Saudi Arabia 2017 Crime & Safety Report: Riyadh

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Terrorism; Religious Violence; Political Violence; Natural Disasters; Cyber; Economic Espionage

Near East > Saudi Arabia; Near East > Saudi Arabia > Riyadh

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Overall Crime and Safety Situation
U.S. Embassy Riyadh does not assume responsibility for the professional ability or integrity of the persons or firms appearing in this report. The ACS Unit cannot recommend a particular individual or location and assumes no responsibility for the quality of service provided.

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.

Please review OSAC’s Saudi Arabia-specific webpage for proprietary analytic reports, Consular Messages, and contact information.

Cybersecurity Issues

In 2012, Saudi Aramco was the victim of one of the first, well-documented cyber attacks to take place in the Gulf. Based on open media reports and various cyber security experts, Aramco’s computer network was compromised by someone who had access to the network. Aramco and the government have not disclosed who was responsible. However, shortly thereafter, another very similar one was launched against RasGas, the Qatari natural gas company. The government, through the Ministry of Interior (MoI), entered into several
technology and training agreements with the U.S. government. Since the inception of this relationship, a collaborative environment has developed between U.S. cyber security experts and MoI representatives. Cyber attacks in late 2016 reminiscent of the 2012 attacks have affected the Saudi civil aviation and transportation agencies, and alleged attacks focused on the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency and Central Bank. U.S. Embassy’s cybersecurity environment is continually being assessed. Guidance to U.S. businesses and their interests is to practice cyber vigilance.

The government blocks access to some websites, claiming that restrictions bar access to pornography. The government also blocks access to websites with religious and political material that the government considers offensive or sensitive.

Other Areas of Concern
ISIS-linked attacks on foreigners and Shia in Qatif and al Hasa prompted the U.S. Embassy to place those areas off limits to official U.S. government travel. Ongoing regional conflicts are also an issue for travelers to Saudi Arabia, as instability in Iraq and the war in Yemen continue to produce attacks on the northern and southern borders of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia continued military strikes into Yemen to stem the advance of the Houthi militia, which is trying to extend their control over Yemen. Yemen’s Houthi militia launched multiple SCUD missiles into Saudi Arabia, although missiles either did not hit their intended target or were intercepted by the Saudi military. U.S. government personnel are restricted from traveling within 50 miles of the border with Yemen (including Jizan and Najran) without permission from Embassy security officials due to the violence that has spilled into the area. This volatile situation, coupled with increased illegal immigration and smuggling from the southern border, provides a very real threat to Saudi Arabia.

Transportation-Safety Situation
Physical road conditions in larger cities are generally fair to good; in contrast, roads in rural areas are less developed. Road surfaces may range from pavement to sand/gravel, without road markings, lighting, and/or reflectors. Drivers might drive with no lights, in the wrong direction, and in reverse, even on well-traveled highways. The U.S. Embassy/Consulates strongly discourage 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. For more information on self-driving, please review OSAC’s Report “Driving Overseas: Best Practices.”

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Authorities have taken steps to curb unruly motorists through the implementation of the SAHER Road Safety Program in 2009 that utilizes speed and red light cameras in conjunction 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 contributes to reckless driving. Traffic police have yet to actively enforce traffic management laws. Traffic accidents are common and often result in serious injuries/fatalities. According to the World Health Organization, Saudi Arabia has one of the highest death rates caused by traffic accidents. In the event of traffic accident with personal injuries, all persons involved may be taken to the local police station. Drivers may be detained for several days until culpability is determined and reparations are paid. Those involved should immediately contact their sponsor for assistance if necessary.

Short-term male 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. Authorities will not recognize foreign licenses held by women, nor will they issue driver’s licenses to women.

Public Transportation Conditions
Public transportation is growing, and several projects are in the planning phases. The Riyadh Metro, slated for completion in 2020, is the world’s largest infrastructure project, and the resulting construction affects Riyadh traffic with road closures and traffic rerouting. Construction has begun; however, no section is operational, and completion is not anticipated until 2020.

Travel by air and rail is accessible and relatively safe. Security is considered good at the main airports and train stations for passengers and cargo.

Large cities provide some bus service.

Aviation/Airport Conditions
Several international airports exist. Riyadh and Dammam airports have robust security; both airports have new biometric systems for immigration processing. Jeddah is in the process of building a new international airport designed to better handle the yearly pilgrimage to Mecca by many Muslims. The U.S. Transportation Security Agency assesses the Kingdom’s international airports on a regular basis. Some lapses (inconsistent management of badges) have been identified.

Terrorism Threat
THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE HAS ASSESSED RIYADH AS BEING A HIGH-THREAT LOCATION FOR TERRORIST ACTIVITY DIRECTED AT OR AFFECTING OFFICIAL U.S. GOVERNMENT INTERESTS.

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

ISIS continues to demonstrate the ability to inspire individuals to conduct attacks and the operational control to plan and conduct attacks inside Saudi Arabia. Multiple attacks in 2016 were linked to ISIS or inspired by ISIS rhetoric. There were four ISIS-linked suicide bombings of mosques in 2015: two Shia mosques in Qatif and Dammam in May; a Saudi Mol Special Security Forces Sunni mosque in Abha in August; and a Shia mosque in Najran City in September.

ISIS has potentially become a destabilizing factor with direct implications for the Kingdom’s security. ISIS has expressed its desire to take over the country. Their intent and the potential impact on regional security will continually be assessed.

Al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has not relinquished its goal of attacking the Saudi government and Western entities inside of Saudi Arabia and remains an active concern.

The Saudi government’s capacity to combat transnational and domestic terrorism has increased dramatically. The Saudis have undertaken several initiatives that have led to arrests, identification of smuggling routes, and interdiction of attempts by ISIS and others to cross the border illegally. The government continues to have a strong security force that has increased its capacity to respond quickly anywhere in the Kingdom. However, KSA 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 firearms and ammunition. The government is working on new initiatives to mitigate these threats, including fingerprinting passengers at airports and constructing a wall along the Saudi-Yemen border. The Saudi government has increased its use of media to announce arrests and to request assistance from the populace to identify and locate terrorists.

Significant events have included:

- ISIS conducts a strategy of “threats” via the Internet.
  - September 2015: Saudi authorities arrest two ISIS-inspired individuals in Riyadh who turned their residence into a bomb-making factory.
  - August 2015: Reports of military activity at/near the border with Yemen continue.

Restrictions remain on travel for U.S. government employees within 50 miles of the border, as
well as the Governorate of Al Hasa and the city of Qatif and its surrounding suburbs in the Eastern Province.

- May 2015-September 2015: Multiple ISIS suicide bombings on mosques occurred, resulting in significant loss of life.
- April 2015: Saudi MoI arrests 93 ISIS operatives.
- March 15-19, 2015: Consular services at the U.S. Embassy/Consulates were canceled due to heightened security concerns at U.S. diplomatic facilities in the Kingdom. The Saudi government has since broadcast that it arrested numerous individuals involved in a plot to attack the U.S. Embassy.

Anti-American/Anti-Western Sentiment
Westerners, particularly Americans, 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 RIYADH AS BEING A LOW-THREAT LOCATION FOR POLITICAL VIOLENCE DIRECTED AT OR AFFECTING OFFICIAL U.S. GOVERNMENT INTERESTS.

Civil Unrest
Security forces generally do not tolerate public demonstrations and move quickly to prevent them from forming or gathering momentum. Security forces have sufficient resources (equipment, manpower) to respond to any civil disturbance.

Post-specific Concerns
Environmental Hazards
Extremely high summer temperatures and the pervasive dust present ongoing, but predictable, environmental hazards. For more information, please refer to OSAC’s Report, “Dangers of Excessive Heat.” 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 processes salt water from the Gulf into fresh water, which is transported through a pipeline to the interior. Riyadh only maintains a three-day supply of fresh water. As such, the water pipeline is a
critical infrastructure concern.

Economic Concerns
Both economic espionage and intellectual property rights (IPR) violations are prevalent. Copyright, trade secrets, and patent infringements in various industries and commodities remain a challenge. The government has improved protection and enforcement of IPR violations, leading to its removal from the U.S. Trade Representative’s Special 301 Watch List in February 2010.

The Ministry of Culture and Information (MCI) launched an IPR National Awareness Campaign to encourage respect for IPR. In February 2012, the Board of Grievances (BOG) sentenced a Saudi national to 10 days in jail for IPR violations. The sentence was the first to impose criminal sanctions on an IPR violator. Enforcement of IPR continues to be a daunting task for officials, but they appear to be making some headway. In 2012, the MCI blocked 52 websites for copyright violations, and IPR inspections resulted in the BOG imposing 1.7 million SAR ($453,333) in fines for violators. The MCI increased enforcement efforts with the hiring of inspectors. The GCC Trademark Law has been approved by the Supreme Council for the GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) and became effective in December 2015, representing significant advancement for IPR in Saudi Arabia.

Drug-related Crimes
Drug use among Saudi youth is an increasing concern, and narcotics smuggling continues to be a challenge along the border areas. MoI officials have identified border security as an area of concern and are addressing the issue through training and physical barriers. Large drug seizures are commonly reported in the media. Penalties for the import, manufacture, possession, and consumption of alcohol or illegal drugs are severe, and convicted offenders can expect jail sentences, fines, public flogging, deportation, or death. Punishment for drug smuggling is death, and according to media reporting at least 63 people were executed in 2015 for drug trafficking.

Kidnapping Threat
The threat of kidnapping by terrorist groups continues to be a potential threat despite the government’s counterterrorism efforts in recent years. Terrorist elements may resort to targeting individuals rather than carrying out large-scale attacks. U.S. citizens should exercise prudence and security awareness.

Police Response
Saudi police response times to emergencies vary due to lack of physical addresses and street names. Local residents have reported that response time averages about an hour; however,

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the police are particularly responsive to the needs of the diplomatic and international business communities. Law enforcement efforts include large numbers of high-profile uniformed and plain-clothes officers working openly and covertly throughout communities.

Saudi law is based on the local interpretation of Sharia law (the religious law of Islam), which is influenced by local customs and practices. Persons violating the laws, even unknowingly, may be expelled, arrested, imprisoned, or even executed. Customs inspections are thorough and effective in finding drug and alcohol violators. Customs officials routinely open mail and shipments to search for contraband, including material deemed pornographic or that appears to be non-Sunni Islamic religious material. Customs officials arbitrarily confiscate or censor materials, to include Christian bibles and religious videos.

Saudi Arabia is patrolled by members of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV), whose members are commonly referred to as “Haia,” “Mutawa,” or the religious police. These officers encourage people to go to prayer, ensure shops/restaurants are closed at prayer times, and intervene if they see any behavior they deem “un-Islamic.” The most common enforcement issues are people being in the presence of a person of the opposite sex who is not a family member and women who have not covered their hair, arms, or feet. 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. Religious police frequently reproach females for failure to observe strict dress codes and arrest men and women found together who are not married or closely related. Incidents involving the religious police increase during Ramadan because many religious police believe they must increase assertion of their authority during the holy month. While many members of the Haia are respectful and polite, the enforcement can be harassing or even violent. Visitors should listen to the officer and let him know the visitor understands why s/he was stopped, in order to resolve the interaction peacefully and without confrontation.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

Americans who are victims of crime or who are detained by police are strongly encouraged to immediately contact the Embassy/Consulate for assistance. If accused (or arrested) for a crime, Americans will need to resolve the matter through the local legal system. Suspects may be detained for months without being charged, pending final disposition of a criminal case.

Crime Victim Assistance

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The emergency number throughout KSA is 999. Please contact American Citizen Services at the following numbers and emails:
Riyadh: (966) (11) 488 3800, RiyadhACS@state.gov
Jeddah: (966) (12) 667 0080, JeddahACS@state.gov
Dhahran: (966) (13) 330 3200, DhahranACS@state.gov

Police/Security Agencies
The Ministry of Interior (MoI) is responsible for policing throughout the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. There are various units within the MOI that have oversight over different areas of policing, security, and enforcement.

Medical Emergencies
Contact Information for Available Medical Services
King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center
Tel: (966) (11) 464-7272
Emergency Tel: (966) (11) 442-3838
Poison Control: (966) (11) 442-7604 (Sunday-Thursday)
With the reputation of being the premier hospital and referral center in Saudi Arabia, the hospital specializes in serious life-threatening conditions (cardiac arrest, trauma, head injuries, etc.). It does not provide medical services to expatriates. In an emergency, they will stabilize an individual and transfer him/her to a private medical facility.
Kingdom Hospital
P.O. Box: 84400, Riyadh, 11671
Tel (966) (11) 275-1111
Emergency Tel: dial ext. 1 or ext. 5301
One of the newest facilities, the hospital has a 24-hour emergency department best suited for non-life threatening medical conditions or injuries (broken bones, lacerations, etc.). It has evening private clinics.
King Abdulaziz National Guard Hospital
P.O. BOX 22490, Riyadh 11426
Tel: (966) (11) 252-0088
Emergency Tel: dial ext. 3332
Poison Control (966) (11) 252-0088 ext. 2200 (24 hours per day/seven days per week)
Best hospital for mass casualties. It has evening and daytime private clinics.
Dr. Sulaiman Al Habib Takhassusi Hospital
P.O. Box 2000, Riyadh 11393 KSA
Tel: (966) (11) 283-3333
Emergency Tel: (966) (11) 283-3500
This is one of the newest private healthcare facilities and offers multi-specialty medical services. It is in Al Rahmaniah District, not far from the U.S. Embassy. The hospital has a 24/7 emergency department, which can provide intensive care services to pediatric and adult patients. It has the largest private cardio-surgery unit in the Kingdom and can manage trauma cases.
King Khaled University Hospital, King Saud University
P.O. Box 7805, Riyadh 11472 KSA
Outpatient Specialized Polyclinic
Tel: (966) (11) 469-0077
Emergency Tel: (966) (11) 467-1079 / 469-9199
KKUH is one of the largest government medical school healthcare facilities. It has a 24-hour emergency department, which can accommodate intensive care for acute medical and surgical emergencies, although only on a short-term basis until the patient is stabilized and can be transferred to a private medical facility. It is one of the few facilities in the Kingdom that has a burn unit. It has an Outpatient Specialized Polyclinic (evening clinic) that can provide medical services to expatriates.
Specialized Medical Center
P.O. Box 66548, Riyadh 11586 KSA
Tel: (966) (11) 434-3800
Emergency Tel: (966) (11) 434-3800 ext. 1036
SMC is a private healthcare facility that offers primary care service. They have a 24-hour emergency department that can provide intensive care services to pediatric and adult patients.
Available Air Ambulance Services
The King Faisal Hospital in Riyadh, opened in October 2009, offered Saudi Arabia’s first helicopter medical evacuation service. Tel: (966) (11) 464-7272 ext. 33333 or 31448
SOS International: Tel: 0044-2080-762-8133
Air Response: Tel: 001-303-858-9967

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Air Medical Services: Tel: 001-305-359-4730
Air Ambulance Network: Tel: 001-727-934-3999

Insurance Guidance
Saudi Arabia requires approved drivers to have vehicle insurance. The Embassy/Consulates recommend that travelers review medical insurance options prior to traveling to country.

Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance
The CDC offers additional information on vaccines and health guidance for Saudi Arabia.

OSAC Country Council Information
The Riyadh Country Council currently meets monthly and has approximately 420 members. Please contact OSAC’s Middle East and North Africa team with any questions or to join.

U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information
Embassy Address and Hours of Operation
Embassy Riyadh: Located at Collector Road M, Riyadh Diplomatic Quarter
Hours of Operation: 0800-1700, Sun-Thurs
Embassy Contact Numbers
Tel: (966) (11) 488-3800
Fax: (966) (11) 483-0773
Website: http://riyadh.usembassy.gov/

Nearby Posts
Consulate Dhahran: http://dhahran.usconsulate.gov/
Consulate Jeddah: http://jeddah.usconsulate.gov/

Additional Resources
U.S. Department of State Saudi Arabia Travel Warning
U.S. Department of State Worldwide Caution
Saudi Arabia Country Information Sheet