



Saudi Arabia — Va-PoReg Country Report

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09/15/1818 Start Part of Other Country [of Ottoman Empire]: The First Saudi State was established in February 1727 and gained control of most of present-day Saudi Arabia through conquests, including Mecca and Medina, until it was defeated by the Ottomans in the „Wahhabi War” on 09/15/1818.¹ The Al Saud regained power in 1824 but only controlled the Najd region, leading to a long struggle for control with the Al Rashid. The Al Saud were eventually defeated in 1891 and forced into exile in Kuwait. The Ottoman Empire maintained nominal control over the Arabian Peninsula in the early 1900s, with a collection of tribal leaders, including the Al Saud, ruling under the Sharif of Mecca’s authority.² For the relevant period, V-Dem’s JCE is classified as limited, indicating weak judicial oversight. Concurrently, V-Dem’s LCE shows no value, which can be cautiously interpreted as indicating an absence of legislative constraints on the executive. LIED identifies political liberties as absent, and V-Dem’s PCLI is also classified by us as indicating that political liberties were absent.

02/16/1902 End Part of Other Country [of Ottoman Empire, Autocratic Monarchy]/Start Autocratic Monarchy: The Emirate of Riyadh was the initial version of the Third Saudi State from 1902 to 1913, headed by the House of Saud. This state was established when the Saudi forces conquered Riyadh from the Emirate of Ha’il during the Battle of Riyadh.³ It was succeeded by the Emirate of Nejd and Hasa and was considered the earliest legal predecessor of modern-day Saudi Arabia.⁴ The second form of the Third Saudi State was the Emirate of Nejd and Hasa, which lasted from 1913 to 1921. It was a monarchy under the leadership of the House of Saud. The state was created after the Ottoman garrison lost control of Al-Ahsa to Saudi forces during the Conquest of al-Hasa.⁵ The Sultanate of Nejd, which lasted from 1921 to 1926, was the third manifestation of the Third Saudi State and served as a forerunner to present-day Saudi Arabia. It was governed by the House of Saud as a monarchy, and emerged when Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, the Emir of Riyadh, became sultan over Nejd and its surrounding areas.⁶ For the relevant period, from 1902 to 1925 V-Dem’s JCE is classified as limited, indicating weak judicial oversight. Concurrently, V-Dem’s LCE shows no value, which can be cautiously interpreted as indicating an absence of legislative constraints on the executive.

01/08/1926 Continuation Autocratic Monarchy [as Kingdom of Hejaz and Nejd]: After the Kingdom of Hejaz fell to Abdul Aziz’s forces in December 1925, he declared himself king of Hejaz in January 1926 and combined his territories with the Kingdom of Hejaz and Nejd.⁷ On 05/20/1927, the Treaty of Jeddah was signed, in which Great Britain recognized the independence of the Kingdoms of Hijaz and Najd, both ruled by the monarchy established through conquest by Adb al Aziz al Saud over the previous 25 years (Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 91). In accordance with LIED, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during the specified period. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive held unlimited authority with no institutionalized constraints on decision-making power. For 1926-1932, V-Dem’s JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, while V-Dem’s LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent.

09/23/1932 Continuation Autocratic Monarchy [as unified Saudi Arabia]: The Kingdoms of Hejaz and Najd were unified under the name Saudi Arabia. The king serves traditionally as both the head of state and government. He is selected by his predecessor from among the male descendants of the nation’s founder Ibn

Saud. However, this selection must be approved by the Allegiance Council, consisting of senior princes.⁸ On 09/27/2022 Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, the son of King Salman, was appointed prime minister making him the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia. In general, the political system is dominated by the royal family. The extensive size of the Al Saud family enables it to occupy most crucial positions within the kingdom and maintain a presence across all levels of government. Traditionally, key ministries and all thirteen regional governorships have been reserved for members of the royal family. Decisions are reached through consultations between the King, the Council of Ministers, Islamic scholars (at least until the mid-2010s) and tribal leaders. Saudi Arabia does not have a conventional constitution. Instead, the Qur'an and the Sunnah are declared as the state constitution. Without national elections or political parties, Saudi Arabian politics operates within two distinct realms, internally between the royal family and externally between the royal family and the broader Saudi society. Factional divisions within the Al Saud family are based on clan loyalties, personal ambitions, and ideological disparities. The dominant clan faction, referred to as the 'Sudairi Seven', consists of the late King Fahd, his full brothers, and their descendants. The Consultative Assembly is the formal advisory body of Saudi Arabia. It is a deliberative assembly that advises the king on important issues for the country. With the power to propose laws to the king and his cabinet for approval and enactment, it consists of 150 members appointed by the king. They are selected from scholars, individuals with expertise, and specialists. Since 2013, the Assembly has included 30 female members out of the total 150, meeting a 20 percent minimum quota for women's representation.⁹ Male suffrage was introduced in 2005 while female suffrage was introduced in 2015. Men and women have the right to vote for half the seats in „virtually powerless“ municipal councils.¹⁰ Political participation in Saudi Arabia is largely restricted, with the monarchy limiting public involvement in meaningful ways. Municipal elections, characterized by a lack of political parties, see voters heavily influenced by tribal and religious leaders, many of whom maintain close ties to the ruling establishment.¹¹ In Saudi Arabia are almost all political rights and civil liberties restricted. Women and members of religious minority groups often face significant discrimination, both in law and in practice. The working conditions are often exploitative.¹² In accordance with LIED, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during the specified period. Since 1902, LIED identifies political liberties as absent, and V-Dem's PCLI is likewise classified by us as showing that political liberties are absent. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive held unlimited authority with no institutionalized constraints on decision-making power. From 1933 onward, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent. Per FH, from 1972 onward, the country scores between 11 and 14 as not free, which we also interpret as not free.

Autocratic Monarchy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional sources (Bank/Richter/Sunik 2014, Metz 1992, Champion 2003, Ibrahim 2001)

Notes

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wahhabi_War

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Saudi_Arabia#

³ <https://www.thenationalnews.com/gulf-news/saudi-arabia/2022/01/13/the-capture-of-riyadh-1902-how-a-daring-raid-shaped-arabia/>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emirate_of_Riyadh

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emirate_of_Nejd_and_Hasa#

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sultanate_of_Nejd

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sultanate_of_Nejd

⁸ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/saudi-arabia/freedom-world/2023>

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_Saudi_Arabia#cite_note-7

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_suffrage#cite_note-centralasiainstitute.org-37

¹¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/saudi-arabia/freedom-world/2023>

¹² <https://freedomhouse.org/country/saudi-arabia/freedom-world/2023>

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