

A Kid's Guide to
THE MIDDLE EAST



Understanding SAUDI ARABIA Today



SAUDI ARABIA

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE: The narrative used in portions of this book is an aid to comprehension. This narrative is based on the author's extensive research as to what actually occurs in a child's life in Saudi Arabia. It is subject to interpretation and might not be indicative of every child's life in Saudi Arabia. It is representative of some children and is based on research the author believes to be accurate. Documentation of such research is contained on pp. 60–61.

The Internet sites referenced herein were active as of the publication date. Due to the fleeting nature of some web sites, we cannot guarantee they will all be active when you are reading this book.

To reflect current usage, we have chosen to use the secular era designations BCE (“before the common era”) and CE (“of the common era”) instead of the traditional designations BC (“before Christ”) and AD (*anno Domini*, “in the year of the Lord”).

PBP

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Introduction

Sports cars whizzing along highways into Riyadh (Rih-YAD-uh). Thousands of people praying together at the local **mosque**. Kids playing video games with their cousins. Many different images accurately depict Saudi Arabia today. This Middle Eastern country's unique natural environment includes huge areas of desert. Saudi Arabia's landscape has influenced its history, food, and people.

Some snapshots of Saudi Arabia reflect its complicated nature. For example, newspapers around the globe show foreign workers being sent back to their home countries. Other photos might feature former **nomadic** herders who now drive taxis around Saudi Arabian cities. People browsing the Internet might have even seen a photo showing damage after a terrorist attack. Like all countries, Saudi Arabia has its challenges. While people's lives in Saudi Arabia are often peaceful, the nation's history has not been free from conflict.

Do all Saudis view the future of their country in the same way? Of course not. Just like people in other countries, the Saudi people have differences of opinion about how their nation should forge ahead. The changing role of women in the kingdom is a challenge here. Another challenge is developing new industries in order to become less dependent on money from oil. Yet part of what makes Saudi Arabia great is the creativity and determination of its people. Throughout the last century, Saudis have transformed their nation. Through hard work and problem solving, they have made the desert bloom. They have built airports, factories, and oil **refineries**. Saudi Arabian schools and universities turn out well-educated men and women year after year.



Saudi Arabian road through a stretch of red sand desert

Saudi Arabia's culture is rich. It binds the nation's people together. A vital part of the Saudi culture is **Islam**, the national religion. It influences Saudi education, law, clothing styles, food preferences, and more. But the culture is much more than just religion. Like in many other nations, you can see kids chasing soccer balls down a field. They do homework in the evenings. Families sit down to meals of their favorite foods and share news from their days. Whether in an **oasis** or along the Red Sea, Saudi Arabia offers much to see and do for visitors and locals alike.



Saudi boys ice skate at the Fal Ice Skating Project in Riyadh. Students with good grades only have to pay half-price admission to skate here. There are also ice skating rinks in several other Saudi cities now, including Jeddah and Taif.

CHAPTER 1

School Days and Desert Adventures

This weekend is going to be great! My dad, grandfather, older brother Ahmed, and I (Omar) are taking an overnight trip to the desert. A few months ago, my dad saw an advertisement in the Medina newspaper for a traditional sports festival. Medina is the city where my family lives. It's a pretty big city. I think it's one of the prettiest places to live. I have a great view from my bedroom window since our apartment is on the third floor.

Anyway, when my grandfather heard about the festival, he wanted to come too. He used to be a camel racer when he was young. Was he ever fast! I have a photo of him with his favorite camel on my dresser. He won first prize and was holding up a fancy trophy. Besides camel races, there will also be falconry demonstrations at the festival. Have you ever heard of falconry? Competitors hunt with falcons or other birds of prey. Before the hunt, the falcon wears a hood. This helps keep the bird relaxed. When it is time for the bird to hunt, its hood is removed and it perches on the arm of the falconer. The bird flies and then swoops down to attack the prey. The falcon remains with its catch until its master arrives.

My grandfather says that he'll play *carrom* with me on the trip. Carrom is a board game. It's a little like billiards. You push a small, white disc towards other discs to move them into one of the four corner pockets on the board. My dad is so good at it. Once in a while, I win against Ahmed. Not too often, though, since I'm ten and Ahmed is fifteen. We also enjoy playing backgammon.

While we are away on our overnight trip, my mother and younger sister Nadia will stay at home. Aminah, the housekeeper who lives with us, will stay home too. They'll probably have some friends or

relatives over. Nadia loves playing with her cousins and drinking tea with our aunts.

But this trip is still a few days away. It's Monday night and I just finished my homework. I usually try to get some of my homework done before dinner, especially on the nights that I have soccer practice. Once a week I play soccer in the evenings with a local club. Kids here really don't play sports in the afternoon because it's too hot. If I get stuck on a math or science problem, I ask Ahmed for help. He's in secondary school. I'd like to be a teacher when I grow up. Maybe even a geography professor at King Saud University.

Speaking of school, I love to read about what school is like for kids in other countries. Kids in Saudi Arabia wear uniforms to school. One time I spilled my breakfast all over my white uniform. It wasn't good—the eggs, tomatoes, and oil in my *shakshouka* (shahk-SHOO-kuh) made a big mess. Ever since then, my mother makes me eat breakfast in my pajamas. That way, if I spill anything, I don't ruin my clothes for the day.

My dad drops Ahmed off first since his school is on the way to mine. Nadia and I go to the same primary school but we don't really see each other. After kindergarten, boys and girls don't have classes together.



shakshouka

My first class starts at seven o'clock in the morning. People from other countries sometimes ask why we start so early. Schools in Saudi Arabia begin and end early in order to beat the heat. I study science, math, geography, history, civics, art, Islam, and Arabic. The boys in my school do sports but the girls do not. My sister Nadia and her classmates have home economics classes instead.



Saudi students arrive at their school in Riyadh on the first day of classes.

My favorite class is geography. I love learning about all the different places there are in the world. Some day I'd like to see the pyramids in Egypt. I'd also like to visit someplace that gets lots of rain, like a tropical rainforest. In Saudi Arabia it's super dry. Medina only gets a little more than two inches of rain per year!¹

Our school week goes from Sunday to Thursday. We have Fridays and Saturdays off. Every Friday I go to the mosque with my dad and Ahmed to pray. My mom and Nadia pray at home. During the week, our driver picks up Nadia, Ahmed, and me from school around 1:30 and we head home for lunch. Aminah and my mom always make something yummy. Some days we have lentil soup, **hummus**, and a salad. We also eat a lot of *fuul*—mashed fava beans with lemon and garlic. One of my favorite lunches is *kofta*, meatballs made of ground beef or lamb with spices and onions. We

often have something sweet at the end of our meal. I love eating dates, apricots, and chocolates. Sometimes Aminah brings back a fancy cake from the supermarket for us. That's a real treat.

On the nights I get my homework done early, we might watch a big soccer match on TV after dinner. My friend Saad has a gigantic TV. When the World Cup was on last summer, he invited my dad and me to come watch some of the games with him. It was awesome! During the next school holidays, we will travel to visit my other grandparents. My mother's parents live in Riyadh, the capital city.

Well, I'd better get to bed. *Tosbeho 'ala khair* (Tos-BAY-ho ahlah KAIR—Good night!

IN CASE YOU WERE WONDERING

Do people in Saudi Arabia take vacations?

Saudi families often travel during school vacations. During the summer heat, Saudis commonly travel to Jeddah and Taif, cities in western Saudi Arabia. Jeddah is a modern city on the Red Sea. It has beautiful beaches, museums, and sporting complexes. Visitors also flock to Taif. It is called the "City of Roses" because a rose scent enters the city from nearby orchards.² Located in the mountains, it is slightly cooler than most of the kingdom. Taif has scenic beauty and rich culture. Tourists enjoy the views from cable cars here.³ Many Saudis have family members living in other parts of the Middle East. Saudis often visit these relatives when they have several days of vacation time.

EDUCATION IN SAUDI ARABIA

The Saudi Arabian education system is well-developed. When the kingdom was first founded, not many Saudis got to go to school. Today, Saudi citizens go to school for free. This is true from elementary school to university. Learning about Islam is very important in Saudi schools. Schools here also teach life skills. They prepare students for a variety of jobs.

Children usually start first grade at age six. Kids continue in primary school through sixth grade. Intermediate school covers grades seven through nine. Secondary school includes grades ten through twelve. After a year of secondary school, students specialize. They either focus on humanities or scientific studies. Saudi Arabia also has secondary schools for students who want to prepare for a certain career. Here students might learn about agriculture. They can also study business or technical subjects.

Saudi boys and girls cannot go to school together after kindergarten. (Kindergarten is for kids aged three to five.) Some Saudi schools have separate classrooms for boys and girls. All-girls' schools can also be found throughout the kingdom. Students have teachers of the same gender, from elementary school through university. Education is required for both boys and girls. More than half of the six million Saudi students are girls.⁴

Saudi Arabia established its first university in 1957. Today people call it King Saud University. Some college and university campuses are all female. King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) opened in 2009. It was the first Saudi university to allow men and women to take classes together. Saudi Arabia now has twenty-five public and twenty-seven private universities. More are being planned.⁵

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