

Arrival in Riyadh

On May 12th 2025 I landed in King Khalid International Airport, a single day before the US President arrived for his first international trip of his second term. Upon arrival, I saw a Boeing aircraft bearing United States insignia, positioned in anticipation of the U.S. delegation. As we drove in the dark desert night, grandiose infrastructure was brightly illuminated, showcasing the large and smoothly painted highway before us, and revealing the rows of Saudi and United States flags lining the streets in preparation for the imminent Presidential and Royal convoy

Our trip began by meeting a Gulf investor at the 4 seasons Hotel in Riyadh for breakfast. The hotel was occupied largely by both Western businessmen and women, as well as men wearing traditional Gulf robes paired with designer sunglasses. The investor was an expert on Saudi Arabia history and society, and had been working in and around Saudi for more than a decade, predating the rapid reforms currently being undertaken by the national project "Vision 2030". He has witnessed a nation change before his eyes. Launched in 2016 by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the initiative is a national manifesto to shift from an oil based economy, expand the role of the private sector, and position the Kingdom as a global hub for investment, tourism, and technology. The investor explained that while the economic reforms have been significant, the most impactful have been the societal reform. To understand how drastic the changes have been, he explained that he knew Saudi was changing, when he arrived for one of his routine visits and noticed that his hotel lobby was playing music. Music had previously been largely restricted.

The country's business landscape has become more competitive as Vision 2030 continues to realize, for a physical embodiment of this he suggested we visit the King Abdullah Financial District or "KAFD". KAFD, is a highly developed financial district with prodigious and imposing skyscrapers featuring the names of some of the world's largest companies, many of the buildings also stood empty in preparation for growth to come as the national agenda comes into fruition. Western shops and restaurants stood as marks for changing times. Joe and the Juice, the popular Danish chain, displayed Saudi men in traditional thobes and women in traditional abayas sipping trendy juices and smoothies, in a country that only opened officially to tourists in 2019. Abayas are no longer mandatory due to the reforms, but most choose to wear them.

Saudi-US investment forum

On this same day across the city of Riyadh, the Saudi-US investment forum took place and became ostentatious headline news for the sheer scale of its influential participants. In addition to the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and President of the United States Donald Trump, its participants included but were not limited to, Elon Musk, Sam Altman the CEO of OpenAI, Jensen Huang, CEO of NVIDIA, Andy Jassy, CEO of Amazon / Amazon Web Services, Alex Karp, CEO of Palantir, Larry Fink, CEO of BlackRock and Stephen Schwarzman, Chairman & CEO of Blackstone. Amongst this unprecedented concentration of global political and

commercial power, it is clear that Saudi Arabia is emerging as not only a regional, but a globally influential nation.

Ritz-Carlton and US-GCC Summit Atmosphere

The Ritz-Carlton in Riyadh is far more than a hotel. It functions as a hub of state power, diplomacy, and important conferences. During our trip the GCC-US Summit was held in the compound, hosting the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states, and US President Trump. I arrived at the hotel after the event. The opulence was surreal. A gargantuan palace filled with American and Saudi businessmen, uniformed Saudi servicemen, and United States private military company soldiers. The chandeliers were the size of the escalades parked outside.

Meeting in the Ministry of Communication

I arrived at the Ministry of Communication for a meeting with a Saudi official to an aesthetic modern and seemingly ubiquitous large government building in a secure compound. I was immediately greeted by security who took my name and confirmed it inside by walkie talkie, and was subsequently escorted in. The waiting room featured three portraits of MBS, his father King Salman and the nation's founder, King Saud. His office was large and we both sat on perpendicular couches. We spoke much about the growing industries, and their goals of growing innovation in frontier technologies such as AI, Quantum, Robotics, Space, and Biotech. He made mention of Humane AI, Saudi Arabia's flagship national artificial intelligence that was announced publicly only 3 days prior to our meeting. From this meeting it was clear the Saudi government was providing essentially a white glove service to any company, national or international, that was willing to participate in the Saudi economy. They do not want to match the developed world, they want to surpass it.

Meeting with a Saudi CEO of a large Asset Manager

We met a Saudi CEO of a large international Asset manager whose fund is investing across the kingdom. He explained that it had been easier to operate their company's headquarters previously in Dubai, but is working towards moving the management inside of Saudi Arabia, now that it has become a more suitable location for international work and investment. He also emphasized that Saudi Arabia cannot achieve growth in isolation; sustained development will require strengthening its international partnerships and collaboration. He explained how the country is largely unified in goals, strategy, and vision, which has allowed for peace in a tumultuous region, tying Saudi Arabia's prosperity with being peace oriented. Vision 2030 sets a deadline for the goals it can achieve, but he expects that the innovation will continue, and suspects a vision 2040 to be eventually revealed.

A New Kind of Power Is Rising

The Kingdom Center Sky Bridge is a building featuring an outlook designed for tourists to see Riyadh at 300m in the sky. On one side of the view you see, Riyadh as a sprawling metropolis fitted with giant sky scrapers, while the other side of the view features an empty plot with endless cranes and construction, emblematic of what is to come. Saudi Arabia has been blessed with the natural resources it has been dealt, but it is certainly playing its cards well. I arrived in Saudi Arabia at a particularly pivotal moment, as the world and business leaders gathered in the country. The pristine highways lined with US and Saudi flags show that the country is not only hosting power, but positioning itself as part of it. From every conversation, whether government official, CEO, or uber driver, a single message has been consistent, Saudi Arabia is changing rapidly and deliberately, and the people are largely optimistic of what is to come. The Kingdom has intelligently placed itself as a close regional ally of the United States, as well as competing countries, making it a strategic geopolitical location between the world's competing nations, enhancing its soft power, economic leverage, and allowing it to attract talent, capital and political relevance from all over the world. A new kind of power is rising.