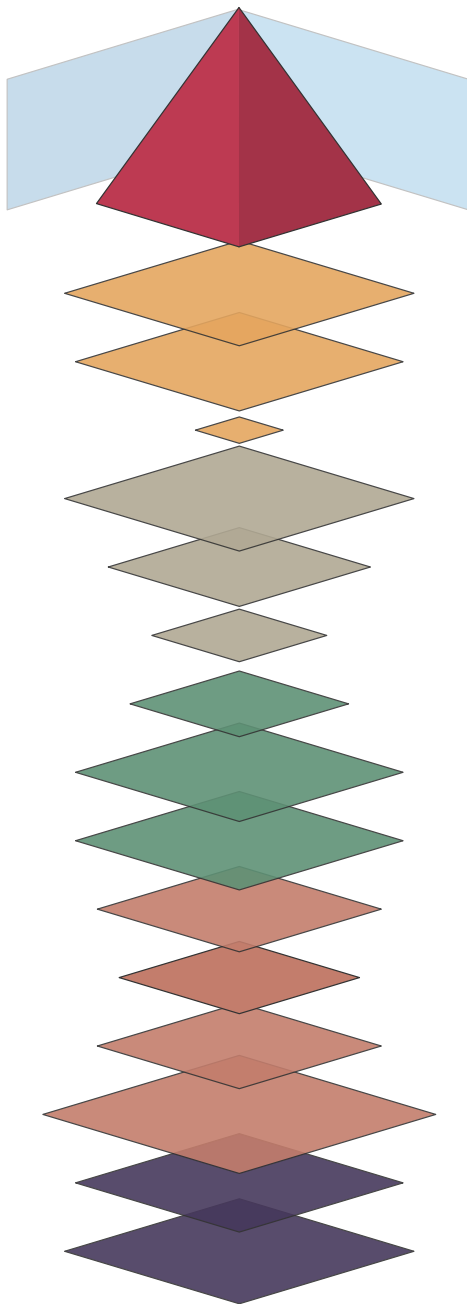




# SAUDI ARABIA



## 6.23 CRIMINALITY SCORE

38<sup>th</sup> of 193 countries  
16<sup>th</sup> of 46 Asian countries  
8<sup>th</sup> of 14 Western Asian countries



### CRIMINAL MARKETS **6.57**

HUMAN TRAFFICKING	8.00
HUMAN SMUGGLING	7.50
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	2.00
ARMS TRAFFICKING	8.00
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	6.00
ILLICIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	4.00
FLORA CRIMES	5.00
FAUNA CRIMES	7.50
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	7.50
HEROIN TRADE	6.50
COCAINE TRADE	5.50
CANNABIS TRADE	6.50
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	9.00
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	7.50
FINANCIAL CRIMES	8.00



### CRIMINAL ACTORS **5.90**

MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	3.00
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	6.50
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	8.50
FOREIGN ACTORS	3.50
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	8.00



## 4.00 RESILIENCE SCORE



Funding provided by the United States Government.

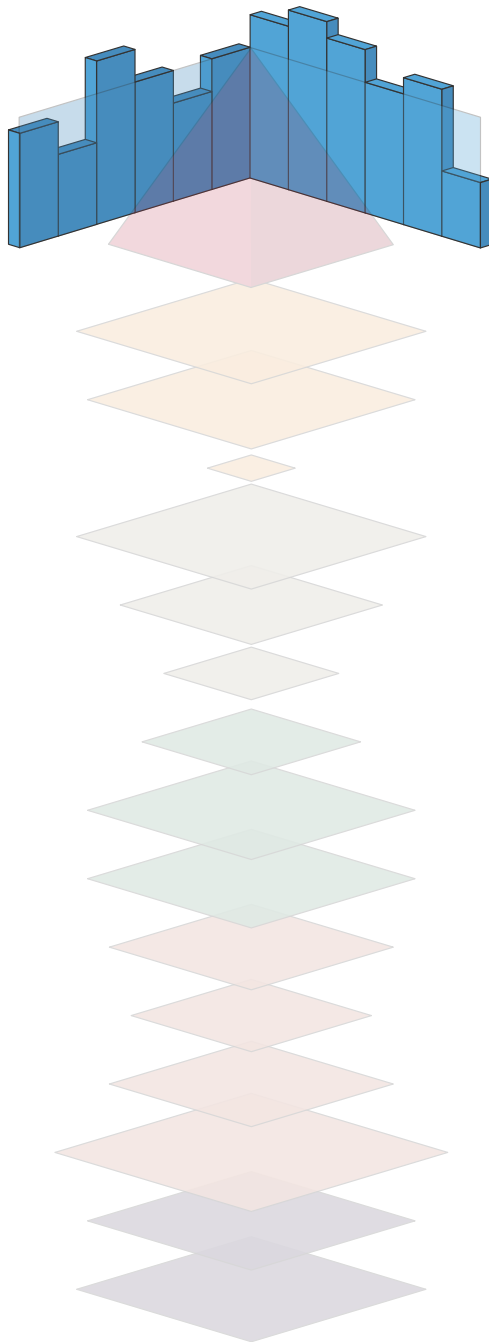


Funded by the European Union

ENACT is funded by the European Union and implemented by the Institute for Security Studies and INTERPOL, in affiliation with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.



# SAUDI ARABIA



**4.00**

## RESILIENCE SCORE

**132<sup>nd</sup>** of 193 countries  
**26<sup>th</sup>** of 46 Asian countries  
**8<sup>th</sup>** of 14 Western Asian countries

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	<b>3.50</b>
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	<b>2.50</b>
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	<b>5.00</b>
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	<b>4.00</b>
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	<b>3.00</b>
LAW ENFORCEMENT	<b>4.00</b>
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	<b>5.00</b>
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	<b>5.50</b>
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	<b>5.00</b>
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	<b>4.00</b>
PREVENTION	<b>4.50</b>
NON-STATE ACTORS	<b>2.00</b>



**6.23**

## CRIMINALITY SCORE



**CRIMINAL MARKETS** **6.57**



**CRIMINAL ACTORS** **5.90**



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# CRIMINALITY

## CRIMINAL MARKETS

### PEOPLE

Human trafficking remains a serious concern in Saudi Arabia. Various forms of exploitation, including forced labour, sex trafficking and forced begging, are observed in the country. Saudi Arabia relies heavily on foreign workers, mainly from Asian and African countries, who make up a significant portion of the labour force, leaving them susceptible to exploitation and trafficking. While many migrants enter the country for employment opportunities, the controversial Kafala system, which ties their status to their employers, makes them vulnerable to becoming victims of human trafficking, particularly in the domestic servitude and labour sectors. Female domestic workers are at risk as their isolated work within private homes exposes them to potential abuse by their employers. Women and children are particularly vulnerable to coercion and can be drawn into organized begging rings.

A recent trend is the trafficking of vulnerable Vietnamese women and girls into Saudi Arabia for exploitation purposes. Certain regions within Saudi Arabia, such as the northern border with Jordan and the southern border with Yemen, serve as major hubs for human trafficking. There have been reports of the trafficking of child soldiers for the purpose of fighting on Saudi Arabia's side in the war in Yemen. Traffickers take advantage of the unstable situation and power vacuum resulting from the ongoing conflicts in those areas. The issue of human trafficking has been further complicated by the emergence of social media platforms, where sex trafficking openly occurs with little to no oversight.

Saudi Arabia is a destination market for significant numbers of irregular migrants travelling from the Horn of Africa through Yemen. Monitoring this flow is difficult due to the ongoing instability in the region, resulting in constantly changing routes. Recent years have seen an increase in the influx of migrants through this route, despite intensified border controls imposed by Saudi Arabia. The majority of these smuggling routes pass through Saudi Arabia's mountainous roads, with a high number of children smuggled along the eastern corridor route. Migrants travelling through this route towards Saudi Arabia are vulnerable to becoming victims of human trafficking. Kidnapping and torture-for-ransom have become prevalent along major smuggling routes in this area, while threats of deportation by Yemeni and Saudi authorities add to the migrants' plight. There is no sizeable criminal market for extortion and protection racketeering in the country, which is limited to sporadic and anecdotal reports.

### TRADE

Saudi Arabia's arms trafficking market is pervasive. The country holds a significant position in the rapidly expanding arms market across the wider region, and reports indicate that the Saudi government has violated the UN arms embargo by supplying weapons from Western countries to non-state armed groups in conflict zones, including Yemen and Syria. The country's substantial arsenal creates opportunities for illicit arms trafficking, with the black market for unlicensed weapons witnessing growth within Saudi Arabia. This underground trade is often facilitated through social media sites. Moreover, corruption within the Saudi military contributes to the domestic arms market, leading to many of these weapons falling into the hands of violent extremist groups. Notably, Houthi rebels have employed drones and missiles to target critical infrastructure in Saudi Arabia. Concerns have also emerged in recent times regarding the presence of armed youth groups in the streets.

Saudi Arabia faces challenges in curbing the illicit trade of counterfeit goods, and millions of resulting fake items are seized by Saudi customs annually. These products encompass various items, including shoes, clothes, mobile accessories, sanitary products, and car filters. Notably, the country serves as a destination for counterfeit perfumery and cosmetics that predominantly originate from China. Saudi Arabia also has a moderately-sized market for the illicit trade in excisable goods, with the underground tobacco industry of particular concern. The illicit trade in tobacco products accounts for nearly a quarter of the total market in the country. Moreover, due to the prohibition of alcohol, a thriving market for the illicit smuggling of alcoholic beverages exists in the country.

### ENVIRONMENT

Saudi Arabia is grappling with various environmental crimes. While information regarding flora crimes in Saudi Arabia is limited, concerns exist regarding the smuggling of agarwood, which holds significant market value, particularly in its raw form, although the extent of the trade remains unknown. As for fauna crimes, Saudi Arabia faces severe challenges in dealing with the illicit trade of exhibition wildlife, particularly mammals used as pets or for private zoos. The acquisition of firearms and vehicles by criminal groups has resulted in more effective hunting methods over the past decades, making the country a prominent player in both exporting and importing exhibition wildlife. In the case of the latter, the illegal smuggling of cheetahs from Africa has been a major concern, with a substantial number of cheetahs smuggled out of the continent in the past decade for Saudi Arabian buyers. This illicit trade is believed to involve influential individuals who are motivated

by the animals' perceived status and symbolism of wealth. The trafficking of falcons also poses a significant concern in Saudi Arabia due to the high demand for such birds, resulting in exorbitant prices on the black market.

The country's subsidized fuel prices have led to price discrepancies with neighbouring states, providing an opportunity for criminals to exploit the price difference by selling fuel abroad at significantly inflated prices. Criminal networks take advantage of the country's porous borders, particularly in conflict zones, to smuggle gasoline, kerosene, and diesel. To evade detection, smugglers often utilize animals such as donkeys, mules, and camels to transport fuel and other contraband through rugged mountainous terrains, providing a cover for their illegal operations. Apart from oil smuggling, gold smuggling is also an issue in Saudi Arabia. Various incidents of gold smuggling have been reported, including the arrest of individuals attempting to ship gold abroad, using the country's airports. Some instances involve gold being smuggled out of the country to destinations like India and Bangladesh, while Saudi Arabia itself serves as a recipient of gold that is either illegally mined or smuggled from other countries.

## DRUGS

Saudi Arabia predominantly serves as a destination country for synthetic drugs, cannabis resin, and heroin. These substances enter the country through land routes from neighbouring countries, as well as through the ports and airports in Jeddah and Dammam. Although the heroin market in Saudi Arabia is smaller than other drug markets, a sizeable heroin trade exists within the country, particularly favoured by Saudi adolescents. The market for cocaine in Saudi Arabia remains comparably limited, but there has been a slight increase in seizures in recent years. The country's international airports frequently apprehend individuals involved in cocaine trafficking, including both Saudi nationals and foreign individuals.

Among the drugs consumed in the country, cannabis resin is the most commonly used substance, while marijuana is not typically used. Younger generations are particularly drawn to cannabis resin due to its potency and relatively low cost. Cannabis trafficking routes often intersect with tribal populations and are connected to pilgrimage and migration patterns. Additionally, khat, a stimulant shrub grown in the Arabian Peninsula and Horn of Africa, has a significant market in Saudi Arabia. Khat is one of the most seized drugs, especially along the country's border areas. The port of Jazan has been identified as a vulnerable hotspot for the smuggling of large quantities of khat into the country.

Captagon, a synthetic drug primarily imported from Syria and Lebanon, has gained significant popularity in Saudi Arabia, making the country the largest consumer market for this drug worldwide. Notably, the Port of Jeddah and

King Abdulaziz International Port in Dammam have become crucial hubs for Captagon seizures. Despite its relatively high price compared to other drugs, methamphetamine trafficking has been increasing in Saudi Arabia.

## CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

Cyber-dependent crime poses a considerable threat in Saudi Arabia. The country ranks among the top three most targeted nations in Western Asia and Africa when it comes to ransomware attacks, which have seen a substantial rise in recent years. Several instances of ransomware attacks on businesses have resulted in major disruptions to operations and substantial financial losses. Apart from ransomware, Saudi Arabia also ranks among the top three countries in Western Asia and Africa affected by malware, particularly adware.

## FINANCIAL CRIMES

Saudi Arabia faces a severe risk of financial crimes, including the growing threat of online fraud. Perpetrators exploit fraudulent websites that mimic official government platforms, attracting a large number of daily visitors and leading to an increase in financial fraud incidents. In some cases, perpetrators pose as employees of governmental agencies to deceive their victims. These scams have a significant impact on Saudi citizens, although foreign nationals are also targeted. Financial crimes in Saudi Arabia involve government and institutional officials, both current and former, who have been implicated in various offences such as fraud, forgery, and embezzlement of public funds. A particular concern is the misappropriation of substantial amounts of oil revenue, resulting in significant annual losses in public funds.

## CRIMINAL ACTORS

Criminal actors in Saudi Arabia encompass various entities, including criminal networks, state-embedded actors, and the private sector. State-embedded actors are reported to have a sustained key role in a number of Saudi Arabia's criminal markets. Notably, there are persistent allegations against the royal family. Corruption is pervasive at all levels of society, with reports of state officials engaging in drug trafficking. Petty corruption is also prevalent, as evidenced by the frequent arrest of soldiers accepting bribes to smuggle contraband into prisons. State-embedded actors often collaborate with criminals in the private sector, and their activities frequently intersect.

As the country emerges as a prominent financial centre, it assumes a significant role in global remittances, in turn raising concerns about illicit financial flows exiting the country. Reports highlight instances of bulk cash smuggling and exploitative money transfers facilitated by individual religious donors and Saudi-based charities, reportedly

including profits from the drug trade. Decentralized criminal networks operate in various criminal markets, including human smuggling and trafficking, as well as drug trafficking. In the human trafficking criminal market, these networks are spread across Saudi Arabia, although they are particularly concentrated at the borders, the coastline and within cities, where demand for (forced) labour is high. These networks are also known to cooperate with their transnational counterparts, especially those in various source countries for human trafficking, especially neighbouring Yemen, as well as countries in East and West Africa, and Asia.

Foreign criminal groups also pose a significant threat to the Saudi government, with the Houthi group having emerged as the primary foreign entity operating within Saudi territory, especially along the Saudi-Yemeni border. Saudi Arabia has also endured attacks on its oil facilities and other critical infrastructure, with suspicions pointing to facilitation by Iranian or Iranian-backed actors. Although there are no traditional mafia groups with a sustained presence in Saudi Arabia, organizations with political goals and mafia-like structures engage in organized criminal activity to finance their activities.

# RESILIENCE

## LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy where ultimate authority rests with the ruling family. Although the country takes a firm stance against organized crime, there are instances where certain crimes receive varying degrees of support from the state. Under the current leadership, the government has implemented measures to combat the illicit drug market; however, overall it downplays the existence of organized crime and prioritizes highlighting the stability of the country's security situation. Consequently, issues such as human trafficking receive limited attention in Saudi Arabian political discourse, while the country's involvement in conflicts such as those in Yemen and Syria has contributed to an increase in arms trafficking.

While the country presents itself as relatively effective in combating corruption compared to others in the region, there are few mechanisms in place to address corruption among the highest levels of the political elite. The ongoing anti-corruption crackdown seems primarily driven by political motivations rather than a genuine commitment to tackling corruption. Corruption remains widespread, and efforts to combat it are selectively pursued for political reasons. Abuse of power, nepotism, and the use of intermediaries, known as 'wasta', in conducting business continue to be prevalent practices. The ruling family retains significant control over oil funds, lacking transparency and accountability. Nonetheless, significant arrests have been made in recent years by the government's oversight and anti-corruption agency, targeting individuals involved in bribery, embezzlement of public funds and other corrupt practices.

Saudi Arabia has consistently demonstrated a firm stance against organized crime by actively participating in international cooperation frameworks. The country has signed important treaties such as the United Nations Convention on Transnational Organized Crime, the Palermo protocols, and several other relevant agreements. As

a member of the Arab League, Saudi Arabia engages in regional cooperation on issues like drug trafficking, human trafficking and maritime piracy. However, Saudi Arabia has notably abstained from the Arms Trade Treaty. Furthermore, the government has the authority to veto decisions within the Gulf Cooperation Council, exercising this power when decisions are not aligned with its national interests. Saudi Arabia also engages in bilateral relations with several states, including the establishment of labour recruitment agreements with various Asian and African countries.

On the domestic front, Saudi Arabia has established comprehensive legal frameworks to address major criminal markets. However, these frameworks often prove inadequate in practice. While Saudi authorities have announced reforms to the Kafala sponsorship system, there have been widespread criticisms that these efforts remain insufficient and do not adequately address the issue of abuse. The possession and trafficking of weapons and the protection of wildlife are also areas of concern.

## CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

Saudi Arabia's judicial system, which is overseen by the supreme judicial council, has very little autonomy. Judges have near-complete discretion in interpreting Sharia law and are generally not required to provide further details regarding their rulings. Since the beginning of 2020, Saudi Arabia has established specialized criminal courts to handle all cases of human trafficking, although since then there has been an overall decline in the number of traffickers prosecuted and convicted. Transparency regarding the imposed penalties and sentencing details has also been lacking. The penitentiary system in Saudi Arabia is known for its secretive nature, making it difficult to obtain information about the conditions inside prison facilities. However, numerous reports indicate severe abuses, including torture, inadequate medical care, overcrowding beyond capacity

and mistreatment of both male and female prisoners. These abuses encompass practices such as solitary confinement and lack of proper medical attention; there have been instances where prisoners have lost their lives. While independent organizations are no longer permitted to inspect prisons, credible reports continue to emerge indicating the ongoing mistreatment of detainees. Recent efforts to reform the justice system in Saudi Arabia include the implementation of written penal codes for discretionary crimes, aiming to enhance the integrity and efficiency of judicial institutions, although specific details and their adherence to international standards are yet to be clarified.

There are specialized organized crime units established within law enforcement including a narcotics unit as well as a newly created independent unit focusing on financial crimes. Despite being considered effective, there are recurring allegations of physical abuse and arbitrary arrests carried out by police officers.

Saudi Arabia's borders are under constant pressure, exacerbated by the challenging sandy terrain which makes policing difficult. Trafficking routes into Saudi Arabia are often established by people from tribal areas or intertwined with migration and pilgrimage. While the Saudi government has long extended its public service provision even to remote villages, this has been somewhat disrupted by instability and conflict erupting in the border areas with Yemen. Specifically, the war in the south with Yemeni Houthis has reportedly enabled the construction of irregular routes leading to the country, as well as facilitating the smuggling of large volumes of arms and drugs. Saudi Arabia has taken measures to enhance security at its borders, including utilizing INTERPOL's global databases for instant checks of people, documents, and vehicles. In recent years, the country has also made increased efforts to protect critical infrastructure in cyberspace through the implementation of a comprehensive strategy at both domestic and international levels.

## ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Money laundering and terrorist financing are systemic vulnerabilities of Saudi Arabia, although public statistics on the extent of the issue are not readily available. In recent years, the country has established dedicated units to address the issue. Money laundering is regarded as a significant offence in Saudi Arabia, with severe penalties imposed on individuals engaged in legitimizing or concealing the origin of illicit funds. Such penalties include fines of up to US\$1.5 million, imprisonment for a maximum of 15 years, and travel bans for Saudi nationals.

Saudi Arabia has a strong economy overall, and the country's business environment is somewhat conducive to a dynamic private sector. However, its dependence on oil makes it vulnerable to fluctuations in oil prices. The crown prince's

'Vision 2030' strategy seeks to diversify the country's economy and has led to a record number of economic reforms that have improved the business climate in the country. Yet despite these efforts, the global oil price drop and pandemic-related emergency measures have had a negative impact on the Saudi economy and depleted its foreign exchange reserves.

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Saudi Arabia is making progress in enhancing victim support services through the establishment of shelters and welfare centers. These facilities are specifically designed to assist individuals affected by sexual exploitation, labour exploitation and child begging, providing aid including accommodation, social services, healthcare, psychological counselling, education and legal support. Despite these efforts, concerns persist about Saudi Arabia's limited effectiveness in identifying and referring victims, particularly among vulnerable populations. Routine screening for potential trafficking victimization is lacking, which can result in the inadvertent arrest and deportation of unidentified victims, especially undocumented migrant workers targeted by the police. Although law enforcement agencies receive training on recognizing trafficking indicators, there is still the practice of penalizing victims for engaging in coerced unlawful acts, including victims of sexual exploitation.

Additionally, concerns have been raised regarding the difficulties victims face in coming forward due to Saudi Arabia's legal system, which is rooted in Sharia law. Notably, drug offences are often met with capital punishment, and in the past, victims of sex trafficking have been punished for engaging in sex work. The government has also attempted to take a preventive approach to human trafficking by deploying labour inspectors who are specialized in human trafficking. It also provides awareness raising programmes for drug use. However, the positive effects of these efforts are yet to be observed.

Challenges persist regarding civil society organizations (CSOs) and independent media in Saudi Arabia. Most CSOs are affiliated with the government, while independent CSOs face restrictions that can lead to their banning or loss of operational rights for violating certain criteria. Independent media is virtually non-existent, and journalists encounter repressive measures, including self-censorship and the risk of prosecution for criticizing government policies. Saudi Arabia has faced widespread accusations of using spyware to control and repress activists and journalists.

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