

Major Innovations in the Saudi Census 2022



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Executive Summary

The paper focuses on the last population census held in 2022 in Saudi Arabia, the fifth since 1974. Based on the very first results of the census, the paper identifies and analyses three major innovations characterising this operation, namely, its methodology (introduction of administrative records as a source for a *de jure* enumeration of usual residents in the country); the disclosing of adjustments made to population figures for the period 2010-2021, based on the results of census 2022; and the publication of disaggregated figures of non-nationals by country of citizenship. Using a political demography approach, the paper concludes that the last Saudi census unveils significant changes in the country's policy and politics: enhanced knowledge of the population to streamline the socio-economic reform process, globalisation and "technocratisation" of population governance, and resetting of the place of non-citizens in the national "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991).

A population census is a snapshot of a country's population at a given moment. It provides information on the number and main socio-economic characteristics of all resident individuals (sex, age, household composition, geographic location, migratory status, health, and disability, economic, income, housing, education, and other characteristics), at the smallest geographic level (the household) throughout a country. The population census provides data that are critical for "formulating, implementing and monitoring policies and programmes aimed at inclusive socioeconomic development and environmental sustainability."¹ Beyond such an apolitical, technocratic representation of a population enumeration, a census is also "the most visible, and arguably the most politically important, means by which states statistically depict collective identities" (Kertzer and Arel, 2002, 3). A census reflects and contributes to shape the national "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991, 164-170).

Against this backdrop, the paper focuses on the last population census held in 2022 in Saudi Arabia, the fifth since 1974. Based on very first results of the census published one month before writing, the paper identifies and analyses three key innovations characterising this operation, namely, its methodology (introduction of administrative records as a source for a *de jure* enumeration of usual residents in the country); the disclosing of adjustments made to population figures for the period 2010-2021, based on

1 <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/census/>.