could not be funded by the government until laws are changed. The reason this is true is because if the laws state that women are not allowed to go somewhere without a male guardian, for example, it would be extremely wrong for the government to fund a movement that its very laws do not allow. The first step to a major solution would start with civilian effort, in my opinion, and from there, the government can start getting involved. Currently, women just received the right to drive in June of 2018. This was supported by Prince Muhammad, and because of that, the plan for change became a reality.

The government and civilians play the largest role on the path to human rights and gender equality. If this project is successful, many things in Saudi Arabia will be changed for the better. For instance, there will be new laws, more freedom, and a much more peaceful country to live in. For a successful solution to a problem of this magnitude, everyone must be treated equal, regardless of their social status, race, sex, or sexual orientation. If men are supporting gender equality in Saudi Arabia, all groups of people should be

able to participate in the movement. This includes women and children, people of any ethnic background, foreign citizens, homosexuals, minorities, and marginalized peoples. Once again, it is important to know that Saudi Arabia is predominantly Islamic, and understand that there may be some violence and backlash as a result of altering traditional values.

A movement of this magnitude in Saudi Arabia essentially does not have a time limit, and therefore it can last as long as there is still change that needs to be done. What will really show the true “sustainability” of this project is its results. It would be expected that the economy, various industries, healthcare, human rights, infrastructure, technology, and legislation will all be improved because everyone is treated fairer. A country that oppresses its women, homosexuals, other religions, and minorities will not succeed into the future. In my opinion, the Kingdom Saudi Arabia is going to fall if they continue these discriminatory practices. However, a country that gives all people the same treatment, rights, and necessities will flourish for many years to come. The terms ‘peace’ and ‘equality’ sound cliché, but they really are the only way humans will be able to live together without authoritarianism, violence, war, and relentless oppression.

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