

Research Briefing

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Saudi Arabia: Introductory country profile

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Summary

The UK has strong diplomatic, military, and economic ties with Saudi Arabia, and is currently negotiating a trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council, whose six members include the Kingdom.

This briefing introduces Saudi politics, human rights, trade, and international relations. It also signposts further reading. Please visit the Commons Library's [Middle East pages](#) for detailed analysis on the region's politics.

Unless otherwise stated, sources were accessed in June 2023

Saudi Arabia in the Middle East



Attribution: [Adobe Stock image 97651099](#). Saudi Arabia political map with capital Riyadh by Peter Hermes Furian. [Adobe Stock License](#)/image cropped

Headline statistics

- **2021 Population:** 35.9 million (UK: 67.3 million)
- **2021 Gross domestic product (GDP):** US\$834 billion (UK: US\$3.1 trillion).
- **2021 GDP per capita (GDP divided by population):** US\$23,200 (UK: US\$46,500).
- **2022 GDP growth:** 8.7% (UK: 4.0%). **2023:** 3.1% (UK: -0.3%).¹

¹ Data from [World Bank](#) and International Monetary Fund, [World economic outlook](#), April 2023, pp39, 142. All sources accessed 23 June 2023.

1 Economy

Saudi Arabia is a high-income economy, heavily reliant on migrant labour.

Oil is important, with 38% of its GDP, 64% of government revenues and 78% of Saudi mechanised exports based on crude petroleum and natural gas (2019 data). It also holds the world's second largest amount of proven crude oil reserves (at 17%, and second to Venezuela).

Changes in oil prices have a significant impact on Saudi Arabia's programmes and revenues, and whose government has resultingly sought to prioritise diversifying the country's economy. Vision 2030 (see page 4) sets out an aim to increase the private sector's contribution from 40% to 65% of GDP and raising the share of non-oil exports in non-oil GDP from 16% to 50%. The Saudi Public Investment Fund is expected to support this through investing US\$40 billion each year into the domestic economy.²

In addition to oil, other significant sectors are manufacturing (12% of GDP) and services (42%). Service industries include finance, retail, and transport.

The Covid-19 pandemic negatively impacted on oil exports and contributed to a decline in GDP by 5.4% in 2020 and a fiscal deficit of 12% of GDP.³ The World Bank states recovery in 2021, with GDP growth of 0.5% and a fiscal deficit falling to 2.1% of GDP, was "stronger than expected."⁴

As a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which includes Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE, Saudi Arabia applies low external tariffs with its neighbours and is working towards a common market. It will provide for freedom of movement, residence, and access to social services for GCC citizens. The GCC has also entered negotiations for free trade agreements with the EU, India, Japan, and the UK (see below, page 7, for the UK).⁵

2 Leadership and politics

In 1932, the Kingdom of Hejaz and Sultanate of Nejd on the Arabian Peninsula were unified under the name of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This followed the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War and British support for some Arab armies, including that of the House of Saud (which remains the Kingdom's monarchy).

² World Bank, [Saudi Arabia's economic update](#), April 2022; World Trade Organization, [Trade policy review: Saudi Arabia](#), March 2021, para 1.1, 4.41, 16

³ World Trade Organization, [Trade policy review: Saudi Arabia](#), March 2021, paras 2, 1.3, 1.9

⁴ World Bank, [Saudi Arabia's economic update](#), April 2022

⁵ World Trade Organization, [Trade policy review: Saudi Arabia](#), March 2021, paras 2.37, 2.43

2.1

Constitution

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030

[Vision 2030](#) was launched in 2016 and sets out the Kingdom's objectives to be at the heart of the Islamic and Arab worlds, to diversify its economy away from oil, and to increase its trade across Africa, Asia, and Europe. It commits to increase women's participation in the workforce to 30%, develop the Kingdom's renewable energy sector, localise the manufacture of defence equipment (currently only 2% is within the country, it wants to increase this to 50%) and to advance economic integration with the GCC.⁶

Absolute monarchy

Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy. Constitutionally, the King rules in accordance with Sharia (Islamic law).⁷

The Head of State is King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. His son, Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud (sometimes known as MBS) is Crown Prince and Prime Minister. He is seen as the de facto ruler and played an important role in the decisions for Saudi Arabia to intervene in Yemen's civil war in 2015, the development of Vision 2030 for the Kingdom, and the boycott of Qatar from 2017 to 2021 (see page 10 onwards for foreign policy).⁸

Council of Ministers

The King appoints and leads a Council of Ministers. While they reach decisions by majority vote, royal sanctions are needed for them to come into force.

Majlis al-Shura (consultative council)

A 150-strong advisory council, the Majlis al-Shura, has existed since 1993. Its members are chosen by the King. Royal decrees state at least 20% of seats in the council must be allocated to women. Currently, 30 women sit in the council (20% of members). Although the council may propose and amend draft laws and hold sessions with ministers who are not members of the royal family, it has no legislative or other power.⁹

⁶ Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, [Saudi Vision 2030](#)

⁷ Section 2.1 from Europa World Plus, [Saudi Arabia: Constitution and government](#), accessible via a Commons Library login

⁸ [Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, power behind the throne](#), BBC News, 6 October 2020

⁹ Chatham House, [Civil society in Saudi Arabia](#) (PDF), 2015, pp7-12

Municipal elections

Since 2005, irregularly spaced elections have been held to select half the membership of municipal councils. Women were permitted to vote and seek election from 2015 (the last time such elections were held). An estimated 131,000 women registered to vote (out of a potential five million). 20 of the 2,100 seats were won by women.¹⁰

2.2

Political rights

The US State Department's [2022 report on human rights in Saudi Arabia](#) cites ongoing restrictions on political participation:

- **Free expression:** Legal controls and monitoring are used by the government to restrict free expression and public criticism of it and the royal family. The US State Department says “many individuals” were detained on these grounds.
- **Free media:** The Ministry of Media can close any means of communication that it deems is engaged in a prohibited activity. All newspapers and websites must be government-licensed, senior editors must be approved, and material has been subject to censure on grounds of blasphemy, sectarianism, a threat to public order, and critical of the Saudi royal family or the Gulf allies of Saudi Arabia.
- **Freedom of assembly/association:** Permits must be issued for organised public assemblies, and no political assemblies can take place. Political parties are banned, while other organisations must be licenced.
- **Imprisoned dissidents:** The UN Special Rapporteur for the promotion and protection of human rights and local organisations have cited the use of anti-terrorism laws against those who criticise the government.¹¹

2.3

Human rights

The [Saudi Human Rights Commission was created in 2005](#), with responsibility for monitoring human rights in the Kingdom. Ongoing concerns include:

- **Death sentences continuing to be imposed:** In 2022, 196 executions were recorded by Amnesty—the highest level in 30 years. Offences liable

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, [Saudi Arabia: Landmark elections for women](#), 11 December 2015; UN Women, [Statement on the municipal elections in Saudi Arabia](#), 18 December 2015

¹¹ US State Department, [2022 country reports on human rights practice: Saudi Arabia](#), March 2023

for the death penalty include drugs-related offences, terrorism, murder, rape, and robbery.¹²

- **Gender equality:** As part of Vision 2030, the Kingdom is seeking to increase female participation in the workforce. Increased rights include women being able to obtain a driver's licence (2018), leave the country without the permission of male guardian (2019), open their own businesses without the consent of a male guardian (2018) and eligibility for equal pay (2018).¹³ The Crown Prince has also signalled that women no longer need to wear headscarves or full-length robes in public places, though all must dress "modestly."¹⁴

However, women still require the permission of a male guardian to marry, and only men have the unconditional right to initiate a divorce. Some women's rights activists have been arrested for seeking reforms and been subject to travel bans.¹⁵

- **Freedom of religion is not allowed under the law.** The law bans proselytizing by non-Muslims and non-Islamic public worship, while there is reported discrimination and imprisonment of Shia clerics (Saudi Arabia is a majority-Sunni Muslim state). The estimated 2.1 million Christians in the country worship in private.¹⁶
- **Worker rights.** There are an estimated 10 million migrant workers in Saudi Arabia.

Like other Gulf states, Saudi Arabia operates the [kafala \("sponsorship"\) system](#). This means workers enter the country only after gaining sponsorship by an employer. In 2021, the Kingdom introduced reforms, allowing some workers to change jobs or leave the country without their employer's permission. However, these do not affect the rights of domestic workers and there are continued concerns of forced labour and delays to the payment of wages.¹⁷ Only Saudi workers are entitled to form workers' committees in workplaces with more than 100 staff.¹⁸

- **Same-sex relationships are illegal** and can carry the death penalty. There are reports such sentences are carried out.¹⁹

¹² Amnesty International, [Death sentences and executions 2022](#), May 2023, pp7, 31

¹³ Embassy of Saudi Arabia in the US, [Saudi Arabia's reforms and programs to empower women](#) (PDF), August 2019

¹⁴ [Saudi crown prince says abaya not necessary](#), Gulf News, 19 March 2018

¹⁵ Amnesty International, [Saudi Arabia: Personal status law codifies discrimination against women](#), and Human Rights Watch, [Saudi Arabia: Law enshrines male guardianship](#), both 8 March 2023

¹⁶ US State Department, [2022 report on international religious freedom: Saudi Arabia](#), May 2023

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, [Saudi Arabia: Labour reforms insufficient](#), 25 March 2021

¹⁸ International Labour Organization, [Regulatory framework governing migrant workers](#), May 2023

¹⁹ International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association, [State-sponsored homophobia](#), 2020, December 2020, pp38, 69-74

UK Government assessment

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) [identifies Saudi Arabia as one its 31 human rights priority countries](#). Its latest report covers 2021. Concerns and actions included:

- The prohibition on the open practicing of non-Muslim faiths. The UK embassy held an inter-faith dialogue to support respect between different faiths in 2021.
- The use of the death penalty and the reported use of torture. The UK Government has raised specific juvenile cases with Saudi officials.
- Continuing restrictions on freedom of expression.²⁰

The UK Government says it regularly raises the death penalty and other human rights concerns directly with Saudi authorities, including at the ministerial level. While it acknowledges “significant change, including increased freedoms and economic opportunity for women” the UK Government states human rights “is likely to remain a key issue in our engagement for the foreseeable future.”²¹

The sale of UK arms to Saudi Arabia and their use in the Yemen conflict has also been controversial: See the Commons Library research briefing [UK arms exports to Saudi Arabia: Q&A](#), January 2021. Both the US and UK continue to sell arms to the Kingdom.

3 Relations with the UK

3.1 Plans for a trade agreement

While having an active trade and investment relationship, the UK and Saudi Arabia do not have a free trade agreement. Their trade takes place on the [World Trade Organisation \(WTO\) terms](#), meaning that they must treat each other’s goods and services the same as those from other WTO members.²² A preferential trade agreement would allow for more favourable terms.

Following a consultation, in June 2022 the Government [launched free trade negotiations with the GCC](#), which includes Saudi Arabia. Total trade in goods and services between the GCC and the UK reached £41.4 billion in 2019. This

²⁰ FCDO, [Human rights and democracy: The 2021 FCDO report](#), 9 December 2022

²¹ HC Deb, [28 November 2022](#), c688

²² Department for International Development (DIT), [Trading under WTO terms](#), 31 December 2020

would make the bloc, as a whole, the UK's tenth largest trading partner. However, trade fell to £30.4 billion in 2020.²³

The International Trade Committee has called for the UK Government to publish the likely impact of any agreement on human rights within the GCC.²⁴ Talks are ongoing.²⁵

UK-Saudi trade in 2022

- **Trade with the UK:** Saudi Arabia was the UK's 23rd largest trading partner.
- **Total UK-Saudi trade (exports and imports):** £17.3 billion in 2022, the highest since at least 2013. The previous peak was £13.4 billion in 2015.
- **Top five UK goods exported:** Power generators, medical/pharmaceutical products, cars, toilet and cleansing preparations, jewellery.
- **Top five UK goods imported:** Refined oil, power generators, plastics, crude oil, non-ferrous metals (including zinc, lead, and tin).²⁶

Notes: Data on the top five services traded is not available. During this period, trade was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and related health measures.

3.2

Gulf Strategy Fund (GSF)

The UK's GSF works in several Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia. Through it, the UK supports Saudi Arabia's Vision 2020 (see box, page 4). This includes commitments to develop cultural, sport and tourism sectors in the Kingdom to enable economic diversification. The GSF also supports clean growth and environmental sustainability, strengthening of UK-Saudi education partnerships, and countering terrorism.²⁷

In 2021, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Democracy and Human Rights in the Gulf argued the fund should be suspended as it failed to contribute to progress on human rights in the region. The Government disagreed, arguing all funding is subject to checks to ensure it does not impact negatively on

²³ DIT, [Information note on consultation relating to future trade negotiations between the UK and GCC](#), October 2021, p9 and [UK approach to negotiating a free trade agreement with the GCC](#), 22 June 2022

²⁴ International Trade Committee, [FTA negotiations with the GCC](#), HC 79, April 2023, para 86

²⁵ DIT, [Trade update: UK-GCC FTA](#), 22 March 2023

²⁶ DIT, [Trade and investment factsheets: Saudi Arabia, June 2023 edition](#) (updated monthly)

²⁷ FCDO, [GSF \[for 2021 to 2022\]](#), 26 August 2022

human rights and said it will continue to raise human rights concerns with Gulf countries.²⁸

3.3

Other UK-Saudi engagement

High-level UK-Saudi meetings in 2022 and 2023

In November 2022, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak met the Saudi Crown Prince at the G20 summit. They discussed UK-Saudi cooperation in the face of “regional security threats” (see Iran, page 12) and working together to stabilise energy markets following the rise in energy prices in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The UK Prime Minister also raised women’s rights.²⁹

This followed a visit of Prime Minister Boris Johnson to Saudi Arabia in March 2022, which focused on maintaining stability in world oil markets, ongoing human rights issues, and advancing the UK-Saudi strategic partnership.³⁰

Defence and security

- **UK military forces** are based in the Gulf to protect shipping and conduct operations against groups such as Islamic State/Daesh.³¹ In 2020 the UK deployed air defences to Saudi Arabia to defend against attacks from Yemen and Iraq by Iran-aligned armed groups.³² In 2022, there were 22 UK military personnel deployed in Saudi Arabia and nine Saudi personnel in the UK.³³
- **Defence Cooperation Programme:** The UK has exported Typhoon, Tornado and Hawk aircraft, mine countermeasure vessels and associated munitions, infrastructure, logistics and manpower support packages. This is long-standing, and is [fulfilled by BAE Systems](#).³⁴
- **Defence Cooperation Agreement:** Signed in 2022, the agreement aims to enhance bilateral defence and security cooperation, and will include training, capability-building and regular dialogue.³⁵

²⁸ Commons Library, [The Gulf in 2021](#), section 2

²⁹ Number Ten, [PM meeting with Crown Prince and Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman](#), 15 November 2022

³⁰ Number Ten, [PM meeting with the Crown Prince of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia \[...\]](#), 16 March 2022

³¹ Commons Library, [UK forces in the Middle East region](#), p3

³² HCWS100 [[UK air defence support to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia](#)], 16 June 2022

³³ PQ 108445 [[Saudi Arabia: Armed Forces](#)], 12 December 2022; PQ 13255 [[Armed Forces: Deployment](#)], 9 June 2022

³⁴ DIT, [Strategic Export Controls annual report 2019](#), HC1003, 1 December 2020, para 6.3

³⁵ Ministry of Defence, [UK signs plan for defence cooperation with Saudi Arabia](#), 13 December 2022

- **Collaboration on critical minerals (such as lithium and graphite):** In January 2023, the two countries pledged to increase investment in critical minerals to safeguard the UK's supply chains.³⁶
- **Strategic UK-Saudi partnership council.** Established in 2018, the partnership confirms the UK as a strategic partner to Vision 2030's aims to improve Saudi Arabia's economy and inclusivity. Areas of engagement include education, healthcare, financial services, life sciences, energy, and defence.³⁷ A third meeting in the economic and social strand of the partnership was held in June 2023 (the other strand concentrates on political and security issues).³⁸

4 Foreign relations

United States

The US has significant military ties with Saudi Arabia and shared concerns over Iranian influence. The US military has conducted training missions in the Kingdom since the 1950s. In 2021, around 2,100 US troops and air and missile defences were deployed to Saudi Arabia to promote regional stability and combat potential missile and drone attacks by Iran-aligned groups.³⁹

Saudi Arabia has increasingly questioned the level of US commitment to the Middle East and support for security against Iran and Iran-linked groups.

This has informed its increased engagement with Russia and China. However, arms sales from the US and its European partners to Saudi Arabia remain substantially higher than China and Russia.⁴⁰ Saudi Arabia has also agreed to cooperate in 5G and 6G communication networks with the US, as well as the Chinese company Huawei, which the US considers a security risk.⁴¹

US-Saudi relations also deteriorated following the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. In 2021, a US intelligence report concluded that the Saudi Crown Prince approved of an operation to capture or kill Khashoggi—the Saudi Foreign Ministry rejected the report. Upon publication, the US

³⁶ Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, [UK and Saudi Arabia pledge to deliver closer cooperation on critical minerals](#), 11 January 2023

³⁷ Foreign & Commonwealth Office, [UK-Saudi Arabia joint communiqué](#), 10 March 2018

³⁸ Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, [UK and Saudi Arabia strategic partnership council: Economic and social pillar-joint statement](#), 7 June 2023

³⁹ Congressional Research Service, [Saudi Arabia: Issues for US policy](#). RS33533, updated 10 May 2022

⁴⁰ Commons Library, [China and the US in the Middle East: Iran and the Arab Gulf](#), August 2022, sections 4 and 7.2

⁴¹ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [Biden's trip to Saudi Arabia: success and failures](#), 11 August 2022; [Saudi Arabia signs Huawei deal, deepening ties](#), Reuters, 8 December 2022

imposed a visa ban and sanctions against some Saudi officials. The UK had imposed sanctions against 20 Saudis in 2020.⁴²

Saudi Arabia and OPEC

The [Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries \(OPEC\)](#) is a group of 13 oil-producing countries that together constitute around 40% of the world's oil supply. The conflict in Ukraine has given them more leverage to set oil prices and global production.

Saudi Arabia produces around a third of OPEC's overall output, making the Kingdom's attitudes significant in OPEC's policy towards oil prices and output.⁴³ Rising energy prices following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has put greater international attention on the actions of OPEC. In late 2022, the United States promised "consequences" for OPEC's decision to cut production.⁴⁴ However, the US has been less critical of further reductions in 2023 as US oil prices have fallen since last year.⁴⁵

Russia is a [member of OPEC+](#), but policy between Russia and Saudi Arabia has been diverging in 2023: Russia is increasingly willing to sell its oil at lower prices to support its war effort, while Saudi Arabia is not.⁴⁶

Russia

Like the UAE, Saudi Arabia has adopted a more neutral position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine and sought to act as a mediator. At the UN, it has voted in favour of General Assembly resolutions calling for Russian withdrawal from Ukraine in March 2022 and March 2023 (these are non-binding).⁴⁷

In 2023, Saudi Arabia has hosted the Ukrainian President and the sanctioned Russian interior minister as part of this diplomatic balancing.⁴⁸

In recent years, Saudi-Russian ties have been strengthening more generally, with the two signing a military cooperation agreement in 2021.⁴⁹ Following

⁴² Commons Library, [The Gulf in 2021](#), section 3.3

⁴³ Council on Foreign Relations, [OPEC in a changing world](#), updated 9 March 2022

⁴⁴ [Biden vows "consequences" for Saudi Arabia after oil output cuts](#), Al-Jazeera, 12 October 2022

⁴⁵ [White House focused on oil prices after OPEC+ move, official says](#), Reuters, 5 June 2023

⁴⁶ [Russia and Saudi Arabia's oil partnership shows strain](#), The New York Times, 7 June 2023 (accessible via Nexis News)

⁴⁷ [Saudi Embassy in the US, Saudi Arabia votes in favour of UNGA resolution calling for Russia to withdraw from Ukraine](#), 23 February 2023

⁴⁸ [Russia's sanctioned interior minister visits Saudi Arabia just after trip by Ukraine's Zelenskyy](#), AP, 23 May 2023

⁴⁹ Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, [Saudi-Russian military cooperation: Signalling or strategy?](#), 3 September 2021

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Saudi Arabia's decision to reduce oil production was interpreted by the US as tacit support for Russia and undermining of the European oil embargo against Russia. However, others argue it reflects economic pressures in an economy that is supported by high oil prices. In 2023, there has been divergence in Saudi-Russia approaches to oil prices (see "Saudi Arabia and OPEC" box).⁵⁰

In 2023, Saudi Arabia restored relations with Syria's Bashar Al-Assad, an ally of Russia, despite US opposition. Assad visited Saudi Arabia in May 2023.⁵¹

China

China has increasing economic ties with the Arab Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, though China balances these with ties to Iran (Iran and Saudi Arabia are typically in tension). In 2021, Saudi Arabia was China's largest source of oil, and total trade between China and Saudi Arabia was 3.5 times higher than its trade with the US (US\$87 billion versus US\$25 billion).

In 2018, Saudi Arabia and China signed a comprehensive strategic partnership (the highest level of diplomatic relations with China) and in 2023 Saudi Arabia said it intends to become a dialogue partner to the [Shanghai Cooperation Organization](#) (Iran is a full member). Despite deepening economic ties, China's role as a security guarantor and arms source for Saudi Arabia remain limited: the value of arms sales from China stood at only 1% of the value of the US\$19 billion by the United States from 2010 to 2020.⁵²

Iran

Together with the [Sunni-Shia divide](#), a dominant fault line in the Middle East is over Iran's regional influence and its support for armed groups and militias in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Iraq.

In 2015, a Saudi-led coalition intervened in the Yemen against the Houthis, who are aligned with Iran and likely to gain material support from them. The Houthis have used missiles and drones to attack several sites in Saudi Arabia. The conflict has largely stalemated, with a ceasefire in 2022 and continuing negotiations in 2023.⁵³

Like other Gulf states, Saudi Arabia was critical of the 2015 agreement reached with Iran to limit its nuclear programme. The Saudis have called for any new deal to be widened to also target Iran's wider regional activity.

⁵⁰ [Oil, US or Russia: Whose side is Saudi Arabia really on?](#), DW, 10 December 2022

⁵¹ Commons Library, [Syria's civil war: A future under Assad?](#), section 3

⁵² Commons Library, [China and the US in the Middle East: Iran and the Arab Gulf](#), August 2022, sections 2.1, 2.2, 3.4, pp23

⁵³ Commons Library, [Yemen: conflict and peace, 2021 to 2023](#), pp8, 12-13

There has been some reconciliation with Iran in 2023, however. Several Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, cut their diplomatic ties with Iran in 2016 following an attack on the Saudi embassy in Iran and Saudi Arabia's execution of a Shia religious leader convicted of terrorism charges. Chinese-brokered talks saw ties restored in 2023.⁵⁴

Israel

Under the US-led Abraham Accords, both the UAE and Bahrain signed a peace agreement with Israel in 2020 (in addition to Morocco and Sudan). This has the potential to [further security cooperation between Israel and Gulf states](#), who share a common concern for Iranian activity in the region and its nuclear programme.⁵⁵

In December 2022, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu set out plans to seek full diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia. The two countries have long had informal contact, but Saudi Arabia has stressed it would not agree to full diplomatic relations until an independent Palestinian state is established.⁵⁶

Israeli settlement activity, Israeli-Palestinian violence, and the actions of some in the new Israeli Government in 2023 have made reaching an agreement harder.⁵⁷ Saudi Arabia is reportedly seeking US support for a civilian nuclear programme and increased security guarantees before agreeing to establish formal ties with Israel.⁵⁸

Other Gulf states

Saudi Arabia is a member of the GCC, whose members include the UAE, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, and Bahrain. The GCC aims to build political and economic ties between its members.⁵⁹

Saudi Arabia is close to the UAE and Bahrain. In 2011, it sent forces to Bahrain alongside the UAE to suppress protests against Bahrain's monarchy.⁶⁰ It also supported the GCC's decision to isolate Qatar from 2017 to 2021 (see box, page 14).

⁵⁴ Commons Library, [Iran's influence in the Middle East](#), sections 1, 2.3 and 4.2

⁵⁵ Washington Institute for Near East Policy, [Regional security cooperation in the Middle East](#), 21 September 2022

⁵⁶ [Saudi FM says no normalising ties with Israel before Palestinian issue resolved](#), Al-Monitor, 20 January 2023

⁵⁷ Middle East Institute, [The slowing down of Israel-Arab relations under the Netanyahu Government](#), 25 May 2023

⁵⁸ [For Israel, normalization with Saudi Arabia is not impossible](#), Al-Monitor, 16 May 2023

⁵⁹ [What is the GCC?](#), Al-Jazeera, 4 December 2017

⁶⁰ Europa World Plus, Bahrain: Constitution and contemporary political history

What was the “Qatar crisis”?

In June 2017, some GCC states and others cut diplomatic relations with Qatar and imposed limits on trade and movement. The countries alleged the country supported terrorism, including through being too close to Iran and supporting political Islam organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

In contrast to other Gulf states, for example, Qatar had supported the Egyptian Presidency of Mohamed Morsi, a member of the Brotherhood, while Gulf states backed his overthrow in 2013. The Brotherhood has ties with groups across the Middle East, but Saudi Arabia and the UAE have worked to suppress it, seeing it as a threat to their regimes.

An agreement ending the dispute was signed in January 2021. It detailed no actions for Qatar to take.⁶¹

5

Further reading

General background/profiles

- Europa World Plus, [Saudi Arabia profile](#). Provides economic and political data and describes key events. Accessible via a Commons Library log-in.
- CIA, [World Factbook: Saudi Arabia](#). Headline statistical information on population, economy, and energy.
- BBC News, [Saudi Arabia profile](#), February 2023. Events to 2018.
- Congressional Research Service, [Saudi Arabia: background and US relations: Issues for US policy](#), RL33533. 65-page briefing on politics, foreign policy, and economic issues from the perspective of US-Saudi relations.

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- HL Deb, [Saudi Arabia: Execution of Hussein Abo al-Kheir](#), 16 March 2023, cc1471-75 and HC Deb, [Saudi Arabia’s execution of Hussein Abo al-Kheir](#), 16 March 2023, cc972-77
- HC Deb, [Saudi Arabia: Death penalty and spike in executions](#), 28 November 2022, cc688-74

⁶¹ Commons Library, [The Gulf in 2021](#), CBP9284, section 5.1

- HL Deb, [Gulf states: Human rights abuses](#), 24 November 2022, cc1522-50
- HL Deb, [Saudi Arabia: Mass execution](#), 14 March 2022, cc15-18 and HC Deb, [Executions in Saudi Arabia](#), 14 March 2022, cc609-18
- HC Deb, [Sale of arms: War in Yemen](#), 13 July 2020, cc1255-67 and HL Deb, [Saudi Arabia: Arms sales](#), 10 July 2020, cc1347-50
- HC Deb, [Human rights in Saudi Arabia](#), 18 July 2019, cc442-476WH
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- House of Lords Library, [Human rights in the Gulf states](#), 17 November 2022
- DW, [Saudi Arabia reforms: Royal power play or meaningful change?](#), 27 June 2021
- Amnesty International, [Human rights: Saudi Arabia 2022](#). Covers nine issues.
- Amnesty International, [Ten ways that Saudi Arabia violates human rights](#), May 2020
- Human Rights Watch, [Saudi Arabia](#). Overview of political opposition, prison conditions, migrants, LGBT+ people and women.
- US State Department, [2022 country reports on human rights practices: Saudi Arabia](#), March 2023. Wide ranging report on political and other rights.
- UN Human Rights Council, [Universal periodic reviews: Saudi Arabia](#). The Council conducts regular reviews of human rights in every country. The most recent review was in 2018.

- The [Gulf Centre for Human Rights](#). Based in Lebanon, it promotes human rights in Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia.
- [ALQST organisation for supporting human rights](#). UK-based.
- [Sanad \(Standing against nefarious and arbitrary detentions\)](#). UK-based.
- [MENA rights group](#). Based in Geneva. Monitors human rights in the Middle East.

Human rights: Specific issues

- Reporters without Borders, [Saudi Arabia](#). Work on media freedom.
- Human Rights Watch, [Saudi Arabia: Labour reforms insufficient](#), March 2021
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- Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, [Saudi women in the workforce](#), December 2022
- The Week, [What women can and can't do in Saudi Arabia](#), August 2021
- International Labour Organization (ILO), [The ILO in Saudi Arabia](#). Summary of the ILO's work in the country and efforts on worker rights.
- US State Department, [2022 report on international religious freedom: Saudi Arabia](#) May 2023. Describes legal and social practices on religion.

Trade and economic profiles

- Department for International Trade, [Trade and investment factsheet: Saudi Arabia](#), updated monthly. Provides a 16-page overview of the UK's trade with Saudi Arabia.
- Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Economic factsheet: Saudi Arabia](#), October 2021. Two-page summary with key economic indicators. No longer updated.
- Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, [Submission to the International Trade Committee on UK trade negotiations: Agreement with Gulf Cooperation Council](#), January 2022. Describes human rights issues raised by the potential trade agreement with the UK.
- International Monetary Fund, [Economic prospects and policy challenges for the Gulf Cooperation Council](#), December 2021. Discusses the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, changes in oil prices, and outlook for 2022.

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