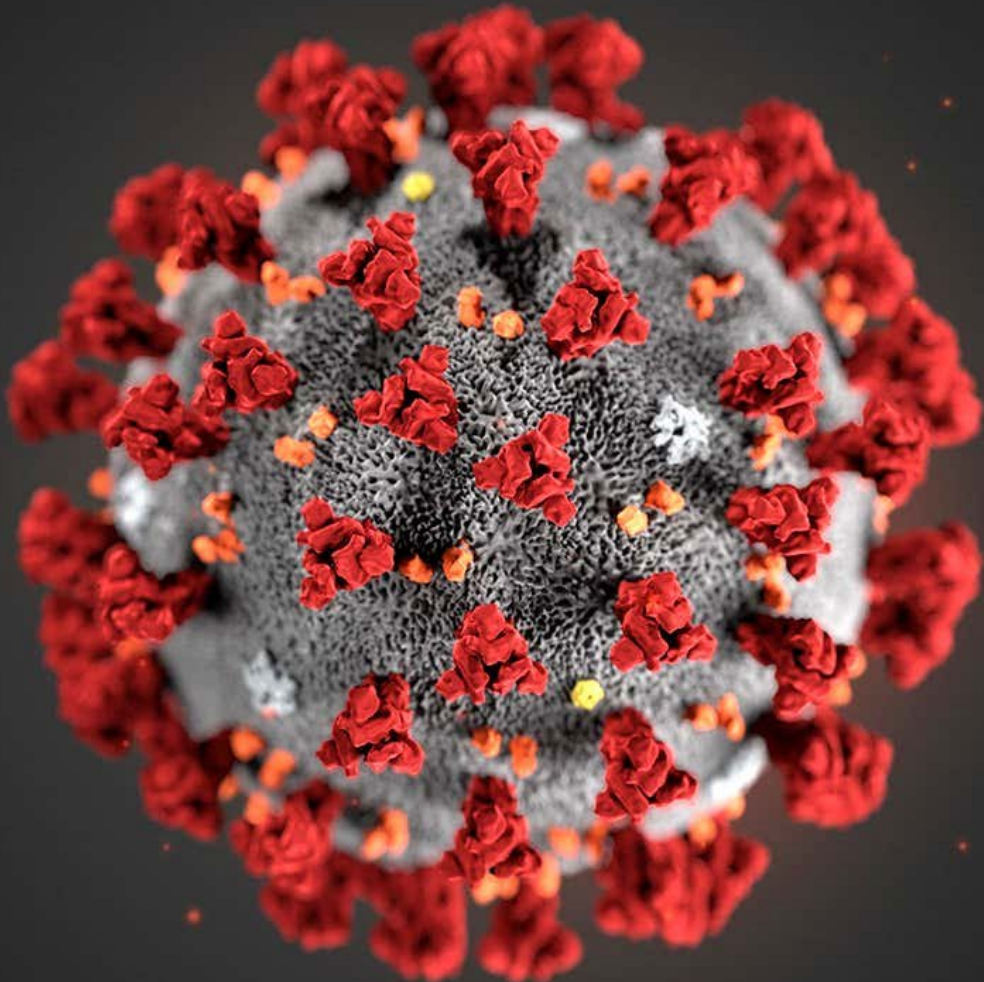




مركز الملك فيصل للبحوث والدراسات الإسلامية
King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies

Saudi Arabia's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Freddie Neve



The Kingdom's Response to the COVID-19 Outbreak: Steps That Have Been Taken to Date

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Introduction

Saudi Arabia has taken the threat of the novel coronavirus seriously, responding rapidly and robustly to slow its spread in the Kingdom and the wider Middle East.

Saudi Arabia's first confirmed case of COVID-19 was on March 2, 2020, in a citizen from Qatif, in Saudi Arabia's Eastern province, who had traveled from Iran via Bahrain.⁽¹⁾ The Kingdom had already taken action before that point. Five days prior, on February 27, the Kingdom halted entry for individuals seeking to perform umrah to Mecca or visit the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. This measure was praised by the World Health Organization (WHO) for helping to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and protect the large number of international pilgrims who visit this site.⁽²⁾

On March 8, 2020, when the total number of COVID-19 cases in Qatif stood at eleven, Saudi Arabia took action to prohibit individuals from exiting or entering the governorate. This was the first action of its kind across the entire Gulf region.⁽³⁾

Since then the Kingdom has extended restrictions on the movement of its citizens and enacted stringent social distancing policies. It implemented curfews across the country; prevented travel between the Kingdom's thirteen governorates and its major urban areas; closed mosques, schools, universities, movie theaters, shopping centers, restaurants, and other public spaces; and halted international and domestic flights. These measures have been in place throughout the holy month of Ramadan.

The Kingdom's experience in and after 2012 of fighting Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), another novel coronavirus, helped it develop a level of preparedness to fight COVID-19.⁽⁴⁾ Saudi hospitals had established separate triage units for respiratory illnesses with specialized ventilation to protect medical personnel from infection. Seven weeks before confirming its first domestic case, Saudi Arabia had already developed guidelines to deal with the new virus. In particular, the Kingdom is carrying out testing to identify and contain pockets of disease. As of May 19, 2020, Saudi Arabia had conducted 618,084 tests, including testing in random sections of its more vulnerable communities; this represents 17,788 tests per million of its population.

The Kingdom has acknowledged the strain that its fight against COVID-19 will place on its citizens and businesses and has implemented a wide range of economic stimulus measures to safeguard them. The government has pledged to raise its debt ceiling to 50 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) to help its population. It has guaranteed 60 percent of its citizens' incomes and has allowed business owners to postpone the payment of value-added tax (VAT), excise tax, and income tax for a

period of three months. It has also promised 177 billion riyals (\$47 billion) worth of support.⁽⁵⁾ Moreover, it has also recognized the strain this additional expenditure will place on public finances, so starting on July 1, the Kingdom will raise additional revenue by increasing VAT from 5 percent to 15 percent. In addition, starting in June, it will suspend a cost of living allowance paid to government workers that was introduced in 2018.

Saudi Arabia has also used its position as president of the G20 group of nations to virtually convene national leaders, ministers, and global experts to coordinate a response. As a result, nations have pledged \$7 trillion to boost the global economy, inaugurated a pool of funding to respond to COVID-19, and suspended debt repayments for developing countries.

As of May 19, 2020, total confirmed cases of COVID-19 stood at 59,854, including 329 deaths. This document outlines in detail the various steps and measures implemented by the Kingdom to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

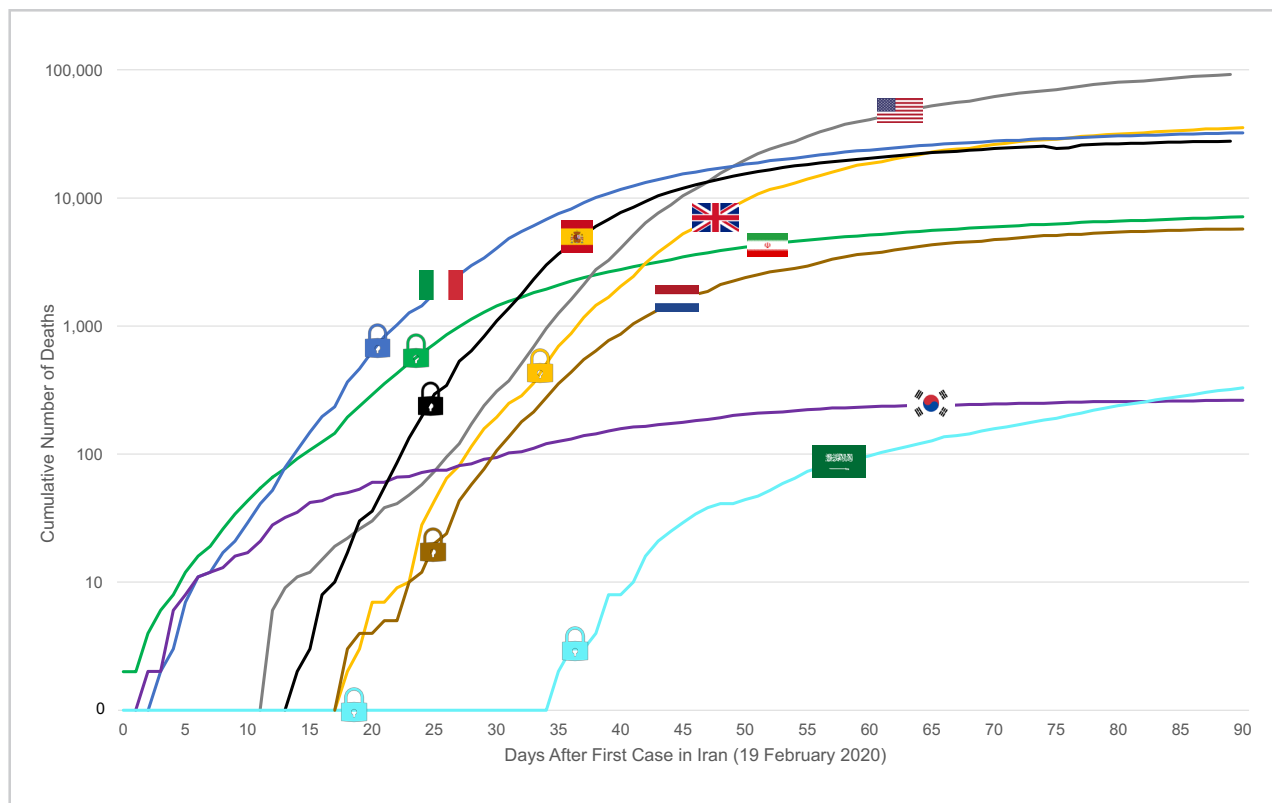


Figure 1: Country comparison by daily number of confirmed COVID-19 deaths. Note: Padlocks represent the points at which movement restrictions were introduced. The first Saudi padlock indicates the lockdown in Qatif on March 8, and the second Saudi padlock is for the lockdown in Riyadh and other major cities, which occurred on March 25. Figures accurate as of May 19.

Restrictions on Movement and Enactment of Social Distancing

The Kingdom has restricted its citizens' movement and enacted stringent social distancing policies. It has implemented curfews across the country; prevented travel between the Kingdom's thirteen governorates and its major urban areas; closed mosques, schools, universities, movie theaters, shopping centers, restaurants, and other public spaces; and halted international and domestic flights.

Key Facts

- Saudi Arabia closed shopping centers, restaurants, coffee shops, public parks, and public gardens on March 15, 2020, when total cases in the Kingdom stood at 118. Essential shops, such as supermarkets, pharmacies, and food delivery companies, are allowed to remain open. Restrictions on movement will be enforced by a newly formed police unit.⁽⁶⁾
- Curfews have been introduced to restrict social contact. Individuals whose neighborhoods are not under quarantine are only allowed out during certain times of day, often only to purchase essential food and medicines. Essential workers are permitted to go to work.
- Gatherings of more than five people for social purposes, including at weddings and funerals, are prohibited.⁽⁷⁾
- People who breach the restrictions can be fined up to 200,000 riyals (\$53,255) and/or be imprisoned for two years.⁽⁸⁾
- Quarantines have been implemented in certain hard-hit districts. In these areas, residents are not permitted to leave their home for any reason.

Economy

The Kingdom has acknowledged the strain that its fight against COVID-19 will place on its citizens and businesses. HM King Salman has pledged to ensure that every resident and citizen will be provided with medicine, food, and necessities during the pandemic.⁽⁹⁾ The Kingdom has guaranteed 60 percent of its citizens' incomes and, starting in March, has allowed business owners to postpone the payment of various taxes and loans for an initial period of three months. In total, the Kingdom has pledged 177 billion riyals (\$47 billion) worth of support.⁽¹⁰⁾ It plans to cover these costs by issuing bonds and raising its debt ceiling from 30 percent to 50 percent of

its GDP.⁽¹¹⁾ It also plans to cut spending and raise revenue by increasing VAT from 5 percent to 15 percent.^{(12), (13)}

Key Facts

- The Kingdom has pledged 177 billion riyals (\$47 billion) worth of support.⁽¹⁴⁾
- A \$2.4 billion stimulus package will pay 60 percent of private-sector workers' wages. Wages will be paid for a period of three months, with a maximum limit for claims of 9,000 riyals (\$2,391).⁽¹⁵⁾
- Saudi business owners can postpone VAT, excise tax, and income tax payments for a period of three months. Expat fees, which the government charges for hiring expatriates, will also be canceled for a three-month period.
- Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have been given six-month deferrals on bank payments, concessional financing, and exemptions from the costs of a loan guarantee program.^{(16), (17)}
- Saudi Arabia's Social Development Bank has allocated 9 billion riyals (\$2.4 billion) to help 6,000 small businesses with financing. These funds will focus on companies within the health-care sector.⁽¹⁸⁾

Public Health Responses

Coronavirus is an unprecedented public health issue posing challenges to all nations. The Saudi government has granted 47 billion Saudi riyals (\$12.5 billion) to the Ministry of Health to enable it to fight COVID-19.⁽¹⁹⁾ It has ordered free treatment for all COVID-19 patients and is conducting widespread testing among random sections of the population to identify cases early. The Kingdom has launched a new app called “Tatman” (which means “rest assured”) that provides citizens with test results and notifies them if they have been in contact with infected people.⁽²⁰⁾

Compared to other Gulf states, the Kingdom has a high density of hospital beds per capita (2 per 1,000) and a high number of physicians and nurses per capita. Nonetheless, it is working to increase capacity. Among the initiatives is the building of a 100-bed mobile hospital that can be moved around the country as needed.

Key Facts

- As of May 19, Saudi Arabia had conducted 618,084 tests, including among random sections of its more vulnerable communities, which represents 17,788 tests per million of its population. On April 27, the Ministry of Health said that over one million people had benefited from mass testing, “whether it is through medical tests or medical evaluations and active testing.”⁽²¹⁾
- The Kingdom’s experience fighting MERS has enabled it to develop a high level of preparedness. As an example, Saudi hospitals have separate triage units for respiratory illnesses with specialized ventilation systems to protect medical personnel from infection.
- Saudi Arabia has 80,000 hospital beds and 8,000 intensive care units (ICUs) available for COVID-19 patients.⁽²²⁾ As of May 6, 96 percent of Saudi Arabia’s ICUs and respirators remained available.⁽²³⁾
- Seven weeks before confirming its first domestic case, Saudi Arabia had already developed guidelines to deal with the new virus.
- A mobile 100-bed hospital in Medina will be built over the next couple of months to treat COVID-19 patients. This hospital will be moved to different regions as the need arises.⁽²⁴⁾
- Saudi Arabia’s postal system is delivering medicines and prescriptions free of charge to patients at hospitals in Riyadh, Dammam, Buraidah, and Al-Ahsa.⁽²⁵⁾

Migrant Workers

The Kingdom has acknowledged that its population of migrant workers is vulnerable to COVID-19 and has taken a number of steps to protect them, including easing overcrowding.

- Free health care is available to all residents of the Kingdom who are infected with COVID-19. This includes migrant workers and people who are in violation of their residency permits.⁽²⁶⁾
- The Kingdom has sent health care teams to carry out tests in migrant districts.
- Strict company guidelines have been announced to control the spread of COVID-19 among migrant populations. Businesses must have designated checkpoints to inspect workers’ temperatures and respiratory health, they must establish isolation rooms for people with symptoms, and they must disinfect surfaces twice daily.⁽²⁷⁾
- The Saudi Center for Disease Prevention and Control has issued guidelines requiring that each worker have at least 12 square meters of space if he or she cannot be provided with a private room and that no bathroom can be shared by more than five people.
- Temporary housing units for migrant workers will be created from 3,445 school facilities.⁽²⁸⁾ More than 250,000 accommodation spaces have been found to temporarily house foreign workers and ease overcrowding.⁽²⁹⁾

The Ministry of Interior of Saudi Arabia Awdah (“Return”) Initiative

Saudi Arabia has implemented an initiative to return residents to their homes. The initiative was announced on May 6, 2020, by the Ministry of the Interior. A registration system was opened for expatriates of all nationalities, including individuals holding exit and return visas, final exit visas, visit visas of various kinds, and tourist visas. The residents had a choice as to whether they wished to return to their home country. If so, they are asked to submit a request electronically via the Absher platform. Through these applications, the Ministry of the Interior is able to work with the home countries to help them receive their returning citizens. The airports participating in the initiative are King Abdulaziz International Airport in Jeddah, King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh, King Fahd International Airport in Dammam, and Prince Mohammad bin Abdulaziz International Airport in Madinah.⁽³⁰⁾

Religion

Saudi Arabia is a deeply religious country, and with Islam's two holiest mosques located there, Muslims across the world have often conducted religious pilgrimages to the country and looked to it for guidance on religious matters. Nonetheless, in the interest of public health, Saudi Arabia has restricted religious gatherings by closing its mosques; prohibiting public access to the two holiest sites in Islam, the Great Mosque of Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina; and suspending umrah pilgrimages.

Key Facts

- Saudi Arabia halted entry for individuals seeking to perform the umrah pilgrimage in Mecca or visiting the Prophet's Mosque in Medina five days before the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in the Kingdom. Refunds are available for all those who purchased umrah visas.⁽³¹⁾
- Saudi Arabia closed all mosques apart from the two holy mosques in Mecca and Medina on **March 17**, at the point when there were 171 confirmed cases in the Kingdom. The ritual call to prayer now directs people to pray at home.^{(32), (33)}
- On **March 20**, the Kingdom prohibited worshippers from entering the two holy mosques; at that point there were 344 confirmed cases in the Kingdom.⁽³⁴⁾
- The Kingdom's Hajj minister has told Muslims who had been planning to participate in the Hajj pilgrimage between July 28 and August 2 to refrain from making reservations or other plans.⁽³⁵⁾

Clerical Response to Saudi Actions

Saudi clerics and religious institutions have responded positively to the government's actions, asserting that restricting religious observance is necessary to preserve life.

- Dr Mohammed al-Issa, secretary-general of the Muslim World League, said in response to the closure of mosques, "This is considered a religious duty... Everybody knows this pandemic requires taking every measure of precaution including preventing any form of gathering[,] with no exception."⁽³⁶⁾
- The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), a fifty-seven-member body of Islamic nations, has expressed support for the Kingdom's management of the two holy mosques during the COVID-19 pandemic. The OIC also stressed the importance of the Kingdom's timely decision to suspend umrah.⁽³⁷⁾

Ramadan

Ramadan is usually a time of piety, joy, and celebration for Muslims all over the world. Attendance at mosques increases, and friends and families gather together at the end of the day to enjoy an iftar meal together. This year's Ramadan (April 23–May 23) has been exceptionally challenging for Muslims living under the cloud of the COVID-19 pandemic. To help citizens shop for essential goods during this period, the Kingdom altered restrictions in areas less affected by the virus. Curfew hours were changed so people could leave their homes for food and medicine between 9 am and 5 pm, rather than the usual 6 am–3 pm.⁽³⁸⁾ Mecca and other badly affected districts remain under a twenty-four-hour curfew.⁽³⁹⁾ Saudi Arabia will enforce a nationwide twenty-four-hour curfew during the holiday of Eid al-Fitr. This curfew will apply from May 23 to May 27.⁽⁴⁰⁾

The Kingdom stressed the importance of adhering to social distancing and movement restrictions during Ramadan. Saudi clerics and religious bodies also communicated the importance of adhering to the guidelines.

- Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdulaziz Al al-Sheikh, Saudi Arabia's highest religious authority, stated that prayers during Ramadan and the Eid al-Fitr feast must be performed at home.⁽⁴¹⁾
- Saudi Arabia's highest religious body, the Council of Senior Scholars, also urged Muslims worldwide to pray at home during Ramadan if their countries require social distancing. In a statement, the body said, "Muslims shall avoid gatherings, because they are the main cause of the spread of infection . . . and shall remember that preserving the lives of people is a great act that brings them closer to God".⁽⁴²⁾

G20 Leadership

Coronavirus is a global problem that requires global cooperation. The Kingdom is the first Arab nation to take over the G20 presidency. This November's G20 summit in Riyadh will focus on fighting COVID-19 and mitigating its economic impact.⁽⁴³⁾ Moreover, the Kingdom is already using its presidency to convene national leaders, ministers, and global experts virtually to coordinate a response toward the pandemic.

Under Saudi Arabia's presidency, the G20 has taken the following actions:

- Pledged \$7 trillion to boost the global economy.⁽⁴⁴⁾
- Inaugurated a global fund for research to find a vaccine.⁽⁴⁵⁾

- Agreed to freeze bilateral government loan repayments for low-income countries until the end of 2020. Some seventy-seven nations will benefit from this decision.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Saudi Arabia's leadership has also urged private creditors to suspend debt repayments from developing countries.⁽⁴⁷⁾
- Called for donations in order to reach the \$8 billion target set by the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank to combat COVID-19. This fundraising goal has now been reached.
- Launched an international initiative to increase access to the health tools needed to fight COVID-19.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Humanitarian Actions

Coronavirus is a global challenge that does not respect national borders. All nations are vulnerable, and the Kingdom is delivering humanitarian aid to all who need it.

Key Facts

- Though international flights have been halted, Saudi Arabia is working with other nations to facilitate the safe return of people to their homes. For example, Saudi Arabia's national airliner, Saudia, has scheduled special commercial flights to allow British nationals to return home.
- Saudi Arabia has pledged \$500 million to global COVID-19 relief efforts. Contributions include \$150 million to the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness and Innovation (CEPI), \$150 million to the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisations (Gavi), and \$200 million to other international and regional health organizations and programs.
- Working with international actors, Saudi Arabia has used its position as president of the G20 to help reach an \$8 billion fundraising target to fight COVID-19 that was set by the WHO and the World Bank.^{(49), (50)}

Other humanitarian initiatives include the following efforts:

- The donation of 30,000 KN95 respirator masks to first responders in Houston, Texas.⁽⁵¹⁾
- The donation of medical aid to China. This package included 30 non-invasive ventilators, 277 patient monitors, 500 infusion pumps, 89 defibrillators, 60 ultrasound machines, and 3 dialysis machines.⁽⁵²⁾
- The King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KSRelief) announced it would provide \$2.66 million to help Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza fight the virus.⁽⁵³⁾

Yemen

Saudi Arabia acknowledges the vulnerability of Yemen to COVID-19 and has tried to broker peace with the Houthis on many occasions. In particular, it declared a two-week cease-fire initiative starting on April 9 at 12:00 midnight, which was extended by one month on April 24.⁽⁵⁴⁾

Saudi Arabia is the world's largest humanitarian donor to Yemen and has been praised by the WHO for airlifting medical supplies to Yemen in anticipation of an outbreak of COVID-19. The airlift included personal protective equipment (PPE) and lab screening tests for Aden and Sanaa.⁽⁵⁵⁾

In addition, the Kingdom also contributed \$500 million to the UN Humanitarian Response Plan for Yemen and an additional \$25 million to help combat the pandemic there.⁽⁵⁶⁾ KSRelief also gave \$3.5 million in medical assistance to the Yemeni government, including PPE, hospital beds, and medical equipment.⁽⁵⁷⁾ In coordination with WHO, KSRelief has inaugurated a COVID-19 testing unit in Hadhramaut province.⁽⁵⁸⁾

On June 2, Saudi Arabia will host a virtual conference for donors to Yemen. The conference is being organized by KSRelief and will have UN participation.⁽⁵⁹⁾

Praise for Saudi Arabia's Response to COVID-19

The Kingdom has received international praise for its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“ *We value the continuous support of ...[Saudi Arabia] to fight the spread of coronavirus.*”

-Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization⁽⁶⁰⁾

“ *[Suspending umrah will enable Saudi Arabia to] implement sustainable measures to prevent and control the disease and protect crowds during this important season.*”

-World Health Organization⁽⁶¹⁾

“ *[Suspending umrah] will undoubtedly contribute to limiting the spread of the virus.*”

-Ahmad Aboul Gheit, Secretary-General of the Arab League⁽⁶²⁾

The General Secretariat of Arab Red Crescent and Red Cross Organization (ARCO) praised the Saudi measures to suspend umrah. Secretary-General Dr. Saleh Al-Tuwaijri stressed that it confirms the Kingdom's keenness to safeguard the lives of pilgrims and visitors to the two holy mosques.⁽⁶³⁾

Appendix: Timeline of Saudi Responses

February 25, 2020: Warning issued against travel to Italy and Japan.⁽⁶⁴⁾

February 27, 2020: Entry halted for individuals hoping to perform umrah to Mecca or visit the Prophet's Mosque in Medina.

March 4, 2020: Indefinite suspension of umrah.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Those who purchased umrah visas that cannot be used will be issued a refund.⁽⁶⁶⁾

March 5, 2020: The area surrounding the Kaaba, Islam's holiest site, is emptied so health authorities can sanitize it.⁽⁶⁷⁾

March 6, 2020: Public attendance at all sports events is suspended until further notice.⁽⁶⁸⁾

March 7, 2020: Land travel between the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, and Bahrain is limited to commercial trucks only. Arrival from these countries is also limited to just three airports: Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam.⁽⁶⁹⁾

March 7, 2020: Schools and higher education institutions in Qatif province are closed for two weeks.⁽⁷⁰⁾

March 7, 2020: Travelers from Lebanon, Egypt, Italy, and South Korea are asked to self-quarantine for two weeks on arrival in the Kingdom. Any individuals showing symptoms are obliged to contact the authorities.⁽⁷¹⁾

March 8, 2020: Individuals are prevented from exiting or entering Qatif. This was the first action of its kind across the whole of the Gulf region and was taken after the Kingdom confirmed its first eleven cases, all of which were in Qatif.⁽⁷²⁾

March 8, 2020: Suspension of travel to the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Italy, and South Korea.⁽⁷³⁾

March 9, 2020: Programs at all schools, universities, and educational institutions are suspended until further notice. The Kingdom has directed the activation of virtual schools and distance learning during this suspension period.⁽⁷⁴⁾

March 9, 2020: HM King Salman announces financial support to the WHO worth \$10 million.⁽⁷⁵⁾

March 10, 2020: Cafes and restaurants are banned from serving tobacco and shisha (flavored tobacco smoked in a hookah), which are an infection risk because they are often shared between customers.⁽⁷⁶⁾

March 11, 2020: Movie theaters are temporarily closed.⁽⁷⁷⁾

March 12, 2020: Postponement of the Saudi-Africa summit and the Arab-African summit to prevent the spread of COVID-19.⁽⁷⁸⁾

March 13, 2020: The counting phase of Saudi Arabia's 2020 general census is suspended.⁽⁷⁹⁾

March 14, 2020: A 50 billion riyal (\$13.3 billion) package is unveiled to support private businesses. This package aims to grant SMEs six-month deferrals on bank payments, concessional financing, and exemptions from the costs of a loan guarantee program.⁽⁸⁰⁾

March 15, 2020: Stores in all shopping centers, apart from grocery stores and pharmacies, are closed. Restaurants and cafes are banned from serving customers but are allowed to offer food delivery services.⁽⁸¹⁾

March 15, 2020: Shopping centers, restaurants, coffee shops, public parks, and public gardens are closed. Essential shops, such as supermarkets, pharmacies, and food delivery companies, are allowed to remain open.⁽⁸²⁾

March 15, 2020: All international flights are suspended for two weeks. The period was considered a special official holiday for citizens and residents who are unable to return due to the suspension of flights. This action was taken after the Kingdom had confirmed 86 COVID-19 cases.⁽⁸³⁾

March 16, 2020: Workers are prohibited from traveling to government agencies for work, except for workers in the health, security, and military sectors. These measures were implemented for sixteen days and are to be reviewed on an ongoing basis.⁽⁸⁴⁾

March 17, 2020: All but the two holy mosques in Mecca and Medina are closed entirely, including for the customary five daily prayers. The ritual call to prayer now directs people to pray at home.^{(85),(86)}

March 19, 2020: HM King Salman gives a televised address announcing that measures will be taken to ensure all citizens and other residents are provided with medicine, food, and other necessities during the pandemic.⁽⁸⁷⁾

March 20, 2020: A 120 billion riyal (\$32 billion) stimulus package to support business is unveiled. Saudi business owners will be allowed to postpone VAT, excise tax, and income tax payments for a period of three months. Expat fees, which the government charges for hiring expatriates, will also be canceled for a three-month period, and these measures could be extended.⁽⁸⁸⁾ The Kingdom also pledges to raise borrowing to 50 percent of GDP to meet costs. This sum includes the \$13.3 billion announced on March 14 to support SMEs.⁽⁸⁹⁾

March 21, 2020: All domestic flights, buses, taxis, and trains are suspended for fourteen days.⁽⁹⁰⁾

March 23, 2020: Curfew from 7 pm to 6 am is introduced to limit the spread of COVID-19. These measures were initially set for a period of twenty-one days but have since been extended. The curfew does not apply to those working in essential services, such as security, the military, the media, and health care.⁽⁹¹⁾ People who violate curfew were to be fined 10,000 riyals (\$2,663) and could face jail for repeated breaches.⁽⁹²⁾ The fine for violating curfew has since increased to 200,000 riyals (\$53,255).

March 25, 2020: Individuals are prohibited from entering or exiting Mecca, Medina, and Riyadh and curfew in these three cities has been extended to 3 pm to 6 am. Individuals are also prohibited from moving between the Kingdom's thirteen provinces.⁽⁹³⁾

March 26, 2020: HM King Salman chairs a virtual G20 summit with global leaders to coordinate a global response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of \$5 trillion is pledged to boost the global economy and a global fund to research a vaccine is inaugurated.^{(94), (95)} The pledge has since increased to \$7 trillion.

March 28, 2020: Saudi Arabia's national airliner, Saudia, agrees to operate special commercial flights to allow British nationals and their families to return to the United Kingdom. Flights to London are operated from Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam.⁽⁹⁶⁾

March 29, 2020: The Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority (SAMA) announces that banks should restructure financing for customers without charging them extra fees and prepare to provide financing to workers who have lost their jobs. SAMA also says that banks should review interest rates for credit cards in consideration of the recent drop in interest rates.⁽⁹⁷⁾

March 29, 2020: Movement in and out of Jeddah is prohibited.⁽⁹⁸⁾

March 29, 2020: Saudi Arabia indefinitely extends its suspension of international passenger flights and its bar on workplace attendance.⁽⁹⁹⁾

March 30, 2020: HM King Salman orders free treatment to be provided to all COVID-19 patients in all government and private health care facilities in Saudi Arabia. This applies to

both citizens and other residents, including those who are in violation of residency laws.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ This will encourage all residents, including migrant workers, to get tested and seek treatment if they become symptomatic.

March 30, 2020: To alleviate concerns about food shortages, the Kingdom announced it will import 1.2 million metric tons more wheat in April, increase its strategic reserves of wheat, and expand the list of countries from which it can import livestock.⁽¹⁰¹⁾

March 30, 2020: Individuals from six districts in Mecca are prohibited from leaving their homes unless they are getting prescriptions or groceries and doing so between the hours of 6 am and 3 pm.⁽¹⁰²⁾ Entry and exit into several neighborhoods in Medina is also restricted.⁽¹⁰³⁾

April 1, 2020: Muslims planning to participate in the Hajj between July 28 and August 2 are asked to refrain from booking and concluding contracts.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾

April 2, 2020: Individuals in all of Mecca and Medina, are prohibited from leaving their homes unless they are getting prescriptions and groceries between the hours of 6 am and 3pm. These restrictions do not apply to key workers.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾

April 3, 2020: Curfew in Dammam, Taif, and Qatif is extended and now takes place between the hours of 6 am and 3 pm.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾

April 3, 2020: A \$2.4 billion stimulus package is unveiled to pay 60 percent of wages for private-sector workers. This will deter companies from making these individuals redundant. Wages will be paid for a period of three months, with a maximum limit for claims of 9,000 riyals (\$2,391).⁽¹⁰⁷⁾

April 5, 2020: The Kingdom announces it will fly home any citizens who are abroad and want to return to Saudi Arabia. An electronic service is launched to register those who are interested. Priority will be given to those in those in the worst-affected countries, pregnant women, and the elderly. Citizens will undergo a two-week quarantine on their return.⁽¹⁰⁸⁾

April 6, 2020: Imposition of a twenty-four-hour curfew on residents in all major cities and closing of all nonessential businesses until further notice. The curfew applies to Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam, Dhahran, Tabuk, Hofuf, Taif, Al Qatif, and Khobar. (Mecca and Medina were already under these restrictions.) Residents will only be permitted to leave their homes between 6 am and 3 pm to procure prescriptions and groceries within their neighborhoods.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾

April 9, 2020: Visas allowing reentry to Saudi Arabia that were set to expire between February 25 and May 24 are to be extended for three months without charge.⁽¹¹⁰⁾

April 15, 2020: An economic stimulus package of 50 billion riyals is approved to accelerate the payment of private-sector dues, provide liquidity to several sectors, and cover the wages of those working in passenger transport. Another 47 billion riyals has been set aside for the health care sector, to be disbursed as needed to build capacity.⁽¹¹¹⁾

April 15, 2020: Strict company guidelines are announced to control the spread of COVID-19 among migrant populations. Businesses must have designated checkpoints to inspect workers' temperatures and respiratory health and isolation rooms for those with symptoms, and they must disinfect surfaces twice daily.⁽¹¹²⁾

April 16, 2020: The Prophet's Mosque in Medina, one of the two holy mosques, bans iftar events. Iftar takes place during the holy month of Ramadan, where people gather to break their day's fasting. The Prophet's Mosque usually dispenses meals to those in need during this month.⁽¹¹³⁾

April 17, 2020: Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdulaziz Al al-Sheikh, Saudi Arabia's highest religious authority, proclaims that Muslim prayers during Ramadan and the Eid al-Fitr feast should be performed at home.⁽¹¹⁴⁾

April 19, 2020: Saudi Arabia's highest religious body, the Council of Senior Scholars, urges Muslims worldwide to pray at home during Ramadan if their countries require social distancing.

April 20, 2020: Suspension of all prayers by the public inside the two holy mosques during the month of Ramadan.⁽¹¹⁵⁾

April 21, 2020: The government announces that restrictions during Ramadan (April 23–May 23) are to be relaxed slightly and the rules for curfew will be revised. Residents in all areas and cities not currently under a twenty-four-hour curfew will be allowed to go out between 9 am and 5 pm, whereas those who are under a 24-hour curfew will only be allowed to go out for grocery shopping or medical visits between 9 am and 5 pm. Residents of neighborhoods that have been quarantined are still prevented from leaving their homes at any time.⁽¹¹⁶⁾

April 22, 2020: During a press conference, finance minister Mohammed Al-Jadaan says the government is considering issuing an additional 100 billion riyals of debt in addition to the 120 billion riyals already announced.⁽¹¹⁷⁾ The finance minister confirms this decision on May 2.⁽¹¹⁸⁾

April 26, 2020: Signing of a \$265 million agreement with Chinese company BGI Group to conduct 9 million COVID-19 tests, with a capacity to carry out 50,000 tests per day. The contract will also establish six regional laboratories, including a mobile laboratory, and provide 500 experts, specialists, and technicians.^{(119),(120)}

April 26, 2020: Gatherings above five people for social purposes, including at weddings and funerals, are prohibited.⁽¹²¹⁾

April 29, 2020: Wholesale and retail trade are allowed to resume and shopping centers can reopen, but social distancing rules must still be adhered to. These measures will be under constant evaluation. Construction companies and factories are also able to resume work during this time.⁽¹²²⁾ Outlets must be disinfected every twenty-four hours and customers are banned from paying with currency. Shoppers and store employees must wear face masks and gloves at all times. Children under the age of fifteen are not allowed to enter.⁽¹²³⁾

April 29, 2020: Announcement of a new initiative to study and identify genetic factors that cause COVID-19 symptoms among Saudis.⁽¹²⁴⁾

April 29, 2020: Individuals are now free to enter and exit Qatif. The curfew there remains in place, however.⁽¹²⁵⁾

May 2, 2020: Entry and exit into Dammam, the capital of Saudi Arabia's Eastern province, is prohibited. Essential work, including in shipping and freight operations, is allowed to continue and factories are permitted to operate at one-third of their capacity.⁽¹²⁶⁾

May 4, 2020: The King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KSRelief) announces it will provide \$2.66 million to help Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza fight the virus.⁽¹²⁷⁾

May 4, 2020: Along with the European Union (EU) Commission and other international partners, Saudi Arabia co-convenes a fundraising event that raises \$8 billion to fight COVID-19.^{(128), (129)}

May 5, 2020: Saudi Arabia increases the penalties attached to violating government restrictions on movement. Those who violate the restrictions will be fined 200,000 riyals (\$53,255) and/or imprisoned for two years.⁽¹³⁰⁾

May 5, 2020: Allocation of 2 billion riyals (\$533.3 million) to import agricultural goods and increase food security.⁽¹³¹⁾ Saudi Arabia has also pledged 300 million riyals (\$99.75 million) to support local farmers.⁽¹³²⁾

May 6, 2020: Saudi Arabia's health minister, Tawfiq Al-Rabiah, says that 96 percent of Saudi Arabia's intensive care unit (ICU) beds and respirators are still available.⁽¹³³⁾

May 7, 2020: Banning of gatherings and crowds of more than five people. The government had already prohibited gatherings of more than one family. These regulations are to be enforced by a newly formed police unit.⁽¹³⁴⁾

May 10, 2020: Restrictions are eased in select Medina neighborhoods, enabling residents to leave their homes between 9 am and 5 pm.⁽¹³⁵⁾

May 14, 2020: Saudi Arabia holds a special meeting of G20 trade and finance ministers to discuss ways of reducing COVID-19's disruption to global trade.⁽¹³⁶⁾

May 23, 2020: To coincide with the holiday Eid al-Fitr, a nationwide twenty-four hour curfew is enforced between May 23 and May 27.⁽¹³⁷⁾

Other Actions

- During Ramadan, HM King Salman approved a reduced version of the special nighttime Taraweeh prayers, to be performed by the staff at the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. The wider public are still prohibited from entering the mosques during Ramadan.⁽¹³⁸⁾
- Jeddah Municipality has installed thermal cameras in malls and shopping centers to monitor the body temperature of customers and workers. Those found with a high temperature will not be allowed to enter the shopping centers and instead will be sent for testing.⁽¹³⁹⁾
- Saudi Arabia has increased the provision of distance learning throughout the country. There are now twenty live broadcast channels operating through its national education portal, iEN. As of early May, 1.4 million university students were able to take over 223,000 exams remotely.⁽¹⁴⁰⁾
- A one-hundred-bed field hospital has been established in Mecca.⁽¹⁴¹⁾

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About the Author

Freddie Neve

is an international affairs and media analyst at Pall Mall Communications, a strategic communications firm specialising in diplomatic and intercultural communications. Before this, he worked as a defence and security analyst, where he provided business intelligence reports and geopolitical analysis to a range of global defence and security companies. He has previously interned at Chatham House and holds a master's degree in International Security.

