



Saudi Arabia 2020 Crime & Safety Report: Riyadh



This is an annual report produced in conjunction with the Regional Security Office at the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh. OSAC encourages travelers to [use this report](#) to gain baseline knowledge of security conditions in Saudi Arabia. For more in-depth information, review OSAC's [Saudi Arabia country page](#) for original OSAC reporting, consular messages, and contact information, some of which may be available only to private-sector representatives with an OSAC password.

Travel Advisory

The current U.S. Department of State [Travel Advisory](#) at the date of this report's publication assesses Saudi Arabia at Level 2, indicating travelers should exercise increased caution due to terrorism and the threat of missile and drone attacks on civilian targets. Do not travel to within 50 miles of the border with Yemen due to terrorism and armed conflict. Review OSAC's report, [Understanding the Consular Travel Advisory System](#).

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Crime Threats

The U.S. Department of State has assessed Riyadh as being a **LOW**-threat location for crime directed at or affecting official U.S. government interests. Crime in Saudi Arabia has increased over recent years but remains at levels far below most major metropolitan areas in the United States. Criminal activity does not typically target foreigners and is mostly drug-related. Review OSAC's reports, [All That You Should Leave Behind](#), [The Overseas Traveler's Guide to ATM Skimmers & Fraud](#), [Taking Credit](#), [Hotels: The Inns and Outs](#), and [Considerations for Hotel Security](#).

Cybersecurity Issues

The Saudi government continues to expand its cybersecurity activities. Major cyberattacks in 2012 and 2016 focused on the private sector and on Saudi government agencies, spurring action from Saudi policymakers and local business leaders. The Saudi government, through the Ministry of Interior (MOI), continues to develop and expand its collaboration with the U.S. Government on cybersecurity.

The Saudi government continues to block access to various websites reported to contain pornographic, religious, and political material that the government considers offensive or sensitive.

Cybersecurity should be an increasingly important focus for the U.S. private sector abroad. U.S. organizations based in the Middle East should increase the use of cybersecurity best practices, especially with regards to the identification and reporting of spear phishing emails. Cyber threat researchers report that Iranian hacking groups have used phishing emails to deliver malware and or harvest [credentials](#). In previously observed campaigns, phishing emails and SMS sent to victims have contained malicious links designed to redirect users to credential harvesting websites, initiate scripts that install malware, and or malicious attachments containing [malware](#).

Iranian actors may use malware to conduct intelligence gathering in the form of stealing files, logging keystrokes, and or destroying [data](#) for disruptive purposes. Follow best practices for cybersecurity. Review OSAC's reports, [Cybersecurity Basics](#), [Best Practices for Maximizing Security on Public Wi-Fi](#), [Traveling with Mobile Devices: Trends & Best Practices](#), and [Satellite Phones: Critical or Contraband?](#)

Transportation-Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Primary road arteries between major population centers and in larger cities are generally in fair to good condition; in contrast, roads in rural areas are less developed. Road surfaces range from pavement to sand/gravel. Roads in rural areas lack road markings, lighting, and/or reflectors. Saudi drivers regularly drive without lights, at excessive speed, or in the wrong direction. Avoid driving at night outside of the greater Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dhahran areas due to poor lighting, unmarked construction areas, livestock crossing highways, and erratic drivers. Review OSAC's reports, [Road Safety Abroad](#), [Driving Overseas: Best Practices](#), and [Evasive Driving Techniques](#); and read the State Department's webpage on [driving and road safety abroad](#).

With the advent of photo enforcement for traffic lights and speed limits, the Saudi government has demonstrated its concern and determination to lower road fatalities. Authorities have taken steps to curb unruly motorists through the implementation of the SAHER Road Safety Program that uses speed- and red-light cameras along with a nationwide, computerized database of registered vehicle owners. This program has led to a tangible improvement in driving conduct, though lack of strict enforcement of other moving violations contributes to reckless driving.

Traffic accidents are common, and often result in serious injuries/fatalities. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Saudi Arabia continues to have one of the highest death rates in the world from traffic accidents. In the event of a traffic accident with personal injuries, authorities may take all involved to the local police station; they also may detain drivers for several days until they determine culpability and reparations are paid.

The Saudi government authorized women to drive in 2018. Short-term visitors may drive using their U.S. driver's license or international driver's license. U.S. citizens employed in Saudi Arabia must obtain a Saudi driver's license from the Traffic Department. Saudi Arabia requires approved drivers to have vehicle insurance.

Public Transportation Conditions

Public transportation options are growing, and several projects are in the construction phase. The Riyadh Metro, slated for completion in late 2020, is currently one of the world's largest infrastructure projects. Construction has resulted in road closures and traffic rerouting.

Travel by air and rail is accessible and generally safe. Security is adequate at the country's main airports and train stations for passengers and cargo. Review OSAC's report, [Security In Transit: Airplanes, Public Transport, and Overnights](#).

Aviation/Airport Conditions

Several international airports operate in Saudi Arabia. Riyadh's King Khalid International Airport (RUH), Jeddah's King Abdulaziz International Airport (JED), and Dammam's King Fahd International Airport (DMM) have adequate security; all airports have new biometric systems for immigration processing. Jeddah is in the process of moving operations into its new international airport designed to handle the millions of Muslim pilgrims who travel to Mecca and Medina.

Due to risks to civil aviation operating within the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman region, including Saudi Arabia, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has issued several advisory Notices to Airmen (NOTAMs). Consult the [Federal Aviation Administration's Prohibitions, Restrictions and Notices](#) for the NOTAM covering the region.

Terrorism Threat

The U.S. Department of State has assessed Riyadh as being a **HIGH**-threat location for terrorism directed at or affecting official U.S. government interests. Terrorists may attack with little to no warning, targeting tourist locations, transportation hubs, markets/shopping malls, and local government facilities. Terrorists have targeted Saudi and Western government interests, mosques and other religious sites (both Sunni and Shia), and some locations U.S. citizens and other Westerners frequent.

ISIS and al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) continue to demonstrate the ability to inspire individuals to conduct attacks and to expand operational capabilities for planning and executing attacks inside Saudi Arabia. Individual cells aligned with Shia militant groups also operate in Saudi Arabia. ISIS and AQAP have expressed their intent to continue attacks in Saudi Arabia. Multiple small-scale attacks have involved ISIS or ISIS-inspired assailants. In July 2016, a suspected suicide bomber died after detonating an explosive device outside a mosque near the U.S. Consulate in Jeddah. In July and August of 2018, shooters ambushed Saudi security forces at checkpoints in Qassim. In April 2019 armed terrorists attacked Saudi security forces in Qatif (Eastern Province) and Zulfi (160 km northwest of Riyadh). On November 11, 2019, a 33-year-old Yemeni male claiming affiliation with AQAP stabbed three cultural performers at a live show in Riyadh. In December 2019, Saudi security forces killed two terrorists possessing RDX explosives and materials for a car bomb in al Anud, a suburb of Dammam.

The Saudi government actively combats transnational and domestic terrorism. Authorities have conducted numerous arrests, identified smuggling routes, and interdicted attempts by ISIS and others to cross the border illegally. The government has a strong security force that has increased its ability to respond quickly anywhere in the Kingdom. However, the government continues to struggle with confronting illegal immigration and smuggling along its southern border with Yemen. Saudi border guards reportedly have stopped thousands of people from crossing the border illegally and have encountered an increased volume of smuggled firearms and ammunition. The government is working on new initiatives to mitigate these threats, including fingerprinting passengers at airports and border crossings. The government has increased its use of media to announce arrests and request assistance from the populace in identifying and locating terrorists.

Anti-U.S./Anti-Western Sentiment

Westerners, and particularly U.S. citizens, remain targets of opportunity for terrorist groups and attacks inspired by terrorist rhetoric.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

The U.S. Department of State has assessed Jeddah as being a **HIGH**-threat location for political violence directed at or affecting official U.S. government interests. Iran and its regional proxies have attacked Saudi Arabia with missiles, rockets, and armed unmanned aerial systems (UAS). For further information on UAS and the threats they pose, review OSAC's reports, [Drone Operations and Threats Abroad](#) and [Addressing Drone Security Threats](#).

Iran and other regional actors hostile to Saudi Arabia have conducted destructive and sometimes lethal attacks against a variety of targets, including critical infrastructure, military facilities, airports, and energy facilities throughout the country, as well as merchant vessels in regional shipping lanes. Riyadh, Yanbu, areas in proximity to Jeddah, the civilian airport in Abha, military installations in the south, and specific oil and gas facilities are examples of recent targets. Iran has supplied Yemen-based Houthis and other regional proxy groups with weapons, including drones, missiles, and rockets. Violence associated with Iran and Iran-supported groups represents a significant threat. U.S. citizens living and working near military bases and critical civilian infrastructure, particularly in the Eastern Province and areas near the border with Yemen, are at heightened risk of missile and drone attacks.

Continuing violence in neighboring countries, such as Yemen, has a potential to spill over into Saudi Arabia. The U.S. Government restricts government personnel and their families from travel to within 50 miles of the Saudi-Yemen border, including the cities of Jizan and Najran; al-Qatif in the Eastern province and its suburbs, including Awamiyah; and Abha International Airport (AHB). U.S. government personnel also must notify the Regional Security Office in advance of travel outside of the tri-city area of Dhahran, Dammam, and Khobar.

Civil Unrest

Security forces generally do not tolerate public demonstrations and move quickly to prevent them from forming or gaining momentum. Security forces have sufficient resources (e.g., equipment, personnel) to respond to any civil disturbance. Review OSAC's report, [Surviving a Protest](#).

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

Extremely high summer temperatures and occasional dust storms present ongoing environmental hazards. Ensure adequate water is available and carefully plan trips during the summer to ensure access to water and emergency communication.

Critical Infrastructure

One of Saudi Arabia's main concerns is access to fresh water. Saudi Arabia relies on desalinated water supplied from desalinization plants on the east and west coasts. Riyadh only maintains a three-day supply of fresh water. As such, the country's desalinization plants and water pipeline network are a critical infrastructure concern.

Economic Espionage/Intellectual Property Theft

The U.S. Trade Representative included Saudi Arabia on its Special 301 Priority Watchlist in April 2019, due to ongoing intellectual property rights (IPR) violations and concerns. Since then, the Kingdom took steps to shut down BeoutQ and end its illicit broadcasts. However, U.S. IP holders continue to voice concerns regarding the lack of IPR protection for innovative pharmaceutical products, including the lack of adequate and effective protection against unfair commercial use and unauthorized disclosure of test or other data generated to obtain approval. Specifically, the Saudi Arabia Food and Drug Authority (SFDA), which the Minister of Health oversees, has authorized domestic companies to produce generic versions of pharmaceutical products that are under patent protection either in Saudi Arabia or the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), or that are still covered by Saudi Arabia's system. In addition, ongoing concerns regarding IP enforcement persist, including difficulty for stakeholders to obtain information on the status of enforcement actions and investigations, the lack of seizure and destruction of counterfeit and pirated goods in markets, and limits on the ability to enter facilities suspected to be involved in the sale or manufacture of counterfeit goods.

Personal Identity Concerns

Saudi Arabia remains a very conservative country; understanding Saudi culture can assist visitors in blending in during their time in the country.

Married women, including non-Saudis, require their husband's permission to depart the country, while unmarried women and children require the permission of their father or male guardian. Minor children must have their father's permission in order to leave the Kingdom. Children visiting their fathers in Saudi Arabia, even when there is a custody agreement, can be prevented from leaving unless the father consents. This is true even if the child is a U.S. citizen. The U.S. Embassy and Consulates cannot obtain exit visas for the departure of minor children without their father/guardian's permission. If a foreigner and a Saudi living in Saudi Arabia divorce, Saudi courts rarely grant permission for the foreign parent to leave the country with the children born during the marriage, even if he or she has been granted physical custody. Foreign mothers of Saudi children, who are divorced or widowed, may apply for a permanent residency permit (*iqama*) without the need for a sponsor. To do so, they must prove maternity and that they were legally married to the Saudi father. Review the State Department's webpage on security for [female travelers](#).

Islam is the official religion of the country and is present in all aspects of life in Saudi Arabia. Saudi authorities do not permit criticism of Islam or Muslim religious figures, including on social media. The government prohibits the public practice of religions other than Islam. Authorities have jailed and/or deported non-Muslims suspected of violating these restrictions. Authorities have raided church services in private homes, and jailed and/or deported participants. Muslims who do not adhere to the strict interpretation of Islam prevalent in much of Saudi Arabia may encounter societal discrimination and constraints on public worship. Public display of non-Islamic religious articles, such as crosses and Bibles, is not permitted. Non-Muslims are forbidden to travel to Mecca and parts of Medina, the cities where two of Islam's holiest mosques are located. Review OSAC's report, [Freedom to Practice](#), and the State Department's webpages on security for [faith-based travelers](#) and the [Hajj and Umrah Fact Sheet](#).

Same-sex sexual activity is illegal in Saudi Arabia. Saudi society does not openly tolerate or accept LGBTI+ identities. Saudi law allows for the punishment of same-sex activity with fines, corporal punishment, life in prison, or death. However, there is no evidence of hate crimes occurring against members of these groups. There is anecdotal, unconfirmed evidence (from social media) that religious police arrest members of the LGBTI+ community and give them advice and literature on reforming their identities and sexual orientation. Review the State Department's webpage on security for [LGBTI+ travelers](#).

Individuals with disabilities may find accessibility and accommodation very different from what they generally find in the United States. Saudi law does not prohibit discrimination against people with disabilities, and there is no legislation requiring public accessibility. Newer commercial and government buildings, however, often include such access. According to the Ministry of Labor and Social Development, there are numerous government-sponsored centers for people with disabilities. Note that Saudi Arabia has limited infrastructure to care for those with mental disabilities. Review the State Department's webpage on security for [travelers with disabilities](#).

Drug-related Crimes

Drug use among Saudi youth is an increasing concern. Narcotics smuggling continues to be a challenge along the border areas. Ministry of Interior (MOI) officials have identified border security as an area of concern and are addressing the issue through additional training and physical barriers. Security officials have encountered armed resistance from traffickers. The media commonly report large drug seizures. Authorities frequently impose capital punishment for drug smuggling. According to the most recent media reporting (January 2020), authorities had executed 184 prisoners. There has been a rise in executions since 2015. In April 2019, the Saudi government executed 37 men in one day, including a prospective college student on his way to the U.S. As of publication, authorities have executed four individuals for drug-related crimes in 2020.

Kidnapping Threat

The threat of kidnapping by terrorist groups continues despite recent counterterrorism efforts. Terrorist elements may resort to targeting individuals rather than carrying out large-scale attacks. Criminal kidnappings are usually associated with other violent crimes. Review OSAC's report, [Kidnapping: The Basics](#).

The U.S. Embassy periodically processes requests for assistance from U.S. citizens with children abducted or wrongfully detained in Saudi Arabia. The majority of cases involve one parent refusing to allow his/her child to return to the U.S. Saudi Arabia is not a party to the Hague Abduction Convention; custody orders and judgments of foreign courts are not enforceable in Saudi Arabia if they contradict or violate local laws and practices. In the event of marriage or divorce under Sharia law, parents do not share equal rights of custody to their children; religious/citizenship status affects the court's judgment in custody cases.

Other Issues

The Saudi government does not permit photography of governmental facilities, such as military bases and government buildings, nor military, security, or police personnel. The Saudi government is also sensitive to photographs that may be perceived as portraying the country in an unfavorable light. This policy can include photos of mosques, impoverished areas, the local population, and traditional souks (markets). Do not take anyone's picture without clear consent, and never take a picture of a woman or a place where women congregate. Be aware of local sensitivities whenever you are taking pictures in public. Authorities have routinely detained U.S. citizens for violating these policies. The U.S. Consulate General is unable to intervene if you violate Saudi law. Review OSAC's report, [Picture This: Dos and Don'ts for Photography](#).

The importation of drones for commercial or personal use is prohibited without prior approval from the General Authority for Civil Aviation (GACA). A customs clearance certificate authorizing importation can be obtained as part of the GACA approval process. Read the State Department's webpage on [customs and import restrictions](#) for information on what you cannot take into or out of other countries.

Police Response

The emergency in Saudi Arabia is **999** for police, **997** for an ambulance, and **998** for the fire department/civil defense. Police response times to emergencies vary due to lack of physical addresses and street names. Local residents have reported that the police response time averages about an hour; however, the police are particularly responsive to the needs of the diplomatic and international business communities.

Saudi law is based on the local interpretation of Sharia law (the religious law of Islam), and influenced by local customs and practices. Authorities may expel, arrest, imprison, or even execute those violating the laws, even unknowingly. Foreign visitors are subject to all local laws.

Penalties for the import, manufacture, possession, and consumption of alcohol or illegal drugs are severe. Convicted offenders can expect jail sentences, fines, public flogging, deportation, or death. Customs inspections at ports of entry are thorough and effective in finding drug and alcohol violators. Authorities may detain suspects for months without charges, pending final disposition of a criminal case. Download the State Department's Crime Victims Assistance [brochure](#).

There are various units within the MOI with oversight over different areas of policing, security and enforcement. Law enforcement efforts include large numbers of high-profile uniformed and plain-clothes officers working openly and covertly.

Members of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV, *Haia, Mutawa*, religious police) patrol Saudi Arabia. These officers encourage people to go to prayer, ensure shops/restaurants close at prayer times, and intervene if they see any behavior they deem "un-Islamic." The most common enforcement issues are being in the presence of a person of the opposite sex who is not a family member, and women not covering their hair, arms, or feet. The Saudi Government has greatly curtailed CPVPV arrest and enforcement powers, although they still retain statutory power to harass people not complying with Sharia Law.

Religious police enforce strict standards of social behavior, to include closing commercial establishments during the five daily prayer observances, insisting upon compliance with strict norms of public dress, dispersing gatherings of women in public places designated for men, and preventing unaccompanied or single men from entering public places designated for families. Historically, incidents involving the religious police increase during Ramadan because many religious police believe they must increase assertion of their authority during the holy month, though this has decreased notably in the last two years due to new policies issued by the Saudi government.

While many members of the CPVPV are respectful and polite, enforcement can be in the form of harassment or even violence. Listen to the officer and let him know you understand why they stopped you to resolve the interaction peacefully and without confrontation. Detained U.S. citizens should immediately contact the U.S. Consulate for assistance.

Medical Emergencies

Medical care varies greatly in quality, and high-profile cases of medical malpractice and errors have occurred. Consult your regular physician if you are considering serious medical treatment in Saudi Arabia. Find contact information for available medical services and available air ambulance services on the Consulate's [Medical Assistance page](#).

The Saudi Red Crescent Authority (SRCA, a humanitarian society that provides emergency medical services throughout the Kingdom) operates a mobile application called "Asefni," or "Save Me." The app provides emergency teams with the user's location, information about health facilities within the user's vicinity, and emergency contact numbers for relief organizations. The app is an effort to provide more efficient emergency response times.

Review medical insurance options prior to traveling to the country. The U.S. Department of State strongly recommends purchasing international health insurance before traveling internationally. Review the State Department's webpage on [insurance overseas](#).

Saudi Arabia has a dry climate with extreme heat several months of the year; be sure to stay hydrated. Air pollution is a significant concern in many parts of Saudi Arabia including Dammam. Many infectious diseases, such as measles, typhoid, dengue, and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), are present in Saudi Arabia. The CDC offers additional information on vaccines and health guidance for [Saudi Arabia](#).

Review OSAC's reports, [The Healthy Way](#), [Traveling with Medication](#), [I'm Drinking What in My Water?](#), [Health 101: How to Prepare for Travel](#), and [Fire Safety Abroad](#).

OSAC Country Council Information

Riyadh has an active OSAC Country Council. Contact OSAC's [Middle East & North Africa team](#) for more information.

U.S. Consulate Contact Information

Collector Road M, Riyadh Diplomatic Quarter. P.O. Box 94309, Riyadh 11693.

Hours of Operation: 0800-1700, Sunday-Thursaday

Website: <https://sa.usembassy.gov>

Embassy Operator: +(966) (11) 488-3800

State Department Emergency Line: +1-202-501-4444

Other U.S. Diplomatic Posts In Saudi Arabia

- [Consulate Jeddah](#), Al Muhammadiyah District, near the new American School building. Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. +966 12 220 5000.
- [Consulate Dhahran](#), US Consulate Driveway, KFUPM, Dhahran 34464. +966 13 330-3200.

Helpful Information

Before you travel, consider the following resources:

- [OSAC Risk Matrix](#)
- [OSAC Travelers Toolkit](#)
- [State Department Traveler's Checklist](#)
- [Smart Traveler Enrollment Program \(STEP\)](#)
- [Saudi Arabia Country Information Page](#)