



Saudi Arabia: ID documents for foreign nationals

- Passports and visas
- Registration of biometric data (fingerprints and photo)
- Muqim card (residence card for foreign citizens)
- Visitor card (special residence card for eligible Syrian and Yemeni citizens)
- Driver's licenses and registration papers
- Digital ID documents through Absher and Tawakkalna
- Exit and re-entry visas as well as final exit visas

Introduction

The topic of this query response is which ID documents foreign nationals who live and work in Saudi Arabia are expected to have during their stay and after having left the country. An overview is also provided of whether foreign nationals who leave the country on an exit and re-entry visa can be expected to possess ID documents other than those who leave the country on a so-called final exit visa. The overview only concerns persons with regular residence, i.e. persons with legal residency in the country.

The regulations governing residency for foreign nationals in Saudi Arabia are described in detail in the report [Saudi-Arabia: Opphold, arbeid og inn- og utreise for utenlandske borgere \(herunder jemenitter, syrere og palestinere\)](#) (Saudi Arabia: Residence, work and entry and exit for foreign nationals (including Yemenis, Syrians and Palestinians) (Landinfo 2020).

As stated in the above report, there are three conditions that can grant foreign nationals the right to stay in Saudi Arabia beyond shorter visits (IRB 2017):

- Through working in the country (generally with an employer as a sponsor).
- Through a close family member who works in the country acting as a sponsor (this is subject to a number of restrictions).
- Through marriage to a Saudi citizen (who will then act as a sponsor).

A fourth possibility is that a very influential person intervenes in one's favour, but this rarely occurs.

ID documents for foreign nationals in Saudi Arabia

Foreign nationals will always have to have a sponsor. All foreign nationals in Saudi Arabia must also always have a valid residence permit and valid ID documents. The two most important ID documents for foreign nationals in Saudi Arabia are passports and the residence card issued by the Saudi authorities, known as a *muqim card* (Arabic: *huwwiyat muqim*).

Certain foreign nationals, specifically some Syrians and Yemenis, will have what is called a visitor card (Arabic: *huwwiyat za'ir*) instead of a *muqim* card. This applies to people who have come to the country on a visa that does not grant them the right to work, but who have had their status changed due to exceptions that have been introduced due to the situation in these groups' home countries. This arrangement is described in detail in the report referenced above (Landinfo 2020, p. 15-27).

Furthermore, people who want to drive in Saudi Arabia will, after a relatively short period of time, have to obtain a Saudi Arabian driver's license, as described below.

A general theme in this response is the ongoing digitisation of the systems for document issuance, registration and contact between foreign nationals and Saudi Arabian authorities. Foreign nationals now have access to a wide range of services through various websites and in particular through two online portals/applications called *Absher* and *Tawakkalna*, the former of which is currently the most central. Through *Absher*, foreign nationals can arrange a wide variety of matters relating to their stay in the country, such as renewing driver's licenses or renewing residence permits for any family members they are sponsoring.

During a visit to Riyadh in February 2022, Landinfo got the clear impression that this is a priority for Saudi Arabian authorities, and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (formerly the Ministry of Labour) confirmed that the state invests considerable resources in this work (Rashoudi 2022). This has implications for which documentation foreign nationals have in their possession after leaving Saudi Arabia, as described below.

A final point that may be worth noting, is that the enforcement of the applicable rules may vary in practice. Landinfo was told that personal connections may be of significance in some cases, although the extent of this phenomenon was reported to be less than before. This means that even though rules and regulations – as far

as Landinfo have found – are followed in the vast majority of cases, the possibility of exceptions occurring cannot be excluded.

Passports and visas

Foreign nationals who intend to work in Saudi Arabia must obtain a job and a sponsor (most often the employer) before entering the country. The worker must then apply for an entry visa for workers, in Arabic *ta'shirat 'amal* (Landinfo 2020, p. 7). As far as Landinfo have found, the entry visa is stamped/attached into the passport.

A valid passport is needed when foreign employees' residence permits are to be renewed (Government of Saudi Arabia 2021a, b; Source 4-D 2022). Moreover, the employee will must have a valid passport to leave Saudi Arabia. Whether the employee uses the passport with the original entry visa when leaving the country, depends on the passport's validity period when entering the country.

Landinfo was, however, informed by a source in Riyadh that Syrians and Yemenis are exempt from the requirement of having a valid passport in order to renew their residence permit (Source 3-A 2022). For Syrians with visitor status and visitor cards who work through the so-called "Ajeer" scheme,¹ documentation of date of birth and what is referred to as a border number, which will be a handwritten number in the visa that is used to travel into Saudi Arabia, appears to be sufficient (Ajeer, n.d.; Saudi Arabian Passport Directorate 2017). Yemenis are required to possess a passport issued by Yemen's Saudi-supported, internationally recognised government, but it is not specified whether or not this must be valid (Ajeer, n.d.).²

Landinfo was informed by the same source that Palestinians are exempt from the requirement of having a valid passport as well (Source 3-A 2022). Landinfo has not, however, found information detailing how this exemption works, or whether it is codified.

¹ Ajeer describes itself as a (state) programme for organising temporary work in Saudi Arabia, and employers and employees can register through the web portal ajeer.com.sa. On this website, it is stated that the opportunity to work even when in the country on a visitor visa only applies to Yemenis and Syrians (Ajeer, n.d.a).

² For more on passports issued by the internationally recognised government versus passports issued by the Houthi authorities in Sana, see the report [Yemen: Civilregister, identitetsdokumenter og pass](#) (Yemen: Civil registry, identity documents and passports) from June 2022.

Foreign nationals intending to leave Saudi Arabia must apply for a exit visa. There are two types of exit visas: exit and re-entry visas and what is known as final exit visas. These are described in detail below.

Landinfo has been informed by several well-placed sources that both types of exit visa are now only issued digitally, and are available to the holder through the Absher app (Source 4-A 2022; Source 4-C 2022; Source 4-D 2022). The visa was previously stamped in the passport. When asked when digital visas replaced those stamped in the passport, Landinfo was told that this happened “some years” ago, and one source estimated that it may have been ten years ago. Two of the sources indicated that it should be possible to get a visa printed through Absher, but noted that this is not common as it is unnecessary (Source 4-A 2022; Source 4-D 2022).

The Saudi Arabian Ministry of the Interior, however, implies on its website that visas at least *can* be stamped in passports, possibly at the request of the employer. Amongst other things, the Ministry of the Interior writes the following (Ministry of the Interior, n.d.):

If the resident alien's passport is stamped with a re-entry visa or a final exit visa and the resident stays in the Kingdom for more than 2 month, the visa can be cancelled and a fine is imposed.

On the same page, it is further stated that:

Re-entry visa is stamped on the employer's request, and its validity period is 6 months.

This does not imply that the exit visa *must* be stamped in the passport, but seem to allow for the possibility. The specific website is not dated, however, and as follows, the information may be out dated. All sources Landinfo interviewed on the topic in Riyadh in February 2022 indicated that exit visas are no longer stamped in passports.

Registration of biometric data (fingerprints and photo)

All foreign nationals travelling into Saudi Arabia must register fingerprints upon arrival, and the fingerprints are also checked on departure (Thales, n.d.). Landinfo experienced first hand that both fingerprints and photos were taken upon arrival in February 2022, and that fingerprints were checked on departure.

The French company Thales, which supplies the system used to register fingerprints, writes that fingerprints and information about the holder are registered in a central registry. Furthermore, the company writes that foreign

nationals who are already in the country have had to provide fingerprints as well. It is not possible to renew one's residence permit if one does not have fingerprints registered in the central database (Thales, n.d.). This is confirmed by Saudi authorities, that state that all foreign nationals over the age of 15 must have both photo and fingerprints registered in order to renew residence permits (Government of Saudi Arabia 2021a, b).

Moreover, Thales writes that it will not be possible for foreign nationals to open a phone subscription without registering fingerprints (Thales, n.d.). Similarly, the Indian Embassy in Riyadh states that it is not possible to get a phone subscription without having a valid residence permit, which, as we have seen, requires registering fingerprints (Indian Embassy in Riyadh, n.d.).

Landinfo has been informed by a well-placed source that biometric data, including fingerprints, are also collected from everyone who, for various reasons, are deported from Saudi Arabia (Source 2-A 2022).

Overall, this implies that, according to the rules, it should not be possible to obtain legal residence in Saudi Arabia and obtain the documentation described in this paper issued to any other identity than the one registered with one's fingerprints, and as follows, not for multiple identities per person.

This shows that different public services and agencies are well integrated in Saudi Arabia, and that individuals' data is gathered and shared between them. Landinfo experienced this first hand during the visit to Riyadh in February 2022; the photo taken at the airport upon arrival was automatically retrieved when the delegation logged on to the mandatory infection tracking application Tawakkalna, using their visa numbers (there are two versions of this application, as described below).

Muqim cards

All foreign nationals living in Saudi Arabia must have a valid residence permit, and an ID card known as a *muqim card*, sometimes also referred to as *iqama* (which means residence permit). The card itself has the inscription Resident Identity in English and *huwiyat muqim* in Arabic centred on the front page. Certain Syrian and Yemeni nationals, however, will carry a *visitor card* instead of the *muqim card* (the visitor card is discussed in a separate section below).

Workers arriving in the country must acquire the card within 90 days. The card is normally valid for five years, although the residence permit itself usually must be renewed every year. The employer is responsible for renewing the residence permit. Landinfo writes as follows concerning the *muqim card* in the report Saudi-Arabia: Opphold, arbeid og inn- og utreise for utenlandske borgere (herunder

jemenitter, syrere og palestinere) (Saudi Arabia: Residence, work and entry and exit for foreign nationals (including Yemenis, Syrians and Palestinians)) (Landinfo 2020, p. 8):

The card serves as an ID card and proof of legal residence for the employee, who must carry the card at all times (IRB 2019; Indian Embassy in Riyadh n.d.).

According to Lifos, the card contains the employee's personal information, name of sponsor, as well as residence permit number (Lifos 2018, p. 22).

The report also provides a detailed description of the card's appearance and content (Landinfo 2020, p. 8-9). The description is in line with what Landinfo was able to observe first hand in Riyadh in February 2022.

The name of the employer/sponsor appears on the card. If a foreign national is sponsored by a family member rather than by an employer, the family member's name and residence permit number will appear on the card.

A person's *iqama number*, i.e. residence permit number, appears on the muqim card. This number is linked to a person's identity, and is essential for a person's stay in Saudi Arabia, including in order to be able to use public services and navigate public bureaucracy. The number is used when logging on to Absher (see below) (Source 4-D 2022).

All foreign nationals get a physical muqim card, but also have access to a digital version of the card in Absher. In a meeting with the Ministry of the Interior in Riyadh in February 2022, Landinfo was given confirmation that the digital version of the card has the same status and validity as the physical one, and may, for instance, be presented to the police when necessary (Al-Ahmadi 2022).

The Saudi Arabian Ministry of the Interior states that employers/sponsors must make sure that a foreign employee hands in their muqim card before leaving the country temporarily on an exit and re-entry visa. If a foreign employee leaves the country on a final exit visa, the same source states that the muqim card is to be handed in to the Passport Directorate when applying for the final exit visa (Ministry of the Interior, n.d.b). Other sources indicate that, when leaving on a final exit visa, the card is to be handed in at the airport (Indian Embassy in Riyadh, n.d.; KFUPM, n.d.a).

Landinfo was also informed by a local source in Riyadh that it is not uncommon for employers to collect an employees' passport when the employee receives the muqim card, and then collect the muqim card when the employee is given the passport back in order to leave the country (Source 4-C 2022). As far as Landinfo has found, the practice of collecting passports is illegal. Either way, available

source material indicates that foreign nationals cannot bring their physical muqim cards with them when they travel out of Saudi Arabia, be it temporarily or permanently.

Errors in name and/or date of birth

In a meeting with the Vice President of the Saudi Human Rights Commission, which is an official government body, Landinfo was informed that the occurrence of errors in both the name and date of birth on a person's muqim card is not uncommon. This means that the authorities sometimes issue cards containing a wrong date of birth and/or the holder's name misspelled compared to the information in said person's passport, and the information the person has provided to the authorities (Al-Tamimi 2022). In other words, in such cases, genuine and properly issued cards will differ from a person's non-Saudi identity documents, including said person's passport.

This was confirmed by a local source. Landinfo was also told of a case in which two siblings were given different family names on their muqim cards, despite it being identical in their passports (Source 4-D 2022).

Visitor cards

Saudi Arabia has not signed the Refugee Convention, and does not have legislation providing protection and residence for refugees in the kingdom. In practice, however, there are many who seek refuge who reside in Saudi Arabia, the vast majority as workers, following to the same regulations as other foreign workers (Lysa 2022, p. 1-3).

Following the outbreak of civil wars in Syria and Yemen, however, Saudi authorities introduced certain exemptions from the regulations that govern foreign nationals staying in the country, for citizens of these countries. These exemptions have made it easier for Syrians and Yemenis to travel to and obtain residence in Saudi Arabia. It has also made it easier for Syrians and Yemenis who were already residing in Saudi Arabia to act as sponsors for family members (Landinfo 2020, p. 16-22; Lysa 2022, p. 21-23).

Saudi authorities do not refer to these Syrians and Yemenis as refugees, but rather as "guests" or "visitors" (Arabic: *za'ir*) (Al-Ahmadi 2022), with reference to the fact that they do not live in refugee camps, but are part of society at large. For Syrians and Yemenis, this designation has also taken on a formal aspect, in that they can register as a "visitor" with the authorities, and thereby gain access to a number of public services and have the opportunity to work through the Ajeer system. This is even if they have not acquired work and a sponsor before arriving in the country (Al-Shammari 2022; Landinfo 2020, p. 18; Lysa 2022, p. 22-24).

Syrians and Yemenis who eligible for this programme, and who intend to work, must acquire a visitor card. The card has the same size and design as the muqim card, but has the inscription “*visitor’s identity*” in English and “*huwiyat za’ir*” in Arabic, centred on the front. Like the muqim card, the visitor card also serves as an ID for the holder in Saudi Arabia. The information given on the card is a bit different from what is given on the muqim cards, but like the muqim cards, it includes name and date of birth. The card is described in detail in the report referred to above (i.e.: Landinfo 2020, p. 25). The card must be renewed every six months, for a fee.

In a research article in the journal *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Charlotte Lysa refers to figures from the Saudi authorities that showed that 637,000 Syrians were staying in the country as visitors in 2018, but that this had dropped to 220,000 in 2022 (Lysa 2022, p. 24). The figure of 220 000 was confirmed in a meeting in February 2022 with the governmental Saudi aid organisation KS Relief, which funds the visitor scheme, . In the same meeting, Landinfo was told that the figure was 300,000 in 2019, and that in 2022, the programme included around 560,000 Yemenis (Al-Shammari 2022).

These figures illustrate two important points: several hundred thousand Syrians and Yemenis have, at one point, been issued visitor cards. Even so, the number of Syrians and Yemenis who fall under the visitor programme constitute a minority of the total number of Syrians and Yemenis who have legal residence in Saudi Arabia, because so many live and work in the country under the ordinary regulations for foreign nationals (to give an example, this is said to include up to a million Syrians) (Al-Shammari 2022). In other words: the vast majority of Syrians and Yemenis in the country have residency under the same regulations as other foreign nationals, and carry muqim cards rather than visitor cards.

Landinfo has not found information indicating whether errors in names and date of birth are as widespread on visitor cards as on muqim cards, but KS Relief confirmed in a meeting with Landinfo that the visitor cards, like the muqim cards, are issued by the Ministry of the Interior (Al-Shammari 2022). In other words, it seems likely that the process and the actors involved are the same for both cards.

Landinfo has not found information as to whether visitor cards, like muqim cards, must be handed in if the holder leaves Saudi Arabia. In this regard, it is important to note that the card provides the holder access to work and certain public services in the country, and that the card acts as a valid ID for the holder in the same way as the muqim card. In other words, carrying such a card would be quite valuable to many, which in turn provides Saudi authorities clear incentives to follow the same practice for both types of cards, i.e. that visitor cards also are confiscated/must be handed in upon departure.

Driver's licenses

UK authorities state that visiting foreign nationals in Saudi Arabia are able to drive using a driver's license issued from their home country for up to 90 days (UK Government 2021). This is confirmed by the US authorities' travel advice, which also emphasise that a foreign driver's license only allows the holder to drive a rental car (U.S. Department of State 2019). The car rental company Sixt, however, writes on their website that this only applies to people who have a driver's license issued in the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, an EU country, another GCC country or people who carry an international driver's license (Sixt n.d.).

Foreign nationals living in Saudi Arabia who wish to drive following their first 90 days in the country, and/or own a car, must obtain a Saudi Arabian driver's license (U.S. Department of State 2019; UK Government 2021). To be able to obtain a Saudi Arabian driver's license, a person must be at least 18 years old (General department of Traffic n.d.; Riyadh Traffic Department n.d.). If a person already has a valid driver's license from one of the countries mentioned above, or an international driver's license, they can apply directly for a Saudi Arabian driver's license to be issued based on their existing license (Expat.com 2022; KFUPM n.d.b; UK Government 2021).

If they do not have a driver's license, they must complete training and take the necessary tests in Saudi Arabia (Expat.com 2022; KFUPM n.d.b). Women have been allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia since 2018 (O'Grady 2018).

Available information on the validity period of driver's licenses in Saudi Arabia is conflicting, and it seems that the validity period may vary. A local source in Riyadh informed Landinfo in February 2022 that the validity period of a driver's licenses may be one, two or five years (Source 4-D 2022). King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals writes on its website, under 'information for employees', that a driver's license may be valid for two, five or ten years, and that the fees to be paid are SAR (Saudi Riyals) 80, 200 and 400, respectively (KFUPM n.d.b). This is in line with the information provided in the Absher user guide, where it is stated that the applicable fee is SAR 40 "per year" (Absher 2022, p. 36). The website Expat.com also writes that a driver's license in the country has a validity period of 10 years (Expat.com 2022). An expired driver's license can be renewed in Absher (Absher 2022, p. 36; Source 4-D 2022).

Two versions of a driver's license are available through the reference database DISCS (DISCS n.d.).³

³ What appears to be the most recent of these is the size of a credit card, and has a pale/white background. In the top left corner, it is written "Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Interior", with the same text in Arabic written in the top right corner. In the middle, it is written "rukhsat

In addition to a driver's license, anyone driving in Saudi Arabia must also carry registration papers/permits for the vehicle, at all times when driving. If a person does not have these papers when stopped by the police, they will be fined (Expat.com 2022; U.S. Department of State 2019; UK Government 2021).

In April 2021, Saudi Arabian authorities launched a digital version of the driver's license available in Absher, as well as in the "Tawakkalna" app (see description below) (Arab News 2021; Saudi Gazette 2021).

A local source informed Landinfo in February 2022 that foreign citizens sometimes have to hand in their driver's license when leaving Saudi Arabia on a final exit visa, but did not provide any further information as to when this would be the case (Source 4-C 2022). Landinfo has not found any further information as to whether foreign citizens have to hand in their driver's license when leaving the country permanently. Still, it is clear that a person cannot have a vehicle registered in their name when leaving the country on a final exit visa (Landinfo 2020, p. 14), and, as follows, will not be able to be in possession of (valid) registration papers after having left the country.

siyyaqa [Driver's license] Driving license" placed in a square with a black border. Beneath this is what appears to be the owner's name as well as a subsequent field, but these are redacted. This is in turn followed by:

- Number (in Arabic and English)
- Date of Birth (in Arabic and English)
- Expiration date (in Arabic and English)
- Date of issue (Arabic only)
- Blood type (Arabic only)
- Type ("private" for individuals, Arabic only)
- Restrictions (Arabic only)
- Citizenship
- Barcode

Photo of the holder is placed to the left of these fields. On the back, it is written "Public Security/Traffic Dept." in the top left corner, and the same in Arabic in the top right corner. In the middle, "Driver's license" is written in English and Arabic, followed by a list of the classes for which the card is valid, as well as restrictions. The logo of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is placed to the left, presumably because the driver's license is valid in all GCC countries. This is followed by a barcode and a number at the bottom.

Digital ID documents through Absher and Tawakkalna

Absher

The Absher platform was originally launched in 2005, but only in recent years has it evolved into the very comprehensive portal it is today (Al-Ahmadi 2022).

Absher is available both online and as a mobile app, of which there are two: Absher Business, for businesses, and Absher Individual. The latter is by far the most popular in terms of how many times it has been downloaded (Google Play n.d.a-b), and is the one individuals use, and the one referred to in the following. The mobile app is presented as follows on Google Play (Google Play n.d.a).

Absher is the official individuals eServices Mobile Application that provide the services of Absher portal in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

With Absher, which is available in both Arabic and English, you will be able to perform many services for individuals in KSA whether they are citizens or residents.

In a meeting with the Saudi Ministry of the Interior in February 2022, Landinfo was told that more than 330 different services, covering more than 80 different public departments and agencies, are available through the platform (Al-Ahmadi 2022). Several sources expressed that “everything” is done through Absher (Source 4-D 2022; Rashoudi 2022).

According to Absher’s “Service Guide” of January 2022, users of the platform can apply for issuance or renewal of passports (for Saudi citizens), apply to renew residence permits (for sponsors), apply for and issue exit and re-entry visas and final exit visas, renew one’s driver’s license and registration papers, register vehicles, pay traffic fines, and much more (Absher 2022).

Users also have a “digital wallet” in Absher, which contains the digital versions of the muqim card, as well as the driver’s license and the registration papers referred to above. Landinfo was informed in a meeting with the Ministry of the Interior in Riyadh in February 2022, that digital IDs are considered to have the same status and validity as physical IDs (Al-Ahmadi 2022). Landinfo has not, however, found exhaustive information as to which ID documents are available through the platform.

Landinfo was informed by a local source in Riyadh that a foreign national can find a summary listing all their trips out of and in to Saudi Arabia in Absher. How far back in time this extends is unclear, but Landinfo saw an example that covered a period extending back to the late 2000s (Source 4-D 2022).

In a meeting with the Ministry of the Interior, Landinfo was told that it is possible to order printouts of certain important documents from Absher, which will then be delivered through the mail (Al-Ahmadi 2022). A local source also stated that a person can obtain printouts of exit and re-entry visas as well as final exit visas, but that this is redundant, given that only the digital visas are used (Source 4-D 2022). Whether this refers to ordering printouts, or printing the visas directly from the platform itself is unclear, and by extension, whether it is possible to print out anything from the platform at all. It was demonstrated for Landinfo that it is not possible to take screenshots in the mobile app.

Foreign nationals in Saudi Arabia log on to Absher using their iqama number (which is written on the muqim card), a password, and a one-time autogenerated code sent by SMS. The code is sent to the phone number registered with the person's iqama number (Source 4-D 2022).

Thus, all information concerning a foreign national is linked together, with the iqama number as the central element. As described in the report referred to above, a person cannot set up a bank account, start a mobile subscription, or the like, unless they have a valid iqama number (Landinfo 2020, p. 9-10). By extension, Landinfo was informed by a local source that if a person does not have a valid residence permit, for instance due to not being able to pay obligatory fees, a person will lose access to a number of services, including their bank account (Source 4-D 2022).

Landinfo has not found clear and unambiguous information as to whether a person may continue to have access to Absher after having left Saudi Arabia on a final exit visa. It seems clear, however, that a valid residence permit is necessary in order to log on to the platform, given that one must enter one's iqama number, and given that access to services is lost if one does not have a valid residence permit.

This last point implies that a person will lose access to their Saudi Arabian phone number after having left the country on a final exit visa, although it is not clear whether it is possible to change the phone number registered on the platform before leaving the country. Still, this would hardly make a difference, given that a person no longer holds a valid residence permit when leaving the country on a final exit visa.

Still, according to what Landinfo has been told, the final exit visa is issued digitally through Absher, and as follows, a person is dependent on having access to the app when leaving the country. Thus, if one loses access to Absher when leaving the country on a final exit visa, it is reasonable to assume that this does not happen immediately, or at the very least not until after clearing the border control upon departure.

It does not seem, however, that the information stored about a person by Saudi authorities is deleted following that person's departure from the country (on a final exit visa). An article in the English-language Saudi newspaper *Saudi Gazette*, from August 2022, describes how a foreign national who has previously left Saudi Arabia on a final exit visa and then returned with a new sponsor and new iqama number, applied for a license registered under their old iqama number to regain its validity (Saudi Gazette 2022):

The Muroor's [traffick authority] confirmation came in response to a resident's query after he enquired about the possibility of transferring the old driving license information to his new Iqama number, after he had left Saudi Arabia on a final exit visa and then came back with new Iqama and a valid driving license.

The wording of the article is ambiguous, but it seems clear that the old driver's license data is stored, linked to the person's (old) iqama number and name, and that it is possible to link this to the same person's new iqama number when returning to the country.

Furthermore, Landinfo was informed in a meeting with the Ministry of the Interior that as of February 2022, more than 25 million digital IDs were stored in Absher (Al-Ahmadi 2022). Saudi Arabia's population, however, amounts to more than 35 million people (Thorbjørnsrud & Nordenson 2022, p. 29), meaning that a significant portion of the population does not have a digital ID through Absher.

In this context, it is worth noting that, according to Saudi authorities, youth under the age of 15, both Saudi citizens and foreign nationals, accounted for more than 8.2 million of the country's inhabitants in 2018 (General Authority for Statistics 2018). Landinfo has not found any information that state whether the portion that does not have digital IDs also includes foreign nationals.

Tawakkalna

When digital driver's licenses were launched in Saudi Arabia, the authorities stated that these would be available in Absher, and in the smart phone application *Tawakkalna* (Saudi Gazette 2021). There are two applications called Tawakkalna, one of which is the official app for tracking the spread of covid infections, whereas the other offers access to various services for Saudi Arabian citizens and foreign nationals residing in the country (Google Play 2022a, b). The latter application is the one that seems to be relevant in this context.

According to the description published on Google Play, Tawakkalna Services is an application that (Google Play 2022b):

(...) aims to provide a distinctive experience through a set of services that cover various aspects of life such as education, health, religious and public services. Beneficiaries: Saudi citizens, residents, Gulf individuals, and visitors.

It is unclear what this rather vague description entails in practice, but the application includes a digital wallet where digital IDs can be stored, as is the case with Absher. Landinfo has not found any information to indicate whether this includes, for instance, muqim cards, nor which other services the application provides. During interviews in Riyadh in February 2022, all sources consistently referred to Absher rather than Tawakkalna when discussing the digital services discussed in this response.

The application was developed by Saudi Arabia's "National Information Center", which also developed Absher (Google Play 2022b, n.d.a).

Departure on an exit and re-entry visa

If a foreign national with a residence permit in Saudi Arabia is to travel out of the country, they must apply for an exit visa. If it is a shorter trip and they, crucially, intend to return to Saudi Arabia, for instance in connection with a holiday, they must apply for what is called an exit and re-entry visa. The relevant conditions and procedures for such visas are described in detail in the report referred to above (Landinfo 2020, p. 12-14).

Saudi authorities introduced certain changes to this system in March 2021, that were part of a long-announced labour reform initiative (Rashoudi 2022). Different sources, however, have given Landinfo conflicting information as to what these changes entail.

In a meeting with the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (formerly the Ministry of Labour) in Riyadh in February 2022, Landinfo was informed that employees now may apply for exit and re-entry visas, as well as for a final exit visa, themselves. Previously, this had to be done by the employer. Furthermore, employees can now freely change employers, something that previously required permission from the current employer. At the same time, Landinfo was informed that it is only possible to change employer after having worked for at least 12 months, and in line with a one's current contract. Similarly, Landinfo was informed that the employer is still involved in the exit visa process, although it was not clear what this involvement entailed (Rashoudi 2022).

In a meeting with the International Labour Organization (ILO), Landinfo was told that "in practice Saudi Arabia has abolished" the exit visa, in the sense that the

employee now only has to notify the employer, and no longer is dependent on obtaining their permission (Cholewinski 2022).

Three local sources, however, told Landinfo that while employees now can apply for both an exit and re-entry visa and a final exit visa, the employer's approval must still be obtained (Source 4-A 2022; Source 4-C 2022; Source 4-E 2022). This was confirmed by a diplomatic source (Source 2-B 2022). A local source also noted that the employer has a 25-day deadline to process the application from the employee (Source 4-E 2022).

Saudi authorities stated that the changes do not include employees in the public sector, nor people working in private homes (usually referred to as the "domestic sector") (Rashoudi 2022).

Employees apply for an exit and re-entry visa through Absher, and the visa is issued digitally and is available through Absher (Source 4-A 2022; Source 4-C 2022; Source 4-D 2022; Rashoudi 2022). Previously, visas were stamped in the passport. Landinfo has not been able to establish when the change from physical to digital visas took place. One source indicated that it happened approximately ten years ago, but emphasised that they were unsure of the exact time (Source 4-D 2022). Two local sources informed Landinfo that exit and re-entry visas can be printed through Absher, but pointed out that this is not something people do, as there is no need to do so (Source 4-A 2022; Source 4-D 2022). It is unclear whether the sources referred to ordering printouts (as described above), or printing directly from the website.

Information provided on a Saudi Arabian government website indicates that a visa can be stamped in the passport if this is requested, as described above. This contradicts what all sources Landinfo interviewed on the topic stated in February 2022, and the government website in question is not dated. Available information, then, seems to clearly indicate that, at the very least, visas are normally issued only digitally. Still, Landinfo cannot exclude the possibility of getting a visa stamped in the passport, if this is requested.

If adult, foreign nationals are amongst those who do not have a digital ID (as discussed above), an alternative and non-digital solution for issuing exit visas will have to be available. It seems reasonable to assume that this solution will involve a stamp in the person's passport.

As described above, Saudi authorities state that the employer must ensure that the employee hands in their muqim card before leaving the country on an exit and re-entry visa. It is worth noting that the government website is not dated. Landinfo has not found information to indicate whether a driver's license must be handed in upon departure on such a visa.

On the other hand, it seems clear that a foreign citizen will retain access to Absher when temporarily leaving the country; they will need access to Absher when returning, and, crucially, their residence permit and thus their iqama number will remain valid when abroad (provided their leave is in line with visa conditions). Furthermore, it is also possible to apply to change the duration of the trip *from* abroad (Source 4-A 2022; Landinfo 2020, p. 13), which presumably requires having access to Absher.

Departure on a final exit visa

Foreign nationals who are leaving Saudi Arabia “for good”, i.e. who, at least for the time being, have finished their work in the country, must apply for a final exit visa. The visa is valid for two months after being issued, and during this period, the holder must finalise all matters in the country, which means closing bank accounts, settling debts, and so on. The process is described in detail in the report referred to above (Landinfo 2020, p. 14-15), and is also included in the changes introduced in March 2021. A person who leaves Saudi Arabia on a final exit visa can return to Saudi Arabia at a later date, but only with a new sponsor and a new residence permit (and a new iqama number).

As with the exit and re-entry visas, final exit visas are now only issued digitally, and applications are submitted through Absher (Source 4-A 2022; Source 4-D 2022; Rashoudi 2022). Two local sources informed Landinfo that exit and re-entry visas can be printed through Absher, but pointed out that this is not something people do, as there is no need to do so (Source 4-A 2022; Source 4-D 2022).

It is unclear whether the sources referred to ordering printouts (as described above), or printing directly from the website.

Information provided on a Saudi Arabian government website indicates that a visa can be stamped in the passport if this is requested, as described above. (Ministry of the Interior n.d.a). This contradicts what all sources Landinfo interviewed on the topic stated in February 2022, and the government website in question is not dated. Available information, then, seems to clearly indicate that, at the very least, visas are normally issued only digitally. Still, Landinfo cannot exclude the possibility of getting a visa stamped in the passport, if this is requested.

If adult, foreign nationals are amongst those who do not have a digital ID (as discussed above), an alternative and non-digital solution for issuing exit visas will have to be available. It seems reasonable to assume that this solution will involve a stamp in the person’s passport.

Upon final departure from Saudi Arabia, the muqim card must be handed in to the authorities, at the latest at the airport (Indian Embassy in Riyadh n.d.; Ministry of the Interior n.d.b; KFUPM n.d.a). As referred to above, Landinfo was told by one source that foreign citizens sometimes are asked to hand in their driver's license when leaving Saudi Arabia (Source 4-C 2022). Landinfo has not found any further information confirming whether this is the case, or under which circumstances it would apply. What is clear, however, is that one cannot be registered as the owner of a car in the country when leaving, and thus cannot carry (valid) registration papers.

Landinfo has not found definitive information as to whether one has access to one's own Absher account, and thus also the digital wallet, after departing Saudi Arabia on a final exit visa. That being said, logging on to Absher requires having a valid iqama number, and a person will not have this after leaving the country (on such a visa). At the same time, anyone leaving will presumably need to be able to present the digital final exit visa when travelling, which in turn is available through Absher. This *may* indicate that foreign citizens do indeed lose access as a result of not having a residence permit, but that this does not happen immediately, or not until it is registered in the system that the person in question has left the country.

Summary: ID documents while staying in Saudi Arabia, and after departure from Saudi Arabia

In summary, this means that foreign nationals with legal residence in Saudi Arabia will carry the following ID documents *when they are in the country*:

- Muqim card, physical and digital.
- Valid passport: the one originally used to enter the country will have an entry visa. There are, however, some exceptions, as described above.
- Digital exit and re-entry visa, if a person has temporarily left the country. As described above, Landinfo cannot exclude the possibility that the exit and re-entry visa can be stamped in the passport. All sources interviewed about the subject in Riyadh in February 2022, however, said that such visas are now only issued digitally.
- Driver's license and registration papers, physical and digital, if the person in question drives a car.

After (temporary) departure on an exit and re-entry visa, available information indicates that access to the various ID documents is as follows:

- The physical muqim card is handed in.

- The person in question has access to their own Absher account, and as follows, the digital wallet. Through Absher, they will also have access to digital exit and re-entry visas.
- As described above, Landinfo cannot exclude the possibility that the exit and re-entry visa can be stamped in the passport. All sources interviewed about the subject in Riyadh in February 2022, however, said that such visas are now only issued digitally.
- It is not clear whether one is asked to hand in the physical driver's license, as well as the physical registration papers. In either case, a foreign citizen driving a car in Saudi Arabia will need access to these documents after having returned to the country.
- Foreign citizens must have a valid passport. Given that many foreign citizens have been living and working in Saudi Arabia for decades, this will not necessarily be the passport that contains the original entry visa. Landinfo has not found any information indicating that a new entry visa is issued/stamped in the passport when someone gets their passport renewed. That being said, Landinfo has not found information that explicitly states the opposite either.

After departure on a final exit visa, available information indicates that access to the various ID documents is as follows:

- The physical muqim card is handed in.
- One source indicates that one's driver's license may have to be handed in, but Landinfo has not found any other sources that confirm this, or clarify the circumstances under which this would be the case.
- A foreign citizen can no longer be the owner of a car in Saudi Arabia after departing on a final exit visa, and thus cannot carry (valid) registration papers.
- It is likely that the person in question will lose access to their own Absher account, and by extension the digital wallet, but it is not clear exactly when this will happen.
- As described above, Landinfo cannot exclude the possibility that the final exit visa can be stamped in the passport. All sources interviewed about the subject in Riyadh in February 2022, however, said that such visas are now only issued digitally.

Foreign citizens must have a valid passport. Given that many foreign citizens have been living and working in Saudi Arabia for decades, this will not necessarily be the passport that contains the original entry visa. Landinfo has not found any information indicating that a new entry visa is issued/stamped in the passport when someone gets their passport renewed. That being said, Landinfo has not found information that explicitly states the opposite either.

About Landinfo's Query responses

The Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre, Landinfo, is an independent body within the Norwegian Immigration Authorities. Landinfo provides country of origin information (COI) to the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (Utlendingsdirektoratet – UDI), the Immigration Appeals Board (Utlendingsnemnda – UNE) and the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security.

Query responses produced by Landinfo are based on information from carefully selected sources. The information is researched and evaluated in accordance with [common methodology for processing of COI](#) and [Landinfo's internal guidelines on source and information analysis](#).

Responses provide brief answers to queries from the Directorate or Appeal's Board. They are written within time constraints and do not provide exhaustive overviews of topics or themes.

Country of origin information presented in Landinfo's Query responses does not contain policy recommendations nor does it reflect official Norwegian views.

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