

SAUDI ARABIA

TIER 1 | USCIRF-RECOMMENDED COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, while Saudi Arabia remained a country of particular concern, religious freedom conditions trended positive in certain areas, including: Saudi senior officials no longer stated that Islam can be the only religion on the Arabian Peninsula; senior leadership met with several Christian leaders, including the head of the Anglican Church and a group of American evangelical leaders, pledging to promote interfaith dialogue and the flourishing of different faith traditions as part of the kingdom's domestic reforms; Egyptian Bishop Ava Markos led the first known publicized Coptic Church Mass in Saudi Arabia's history; USCIRF was granted the first-ever meeting between the head of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) and a U.S. government delegation; religiously motivated restrictions on women driving were lifted, and provisions of the guardianship laws treating women as legal minors were less strictly enforced in the kingdom's capital, Riyadh; the Ministry of Justice announced greater protection of due process rights for Saudis who are arrested; and the government continued to aggressively combat extremist ideology. Notwithstanding these positive developments, religious freedom concerns in Saudi Arabia remain. While the government continued to implement some economic and social reforms related to Saudi Vision 2030, it remains unclear if religious freedom conditions will improve as part of these reforms. During 2018, it maintained a ban on non-Muslim public religious observance and continued to arrest, detain, and

harass individuals for dissent, blasphemy, and apostasy. The Saudi government continued to violate the rights of Shi'a Muslims and non-Muslim minorities, and to advocate a doctrine of religious intolerance. While it began new construction in the Shi'a town of Awamiya, the Saudi government restricted the observance of religious holidays by the Shi'a Muslim minority. After more than 15 years of incremental progress, the Saudi government showed backsliding on improvements to its textbooks that continued to propagate intolerance and advocate violence against religious minorities, women, and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community. Despite the fact that in 2018 women were given the right to drive, the religiously justified guardianship system remained in place, adversely affecting the religious freedom of women in the kingdom.

Based on these particularly severe violations of religious freedom, USCIRF again finds in 2019 that Saudi Arabia merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Although the U.S. State Department has designated Saudi Arabia as a CPC since 2004, most recently in November 2018, an indefinite waiver has been in place since 2006. The waiver releases the administration from taking an otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation. USCIRF recommends that the State Department redesignate Saudi Arabia as a CPC under IRFA and lift the waiver.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Press the Saudi Shura Council to pass and fully implement an antidiscrimination law protecting the equal rights of all Saudi citizens and expatriate residents, take measures to end the harassment of Shi'a Muslims, particularly in the Eastern Province, and end prosecution of individuals charged with apostasy, blasphemy, and sorcery;
- Implore the Saudi government to release Raif Badawi, his counsel Waleed Abu al-Khair, and other religious prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia;
- Press the Saudi government to devise and implement a plan to end the guardianship system that treats women as legal minors and, in the meantime, codify any informal easing of this system in the kingdom; and
- Continue to press the Saudi Ministry of Education to remove inflammatory and intolerant content in government-issued textbooks, cease the exportation of these textbooks to Saudi-supported schools abroad, and make every effort to retrieve previously distributed materials that contain intolerance.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

GOVERNMENT

Absolute Monarchy

POPULATION

33,091,113

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Islam

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

Muslim (official; citizens are 85–90% Sunni and 10–15% Shi'a)
Other (more than eight million expatriate workers include at least two million non-Muslims, including Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, folk religions, and religiously unaffiliated)

*Estimates compiled from the CIA World Factbook and U.S. Department of State

BACKGROUND

Saudi Arabia is officially an Islamic state. According to the 1992 Saudi Basic Law of Governance, the constitution is the Qur'an and the *sunna* (traditions of the Prophet). The judicial system is largely governed by the Islamic Shari'ah as interpreted by judges trained in the Hanbali school of jurisprudence. The king of Saudi Arabia, currently Salman bin Abdulaziz, holds the title "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques." In 2017, King Salman appointed his son Mohammed bin Salman to serve as crown prince. The king also appoints members of the Shura Council, a legislative advisory body, and may dissolve and reconstitute the council at will. Since the crown prince's appointment, there have been a series of crackdowns on corruption, including the 2017 arrests of several prominent businessmen and members of the royal family. These arrests included American citizen Walid Fitaihi, who was allegedly tortured and remained in prison at the end of the reporting period.

There are more than 33 million Saudis, 85–90 percent of whom are Sunni Muslims and 10–15 percent of whom are Shi'a. The United Nations (UN) estimates that 37 percent of the Saudi population are expatriates, at least two million of whom are non-Muslim, including Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, practitioners of folk religions, and those without religious affiliation. Some Saudi citizens identify as non-Muslim or atheist, but

hide this identity in order to avoid the harsh social and legal consequences the government imposes on those who leave Islam. Saudi Arabia also hosts and is the largest donor to the Muslim World League (MWL), a global nongovernmental organization that propagates a particular interpretation of Islam. The MWL's December 2018 conference in Mecca focused on the "Perils of Labeling and Exclusion" and its secretary general, Mohammed al-Issa, has been outspoken against violent extremism over the past year; in January 2018, he condemned Holocaust denial during a visit to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Despite the ongoing implementation of Saudi Vision 2030, a national development initiative announced in April 2016, Saudi Arabia restricts most forms of public religious expression inconsistent with its interpretation of Sunni Islam. The crown prince has reduced the influence of Saudi Arabia's powerful religious establishment, though he has simultaneously consolidated his own power and targeted adversaries. During the past year, there were indications that over the long term, the Saudi government harbors the political will to improve conditions for freedom of religion and belief.

The Saudi Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV), known informally as "the religious police," has continued its process of long-term reforms under new leadership, though these

reforms are not yet complete. These include higher standards for recruiting and training officers, public education programs, and greater assistance to Muslim pilgrims performing the hajj pilgrimage. USCIRF's September visit to the kingdom included the [first ever meeting between a U.S. government delegation](#) and the general president of the CPVPV. USCIRF also conducted meetings with the Minister of Justice, Ministry of Defense's Ideological Warfare Center, the Shura Council, and the Tatweer Company for Educational Services, as well as some nongovernmental interlocutors.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2018

Positive Developments

In 2018, Saudi Arabia continued to combat religious extremism in the kingdom. In March, the crown prince criticized "extremists who forbid mixing between the two sexes" noting that "many of those ideas contradict the way of life during the time of the Prophet and the Caliphs." In April 2018, he noted in an interview that Saudi citizens have been jailed for financing and supporting terrorist groups. In an August 2018 speech marking the holiday of Eid al-Adha, King Salman declared that "the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia affirms its firm stance to fight terrorism and extremism."

Saudi Arabia has cooperated with the United States in the field of counterterrorism and continued to combat violent extremism, including through

the monitoring and reporting efforts of Etidal, the Global Center for Combatting Extremist Ideology. The crown prince also conducted outreach to several Christian leaders in 2018. These included the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Coptic Pope, the head of the Anglican Church, and a group of American evangelical leaders. In these meetings he emphasized the need for interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance. Also, in 2018, Egyptian Bishop Ava Markos led the first known publicized Coptic Church Mass in Saudi Arabia's history.

In September 2018, USCIRF was granted the first-ever meeting between the head of the CPVPV and a U.S. government delegation. In this meeting, the general president of the Commission explained important reforms

the CPVPV had made and was planning to make to its recruitment and enforcement processes. The former head of the CPVPV's Mecca branch, Abdullatif Al-Sheikh, was appointed minister of Islamic Affairs in June 2018. Al-Sheikh was the first head of the CPVPV to publicly announce efforts to reform the CPVPV upon his appointment in 2012 in the wake of strong public criticism in Saudi Arabia. Religiously motivated restrictions on women driving were also lifted in 2018, and provisions of the guardianship laws treating women as legal minors were less strictly enforced in the kingdom's capital, Riyadh.

Shi'a Muslims

Shi'a Muslims in Saudi Arabia continue to face discrimination in education, employment, and the judiciary, and lack access to senior positions in the government and military. The building of Shi'a mosques is restricted outside majority-Shi'a Muslim areas in the Eastern Province, and Saudi authorities often prohibit use of the Shi'a Muslim call to prayer in these areas. Authorities arrest and imprison Shi'a Muslims for holding religious gatherings in private homes without permits and reading religious materials in *husseiniyas* (prayer halls). Saudi Arabia also restricts as a practice the establishment of

Shi'a Muslim cemeteries.

During a USCIRF visit to the Eastern Province, certain Shi'a Muslims reported harassment by local police and invasions of privacy by the General Intelligence

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Directorate (GID). Shi'a Muslims who do not comply with GID instructions have their national identification blocked, restricting access to bank accounts and social services. Authorities also continued to target certain Shia' religious leaders. In early 2018, the Specialized Criminal Court in Riyadh opened a second case against Sheikh Mohammed al-Habib for "encouraging protests intended to destabilize the kingdom." Al-Habib, a Shi'a cleric and close associate of executed Shi'a Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, was detained in 2016 for "creating dissent."

The Saudi government has continued rebuilding the predominantly Shi'a Muslim town of Awamiya, which the government's security forces largely destroyed following violent clashes with Shi'a Muslim protesters and armed

gunmen beginning in May 2017 and continuing through April 2018. During these clashes, security forces sealed off the town, occupied a boys' secondary school near the town of al-Musawara, closed the town's clinics and pharmacies, and prevented essential services such as ambulances from reaching the area. The government plans to invest nearly 64 million dollars (239 million Saudi riyals) into the Awamiya reconstruction project, which includes a park, market, library, conference center, and recreational facilities. Local residents expressed concern to USCIRF in September 2018 that the government's plans for the neighborhood do not address the area's lack of roads, schools, and adequate hospital facilities. The government also has not expanded and modernized the local sewage system, citing security concerns. A total of 488 houses were demolished as part of the Awamiya development project, although the Saudi government provided compensation and new housing to residents of these domiciles. Residents also expressed fear that violence would re-erupt after completion of the project.

In September 2018, the Saudi government reportedly restricted the observance of Ashura in Qatif and limited the performance of public mourning rituals to specific hours. Restrictions included bans on Shi'a Muslims broadcasting their rituals via loudspeakers and the destruction of food shelters where marchers are offered free meals because authorities claimed they lacked proper permits. Municipal police also removed kiosks selling religious and cultural books, and took down celebratory signs on the grounds that they constituted "visual pollution."

Restrictions on Non-Muslims

As a matter of law, the Saudi government bans the public practice of non-Muslim faiths by citizens and expatriates alike. While the Saudi government has stated repeatedly that non-Muslims who are not converts from Islam may practice their religion in private, this policy has not been codified. Several Christian leaders in Saudi Arabia with whom USCIRF communicated in 2018 stated that the Saudi government seemed less interested in monitoring Christians than in

the past, but expressed fear that their communities would be targeted even though they practice within the boundaries of the law. The Saudi government has broken up private religious gatherings on the grounds that they are violating noise regulations, that alcohol is present, or that members of the gathering lack proper work authorization (*iqama*). The government also breaks up gatherings on the grounds that men and women in attendance sit together in the same room, claiming such mixing could encourage prostitution. Hotels must obtain approval from regional governorate offices before hosting mixed-gender events in their conference spaces; the governorate offices deny permission when the event is a religious gathering. The government monitors leaders of non-Muslim communities, who often face difficulty depositing money from weekly offerings into bank accounts in the United States. In September 2018, the Saudi government detained a Catholic priest alongside multiple attendees at a festive gathering prior to his departure from the country. In October 2018, 17 Filipina women in Riyadh were arrested for attending a Halloween-themed party; subsequently, the Philippine ambassador issued an advisory against public celebration of Halloween, Valentine's Day, or Christmas for expatriates living in Saudi Arabia.

Women and Religious Freedom

Saudi Arabia's guardianship system classifies women as legal minors, requiring them to obtain a guardian's permission to study at universities and travel abroad. The Saudi government justifies the guardianship system on religious grounds. It cites Hanbali Sunni interpretations of the Qur'an and *hadith* to justify these significant restrictions on women's agency. Despite this justification, the law applies to both Sunni and Shi'a women, as well as non-Muslim women in the kingdom. Saudi Arabia is the only Muslim country with such an extensive system of guardianship, which places severe limitations on women's religious freedom and human rights. USCIRF obtained anecdotal evidence during its September 2018 visit that certain

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provisions of the guardianship law are no longer being enforced in urban areas to the extent they have been in years past. For example, in the past women needed a guardian's permission for doctors to perform medical procedures, however, there have been recent cases where a guardian's permission was not required. In general, religious-based restrictions on Saudi women remained in place in both urban and non-urban parts of the kingdom.

In April 2018, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced his intent to reform the guardianship system and afford greater equality to women in Saudi Arabia. On June 24, 2018, Saudi women were given the ability to exercise their legal right to drive, and the Shura Council voted in early 2019, shortly after the end of the reporting period, to make child marriage illegal. However, adult women in Saudi Arabia continue to be legal minors according to the guardianship laws. Moreover, the GID arrested several activists opposed to the guardianship law in May 2018 and continues to detain them at Dhahban Prison outside Jeddah and al-Hayer Prison outside Riyadh. Some of these activists have been subjected to alleged torture as well as sexual harassment and assault. In December 2018 the Saudi Human Rights Commission opened an investigation into these allegations.

Prisoners of Conscience

Saudi blogger Raif Badawi, a USCIRF [Religious Prisoner of Conscience](#), is among Saudi Arabia's most high-profile prisoners of conscience. Badawi was the founder and editor of the website Free Saudi Liberals and was arrested in 2012 on the charge of "insulting Islam through electronic channels." In 2014, he was sentenced for insulting Islam. A 2015 court ruling upheld his sentence of 10 years in prison, 1,000 lashes, and a fine of one million Saudi riyals (\$266,000). Fifty of these lashings were carried out in January 2015. In March 2017, a Saudi court affirmed his sentence and demanded payment of his fine. As of 2018, Badawi remains in prison. On July 30, 2018, authorities arrested Badawi's sister Samar after she advocated against the guardianship law; she too remained in prison at the end of the reporting period. Saudi Arabia expelled Canada's

ambassador and froze trade in August 2018 after the Canadian foreign minister expressed "alarm" at the arrest and called for Samar and Raif Badawi to be immediately released.

Palestinian poet Ashraf Fayadh remains in prison for allegedly questioning religion through the poetry in his book *Instructions Within* and spreading atheist thought during an argument at a coffee shop in the city of Abha in 2013. In November 2015, Fayadh was sentenced to death for apostasy, but the charge was reduced in February 2016 to eight years, 800 lashes, and a renunciation of his poetry on Saudi state media. During USCIRF's 2018 visit to the kingdom, the Saudi minister of justice stated that the Fayadh sentence was reduced from death to eight years in prison because of his denial of the apostasy charge in court. The minister of justice further stated that an individual can only be convicted of apostasy if the defendant charged confesses in court, not because the court finds the individual guilty without a confession.

Curriculum and Exportation of Textbooks

For more than 15 years, the Saudi government has failed to sufficiently address intolerant content in official textbooks. USCIRF has regularly communicated its concern to Saudi government officials about the content of textbooks, and did so again in 2018. Despite progress in recent years, Saudi textbooks have seen backsliding into intolerant language inciting hatred and violence toward non-Muslims.

Through regular review of Saudi textbooks for more than a decade, USCIRF has found continued—though slow and incremental—progress toward removing or revising passages that included incitement to hatred and violence. However, a USCIRF [analysis](#) of 2017–2018 religion textbooks revealed the continued presence of some of the most egregious content promoting violence and intolerance, once thought to have been removed. Shi'a and Sufi veneration of the gravesites of prophets is dismissed as "heresy" while criticism of Islam is deemed "apostasy," for which textbooks endorse the death penalty. They caution students to avoid friendship with members of

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other religions. The textbooks encourage both violent and nonviolent *jihād* against nonbelievers. Finally, they encourage the death penalty for women who have an affair and for gay men.

Saudi officials have stated that they have requested the return of all old textbooks from their institutions abroad and sent out new, revised textbooks to replace them, but an unknown number of materials reportedly remain in circulation both within Saudi Arabia and at Saudi-funded schools abroad. In recent years, a Saudi royal decree banned financial support outside Saudi Arabia of religious schools, mosques, hate literature, and other activities that support religious intolerance and violence. In February 2018, the Saudi government also agreed to hand over control of the historic Grand Mosque in Brussels, Belgium, to local Islamic authorities following years of allegations that the Saudi-controlled mosque was preaching violent extremism and intolerance. Reports indicate Saudi Arabia is pursuing a similar approach for mosques and religious schools in other countries.

Apostasy, Blasphemy, and Sorcery Charges

In early 2019, after the reporting period, the Supreme Judicial Council announced that detainees would be informed of their crimes, granted access to a lawyer, permitted to contact their families, and given options for appeal. However, the Saudi government continues to use criminal charges of apostasy and blasphemy to suppress debate, silence dissidents, and restrict religious freedom. Muslim Saudis who convert away from Islam face legal penalties that include capital punishment for the crime of “apostasy.” While Saudi ministers no longer hold that “there can only be one religion on the peninsula” as in years past, public confession of apostasy remains a crime. In meetings with USCIRF, Saudi government officials clarified that only a public confession of conversion would qualify as grounds for prosecution under Saudi apostasy laws. Witchcraft and sorcery also remain crimes punishable by death in Saudi Arabia, and the CPVPV

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has maintained an anti-witchcraft unit since May 2009. In February 2018, officials at Mohammed bin Abdulaziz airport in Medina seized a parcel containing papers and small charms they claimed was a “witchcraft spell.” On June 10, 2018, security services arrested a man and his wife at the holy mosque in Mecca for “performing witchcraft.” Most people arrested for sorcery or witchcraft in Saudi Arabia are expatriate workers from Africa and Southeast Asia, many of whom are accused of using witchcraft against their employers or disrupting Saudi society through their activities.

U.S. POLICY

During its second year, the Trump administration continued to strengthen the U.S.-Saudi relationship while Congress pursued a more cautious approach in the wake of the killing of journalist and U.S. resident Jamal Khashoggi. At the [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#) held in July in Washington, DC, Vice President Michael R. Pence reiterated the administration’s focus on religious freedom in the Middle East. He noted that \$100 million had been devoted to support persecuted religious minorities in the region and stated that “the United States is also committed to ensure that religious freedom and religious pluralism prosper across the Middle East.”

Saudi Arabia has continued to support U.S. policy in the Middle East, including security cooperation on counterterrorism and countering violent extremism initiatives, and the administration’s decision to reimpose sanctions that had been lifted under the Joint Compre-

hensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran. The Saudi government has also signed letters of offer and acceptance for \$14.5 billion in defense purchases from the United States. President Donald J. Trump continued to indicate support for Saudi

Arabia in regional struggles against Iranian influence in the Middle East. During Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s visit to the White House in March 2018, the president emphasized the U.S.-Saudi defense relationship, and congressional leaders from both parties impressed upon the crown prince the importance of

addressing humanitarian concerns over the Saudi intervention in Yemen. In November 2018, the United States called for a ceasefire to the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen, and in December the Senate passed [S.J.Res. 54](#), which prohibited U.S. in-flight refueling support for Saudi aircraft participating in the campaign.

Then Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin met with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director Gina Haspel visited Turkey and met with Turkish investigators following the killing of Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. In November 2018, the U.S. Department of the Treasury imposed [sanctions](#) under the 2016 Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act on 17 individuals connected with the killing, including close confidantes of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. In December 2018, the United States Senate passed [S.J.Res. 69](#), a bipartisan bill that condemned the killing and held the crown prince responsible, drawing a statement of concern from the Saudi Shura Council.

On November 28, 2018, the State Department redesignated Saudi Arabia as a CPC but kept in place a waiver of any sanctions citing the “important national interest of the United States,” pursuant to section 407 of IRFA.

INDIVIDUAL VIEWS OF COMMISSIONER JOHNNIE MOORE:

This chapter correctly cites the decisions and signals being sent from Saudi Arabia that it is willing to engage on the topic of religious freedom in a way we haven’t seen before (and there are many other examples that could have been included), but based upon a simple analysis of—as the Saudis are fond of saying—the “key

performance indicators” this country still necessitates a designation as a CPC, without question.

However, as I stated after my September visit with USCIRF and November visit in my personal capacity, I believe—for the first time—that religious freedom is possible in Saudi Arabia.

As a committed advocate for religious freedom throughout the Middle East, I do not believe that punitive measures will have the intended effect on Saudi Arabia. On the contrary, I think such punitive measures could likely have the effect of forcing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to engage directly and more seriously with countries where religious freedom is not a consideration at all in their foreign policy priorities. If they do not enjoy the important relationship they have with the United States, they will have a relationship with other countries, because they have to have those types of security and economic relationships.

So I do believe the State Department—while joining us in stating clearly a shared opinion of the religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia—is correct in maintaining their waiver.

I do not think the way of persuading Saudi Arabia to improve its religious environment is by shame and by force. I do think it is through direct, respectful and meaningful engagement, as I have personally experienced and am personally experiencing. Furthermore, the State Department is correct in articulating that the present security environment in the Middle East presents real threats and any likely alternative to the status quo would, in all probability, worsen the conditions for minority religious communities—as we saw so horrifically in Iraq.

I remain optimistic that Saudi Arabia’s slow, but steady, reforms will continue and eventually extend to the way it handles religion. We shall see.