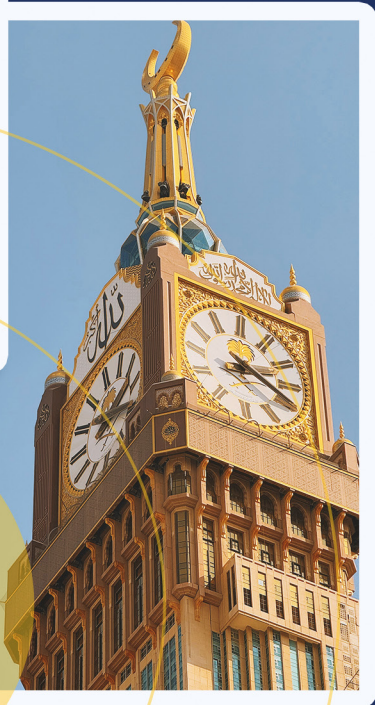
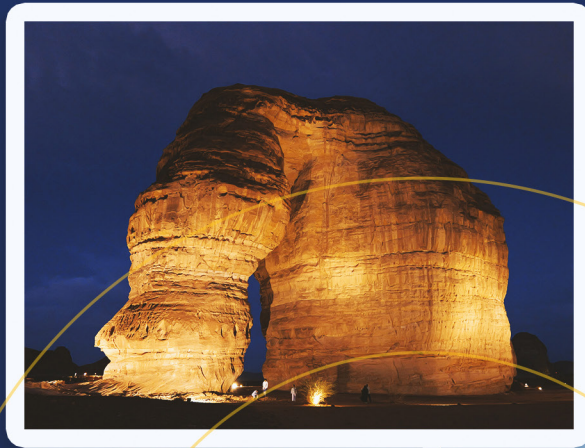


Saudi Arabia travel advisory



September 2026

القسط
ALQST
For Human Rights لحقوق الإنسان



ALQST for Human Rights is an independent NGO founded in 2014 by Saudi human rights defender Yahya Assiri to promote and defend human rights in Saudi Arabia. Named after the Arabic word for “justice”, ALQST takes a consistent approach grounded in international human rights law. We conduct on-the-ground research, engage in international legal and public advocacy, and campaign on behalf of victims of human rights abuses – defending rights for all, without discrimination.



With its vast natural beauty and historic archaeological sites, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has recently started to capitalise on its obvious attractions as a potential tourist destination, despite a lack of infrastructure, as part of a strategy to diversify its economy. The aim of this travel advisory is to provide people thinking of visiting the country with essential background information on the human rights situation there, especially as nowadays this can sometimes affect foreign visitors directly as well. It hopes to prevent them from getting into trouble, or indeed perhaps unwittingly becoming propaganda tools.

This advisory doesn't address the particular risks faced by those doing business in Saudi Arabia, or by the millions of migrant workers drawn to the country as labourers and housemaids. Nor does it detail the security-related risks in certain areas of the kingdom, such as along the southern border with Yemen, where Saudi intervention in the civil war has contributed to a major humanitarian crisis. Instead, this advisory offers visitors – especially those conscious of the impact of tourism on host populations, and wishing to act as ethical travellers – essential background information on relevant human rights risks and concerns.

Background

As home to the two holiest sites in Islam, Mecca and Medina, Saudi Arabia has long hosted and serviced Muslim pilgrims on Hajj and Umrah. Non-religious tourism, though, is a recent phenomenon. Under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's "Vision 2030" economic plan, the authorities have made strenuous efforts to create and develop a Saudi tourism industry. The first visas for non-religious tourists were offered in September 2019, allowing visitors to stay for up to 90 days. Significant public investment has gone into tourism infrastructure, attractions and large-scale cultural, sporting and entertainment events, luring in international celebrities. The Saudi Tourism Authority, set up in 2020, has carried out extensive marketing projects, including its flagship "Visit Saudi" campaign, aimed at attracting overseas visitors – with a target of 150 million tourists by 2030.

Tourism has the potential to be an important economic driver for the Saudi economy, but it is hard to assess how beneficial this might be to the average Saudi family. The public have little to no say in how policy is developed, projects commissioned and funds allocated, while in many regions everyday needs such as housing, transport and basic infrastructure are run-down and neglected. Yet tourism, like the Crown Prince's other megaprojects and glittering festivals, contributes to a carefully crafted aura of progress and liberal reform that in fact helps him to strengthen his repressive grip on power.

Human rights violations, some of them now also affecting foreign visitors

The widely promoted image of a liberalising regime opening up the country to the world stands in stark contrast to the reality on the ground for many Saudi citizens and even foreign residents: a chilling climate of fear and intimidation, and [a persistent pattern of repression and serious human rights abuses](#). The human rights situation has in fact deteriorated since King Salman came to the throne in 2015 and his son Mohammed bin Salman became Crown Prince and de facto ruler in 2017. Here are some of the worst concerns that all potential visitors should be aware of:

Arbitrary arrest, detention and harsh prison terms for exercising free speech

Free speech, freedom of peaceful assembly (e.g. political meetings or demonstrations) and political participation (e.g. voting in elections) are non-existent in Saudi Arabia. There are no independent civil society organisations or trade unions. For several years the authorities have made sweeping waves of arbitrary arrests and imposed lengthy prison sentences on peaceful activists, advocates for reform, and ordinary individuals voicing even quite mild criticism. Under the kingdom's loosely worded and draconian Anti-Cybercrime Law, innocuous social media posts can lead to detention and prison. Such peaceful activity can sometimes involve just a few words, a "like" or a single comment. Many [prisoners of conscience](#) have been unjustly jailed for years or even decades for expressing their opinions.

[Even foreign visitors are now at risk](#) of arrest and punishment for their free speech, particularly online, including social media posts published before entering as well as while visiting the kingdom. Recent examples of foreign individuals targeted include:

- British national [Ahmed al-Doush](#), arbitrarily detained and sentenced to five years in prison after an unfair trial on charges relating to social media use that violated his right to free expression
- French national [Amr Abdelfattah](#), arbitrarily detained and brought to trial on charges relating to a visa issue and to verbal comments alleged to be "insulting the government" and "praising prosecuted individuals"

- Dutch-Yemeni national [Fahd Ramadhan](#), arbitrarily detained for 18 months and later released. He was never formally charged but told officials from the Dutch embassy in Riyadh he believed the reason for his detention was sympathising online with a critic of the Saudi royal family
- Lebanese national [Haidar Slim](#), arrested in 2022 after making Umrah (pilgrimage) and sending via WhatsApp a video of himself performing a Shia religious chant, which later circulated online. He was prosecuted under the Anti-Cybercrime Law and only released in 2025
- A [Canadian national](#) arrested in April 2023 and interrogated about some of his social media posts and “likes”
- A [European national](#) held without charge for 10 months between November 2023 and September 2024
- An American national detained for two months without charge in late 2025 after posting a TikTok video about his experiences in the country

Further examples can be found on the [ALQST website](#).

Given the climate of fear and lack of transparency in Saudi Arabia, the true extent of such arbitrary detentions is likely to be far greater than this with testimonies often only emerging after detainees are released and able to leave the country.

Discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation

When in 2018 the authorities ended a ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia – the only country in the world where such a ban had existed – this was bizarrely hailed as evidence of a new age of gender equality. While some other restrictions on Saudi women’s lives have since been removed or reduced, they still face widespread discrimination, not only socially but according to the law. [The oppressive male guardianship system](#) that makes adult women subordinate to a father, husband, brother or even son has been modified but far from abolished. Women still need the consent of their male “guardian” to marry, for example, and must by law “obey” their husbands. Activists for women’s rights continue to face arrest and prosecution.

As part of the drive to open up the country for tourism, in 2019 the authorities announced a relaxation of the country’s strict dress code for women – but only for foreign visitors to the country. Inviting influencers to Saudi Arabia and allowing them, for propaganda purposes, to dress as they wish has created confusion among local women, who naturally assume

the same standards apply to them, when in reality they don't enjoy this freedom. Numerous Saudi women – like fitness instructor [Manahel al-Otaibi](#) – have been arrested since then accused of wearing “indecent” clothing that would be perfectly acceptable in most parts of the world.

A similar inconsistency between foreign visitors and the local population can be seen with regard to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights. Although the Saudi Tourism Authority website says that the kingdom welcomes LGBT guests, Saudi nationals continue to face the risk of detention or prosecution for gender nonconforming expression or for behaving or dressing in ways that are perceived as inconsistent with their sex assigned at birth.

Saudi law still doesn't recognise LGBT people as having basic rights including freedom from discrimination. While there have been no reported cases of foreign visitors being targeted on these grounds, the legal framework remains uncompromising: sex between two individuals who are not married is subject to heavy penalties. While same-sex marriage is absolutely not recognised in Saudi Arabia, it should be noted that this last provision applies to any unmarried couple – of whatever sex. One consequence of this is that a woman seeking contraceptive services or ante-natal health care in the kingdom will be required to provide proof of married status.

Unfair trials

Judicial proceedings in Saudi Arabia routinely fall short of international standards and fair trial guarantees, and the courts are notorious for their disregard of legal safeguards. Common violations include the denial of access to lawyers and documents, undue delays, the acceptance of confessions extracted under torture, and the holding of trials in secret. Foreigners facing trial in Saudi Arabia often suffer additional violations of their rights by being denied access to interpreters or embassy or consular officials.

Torture and ill-treatment in prison

Conditions in Saudi prisons are notoriously harsh, and inmates often face cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Targeted detainees may face prolonged solitary confinement, enforced disappearance, and physical and psychological torture. This was highlighted in [testimony](#) from a European national detained for 10 months without charge, who was held in a filthy room shared by 14 people with only one functional shower and toilet. French national [Amr Abdelfattah](#), meanwhile, has faced repeated ill-treatment and torture by prison guards and security officers, including beatings, solitary confinement, death threats, and being slammed against a wall. The authorities have denied him medical care for his resulting injuries and seriously declining health. Foreign detainees have reported communication with their family members being restricted, and being warned with threats not to discuss

any aspect of their conditions of detention, health, legal proceedings or charges against them. Visits from embassy or consular officials are also often denied.

Death penalty for low-level drug offences

Saudi Arabia is one of the world's top executioners, and its rate of executions has accelerated in the past few years. The authorities executed at least 345 people in 2024 and [356 in 2025](#), a high proportion of them, in violation of international law, for [non-lethal drug offences committed by foreign nationals](#). The majority of these come from Asian and African countries in the Global South that are economically dependent on Saudi Arabia and reluctant to exercise the limited diplomatic leverage they have. While it is a legitimate objective for the Saudi authorities to try to curb drug trafficking and drug use, their response in resorting to the death penalty is not only unlawful under international human rights law, but discriminatory and ineffective. It tends to affect low-level actors such as drug mules and/or victims of exploitation rather than drug lords. As documented by human rights NGOs, those sentenced to death for drug-related offences are often arrested with small quantities of drugs and subsequently coerced or tortured into confessions. The authorities' heavy-handed approach creates risks for visitors from the Global North as well. In 2023, an [Italian air stewardess](#) was arrested and charged with possession and drug dealing after she was found with a marijuana joint. At risk of the death penalty, she was handed a reduced sentence of six months in prison following intermediation by Italian diplomats.

Travel bans as punishment

While the Saudi Tourism Authority works to attract tourists to the kingdom with its "Visit Saudi" campaign, there are many Saudis citizens under [travel bans](#) that prevent them leaving the country. Many of them are former prisoners of conscience who were eventually released but continue to face heavy restrictions on their freedom, including bans on work, social media and foreign travel. Travel bans sometimes extend to their family members in a form of collective punishment. In addition, foreign women married to Saudi men need exit permits from their husbands in order to leave the country; the same applies to their children.

Further impact of tourism development

The top-down drive to develop a tourism industry in Saudi Arabia is having a negative impact on human rights in several ways, and the 2034 FIFA Men's World Cup is already tainted by egregious human rights abuses.

State violence used to enforce mass evictions

The early stages of state-sponsored megaprojects at [Neom](#), in the northwest of the kingdom, and Jeddah, further down the Red Sea coast – both of them named as host venues for the 2034 FIFA Men's World Cup – involved arbitrary land seizure on a grand scale, and the enforced mass displacement of thousands of the areas' inhabitants without adequate notification, consultation or compensation. At Neom, dozens of local residents from the Huwaitat tribe were arrested, jailed and in some cases sentenced to death for peacefully protesting, and one man, 43-year-old Abdul Rahim al-Huwaiti, was shot dead by security forces in his own home after posting videos of the outrage on social media. In [Jeddah Central](#), similar large-scale evictions and demolitions took place displacing more than half a million people.

Gross violations of migrants workers' rights

The construction of vast amounts of tourism infrastructure as well as stadiums, training grounds and player and fan accommodation for the 2034 World Cup – which will undoubtedly draw huge numbers of visitors – is being carried out by an army of low-paid and vulnerable migrant workers from some of the world's poorest countries. Despite some limited reforms in recent years, Saudi Arabia's labour laws remain weak and poorly enforced, and the notorious [kafala \(sponsorship\) system](#) is still largely intact. This means that migrant workers continue to face routine abuse including wage theft, forced labour, and inadequate health and safety protections, making them highly vulnerable to workplace risks and hazards, in particular related to heat stress and other fatal occupational injuries. Given these conditions, the country's growing demand for migrant labour for the construction of "giga-projects", tourism infrastructure and the 2034 World Cup significantly heightens the risks of large-scale exploitation and increasing numbers of worker deaths.

Things to think about before you go

The aim of this travel advisory is not to dissuade anyone from visiting Saudi Arabia, but to raise awareness of human rights concerns in the country and facilitate informed decision-making. So here are some things to think about:

What impact will your visit have on ordinary Saudi people, who don't have the freedoms you may have? Including the freedoms to think and speak your mind among friends or on social media, and to dress as you please.

Saudi citizens can face severe punishment for such things – and foreign visitors are increasingly being targeted for arrest, unfair trials and prison for matters as trivial as online comments made even before arriving in the country. Ordinary Saudis' rights are being routinely violated by repressive rulers who are now using tourism and entertainment to gloss over their abuses and strengthen their grip on power.

For more information, see [ALQST's latest Annual Report](#) or [get in touch with us](#).

To potential visitors to Saudi Arabia, especially those who think of themselves as ethical tourists, we say:

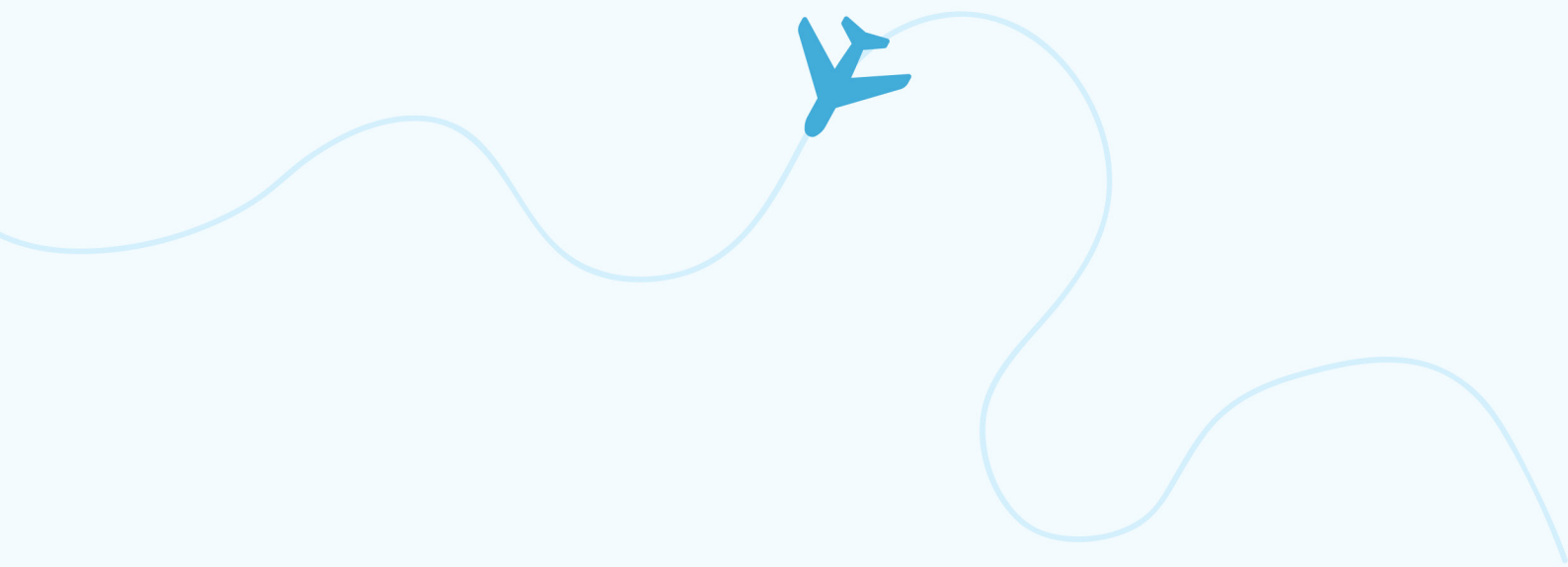
As well as studying your government's safe travel advice, you should also be aware of the human rights context and consider how you might support victims through organisations like ALQST. Don't be fooled by official propaganda or stage-managed encounters, but keep an open mind. Remember too that it can be difficult or even dangerous for ordinary Saudi citizens and residents to meet and talk freely with foreign visitors about sensitive topics – they may feel constrained by the prevailing climate of fear and intimidation and therefore self-censor their conversations.

If you decide to go ahead with your visit, we hope that you'll have a good time, and when you get back consider [taking action](#) to show support and solidarity for Saudi human rights victims and their defenders. To find out more, [contact us](#).

To tour operators, bloggers and influencers, we say:

Please maintain a responsible balance in your literature and content between, on the one hand, descriptions of the Saudi kingdom's natural beauty and attractions, and on the other, an urgent concern for the trampled human rights of the oppressed Saudi people. Where possible and safe to do so, highlight critical issues and individuals at risk. Above all, avoid amplifying the vastly powerful and repressive Saudi authorities' misleading propaganda and helping them to strengthen their stranglehold on free speech and basic liberties.





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