

SAUDI ARABIA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

Sunni Islam is the official religion of the country; the country's constitution is the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad; the legal system is based on the Hanbali School of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence; and freedom of religion is not protected under the law. A law setting forth a range of measures to combat terrorism that went into effect in February included provisions criminalizing "calling for atheist thought," "calling into question the Islamic religion," and "sowing discord in society." The government executed some individuals accused of sorcery or "black magic," among other offenses. The government sentenced to death at least one prominent Shia cleric and arrested several individuals who publicly criticized discrimination against Shia citizens. The government detained individuals on charges of violating sharia, committing blasphemy, sowing discord in society, and insulting Islam. One citizen received a sentence of 50 lashes for insulting Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) officers, and a women's rights activist was detained for insulting Islam. Citing rules on activities such as gender mixing, noise disturbances, and immigration violations, the government harassed, detained, arrested, and occasionally deported some foreign residents who participated in private non-Muslim religious activities, while allowing others to worship privately unimpeded. The government did not complete its project to remove objectionable content from textbooks. The government continued to support the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Vienna.

A terrorist attack on a Shia community center in November during the solemn Shia commemoration of Ashura resulted in seven Shia killed, including children, and thirteen injured. The government arrested 77 individuals for the attack. The government, senior clerics, and social media users widely condemned the attacks. Shia continued to face discrimination throughout the public sector and private sector in the areas of employment and education, but were equal beneficiaries of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program sending citizens abroad for fully funded education. The CPVPV continued to receive criticism in both traditional and social media. Editorial cartoons exhibited anti-Semitism characterized by the use of stereotypical images of Jews along with Jewish symbols, particularly at times of heightened political tension with Israel. For example, during the summer conflict in Gaza, local newspapers often ran cartoons that depicted a blood-covered Star of David as well as yarmulke-wearing figures murdering Palestinian children.

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U.S. embassy and consulate officials promoted respect for religious freedom and raised concerns regarding reported violations of religious freedom with government officials, while also inquiring about the legal status of those detained. Since 2004, Saudi Arabia has been a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. In connection with the Secretary of State's redesignation of Saudi Arabia as a CPC in August, the Secretary issued a waiver of sanctions "to further the purposes of the act."

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population is 27.3 million (July 2014 estimate). Approximately 85 to 90 percent of citizens are Sunni Muslims who predominantly adhere to the Hanbali School of Islamic jurisprudence. Shia constitute 10 to 15 percent of the citizen population. Approximately 80 percent of Shia in the country are "Twelvers" (followers of Muhammad ibn Hasan al-Mahdi, whom they recognize as the Twelfth Imam) and are primarily located in the Eastern Province. Nakhawala, or "Medina Shia," are also Twelvers and reside in small numbers in the western Hejaz region. Estimates place their numbers at approximately 1,000. Twelver Shia adhere to the Jafari school of jurisprudence. Most of the remaining Shia population are Sulaimaniya Ismailis, also known as "Seveners" (those who branched off from the Twelvers to follow Isma'il ibn Jafar as the Seventh Imam). Seveners number approximately 700,000 and reside primarily in Najran Province, where they represent the majority of the province's inhabitants. Pockets of Zaydis, another offshoot of Shia Islam, number approximately 20,000 and exist primarily in the provinces of Jizan and Najran along the border with Yemen.

UN data indicate foreigners constitute more than 30 percent of the total population. Similarly, foreign embassies indicate the foreign population in the country, including many undocumented migrants, may exceed 10 million. According to the Pew Research Center, this population includes approximately 1.2 million Christians (including Eastern Orthodox, Protestants, and Roman Catholics); 310,000 Hindus; 180,000 religiously unaffiliated (including atheists, agnostics, and people who did not identify with any particular religion); 90,000 Buddhists; 70,000 followers of folk religions; and 70,000 followers of other religions.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

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Legal Framework

The Basic Law of Governance establishes the country as a sovereign Arab Islamic state in which Islam is the official religion. The country's constitution is the Quran and the Sunna (the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad). There is no legal recognition or protection of religious freedom.

Conversion from Islam to another religion is considered apostasy, which legally can be punishable by death, though Saudi courts have not issued a death sentence for apostasy in recent years.

Blasphemy against Sunni Islam may also legally be punished by death, but in practice death sentences have not been ordered for blasphemy for decades. Common penalties for blasphemy are lengthy prison sentences and lashings, often after detentions without trial, or so-called protective custody. Criticism of Islam, including expression deemed offensive to Muslims, is forbidden on the grounds of preserving social stability.

The judicial system is based on laws derived from the Quran and the Sunna, and on legal opinions and fatwas of the 20-person Council of Senior Religious Scholars (*ulema*) that reports to the king. The Basic Law recognizes the council, supported by the Board of Research and Religious Rulings, as the supreme authority on religious matters. The council is headed by the grand mufti and is composed of Sunni religious scholars and jurists, 17 of whom are from the Hanbali school of jurisprudence, with one representative of each of the other Sunni Schools (Malaki, Hanafi, and Shafi'i). There are no Shia members. Scholars are chosen at the king's discretion and serve renewable four-year terms, with most members serving for life.

The Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and Financing, commonly referred to as the "counterterrorism law," took effect February 1. The law sets forth a range of measures to combat terrorism; certain provisions, however, curtail religious freedom. The law criminalizes "calling for atheist thought in any form, or calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion on which this country is based," "attending conferences, seminars, or meetings inside or outside [the kingdom] targeting the security of society, or sowing discord in society," and "inciting or making countries, committees, or international organizations antagonistic to the kingdom."

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The right to access legal representation for those accused of violating the counterterrorism law is limited to an unspecified period “before the matter goes to court within a timeframe determined by the investigative entity.” There is no right to access government-held evidence.

Non-Islamic proselytizing for both Saudis and foreigners, including the importation and distribution of non-Islamic religious materials such as Bibles, is illegal. The government prohibits the public propagation of Islamic teachings that differ from the official interpretation of Islam. Some travelers entering the country are able to import a Bible for personal use, but the government regularly exercises its ability to inspect and confiscate personal religious materials.

The Consultative Council is responsible for advising the king and can debate and propose legislation for approval by the Council of Ministers. The king appoints the Consultative Council’s president and 150 members, which includes 30 women. There are six Shia members, two of whom are women. The Consultative Council’s members are appointed to four-year terms and are limited to three consecutive terms.

The Council of Ministers is Saudi Arabia’s *de facto* cabinet, with responsibility for reviewing the Consultative Council’s resolutions and drawing up and implementing the internal, external, financial, economic, educational, and defense policies of the kingdom.

Decisions in Islamic law are not bound by precedent, and rulings can diverge widely. In theory, rulings can be appealed to the appellate and supreme courts, but these higher courts must agree to hear the case. Government universities provide training in all four Sunni schools of jurisprudence but focus on the Hanbali school; consequently, most Islamic law judges follow the Hanbali system.

The calculation of accidental death or injury compensation discriminates according to the religious affiliation of the plaintiff. In the event a court renders a judgment in favor of a plaintiff who is a Jewish or Christian male, the plaintiff is entitled to receive only 50 percent of the compensation a Muslim male would receive; all other non-Muslims are entitled to receive only one-sixteenth the amount a male Muslim would receive. Judges may discount the testimony of Muslims whom they deem deficient in their knowledge of Islam, and they may disregard the testimony of a non-Muslim in favor of the testimony of a Muslim. Under the government’s

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interpretation of the Quran, courts place the value of a woman's testimony in capital punishment cases as half that of a man's.

The CPVPV, sometimes referred to as the "religious police," is a semi-autonomous government agency with authority to monitor social behavior and enforce "morality" consistent with the government's policy and in coordination with law enforcement authorities.

The purview of the CPVPV includes combatting public socializing and private contact between unrelated men and women (gender mixing); practicing or displaying emblems of non-Muslim faiths or failing to respect Islam; "immodest" dress, especially for women; displaying or selling media contrary to Islam, including pornography; producing, distributing, or consuming alcohol; venerating places or celebrating events inconsistent with approved Islamic practices; practicing "sorcery" or "black magic," and committing or facilitating acts that are considered lewd or morally degenerate, including adultery, homosexuality, and gambling.

CPVPV field officers do not wear uniforms, but are required to wear identification badges and can only legally act in their official capacity when accompanied by a regular police officer -- although it is common for these field officers to approach and harass individuals without regular police present. CPVPV members reportedly may no longer interrogate subjects or determine charges against them, although they retain authority to arrest those they deem to violate religious edicts or moral customs. The CPVPV reports to the king through the Council of Ministers, and the Ministry of Interior (MOI) oversees its operations on the king's behalf.

All citizens are required to be Muslim. Non-Muslims and many foreign and Saudi Muslims whose religious practices differ from the government preference must practice their religion in private and are vulnerable to discrimination, harassment, detention, and, for noncitizens, deportation.

The Human Rights Commission (HRC), a government entity, is tasked with protecting, enhancing, and ensuring implementation of international human rights standards "in light of the provisions of sharia," and regularly follows up on citizen complaints. Although there are no formal requirements regarding the composition of the HRC, during the year the Commission had members from various parts of the Kingdom and included two Shia members.

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Non-Muslims must convert to Islam before they are eligible to naturalize. The law requires applicants for citizenship to attest to being Muslim and obtain a certificate documenting their religious affiliation endorsed by a Muslim religious authority. Children born to Muslim fathers are deemed Muslim by law.

Public school students at all levels receive mandatory religious instruction based on Sunni Islam according to the Hanbali school of jurisprudence. Private schools are not permitted to deviate from the official, government-approved religious curriculum. Non-Muslim students in private international schools are required to study “Islamic civilization” in place of the curriculum designed for Muslim students.

Government Practices

The government executed a few individuals for sorcery and “black magic.” The government imprisoned individuals accused of blasphemy, violating Islamic values, insulting Islam, black magic, sorcery, and “immoral activity.” There were reports of individuals being imprisoned for apostasy. The government did not recognize the freedom to practice publicly any non-Muslim religions. The government permitted many foreign residents to privately worship within their homes or in other small gatherings, but other private, non-Muslim religious meetings were raided and participants arrested, detained, or deported. Shia clerics and activists who advocated for equal treatment of Shia were arrested and at least one was sentenced to death for violent opposition to the government. There were no reports of executions for either apostasy or blasphemy.

The government condemned a terrorist attack on Shia in November during the Ashura commemoration, apprehending 77 suspects—all Saudis except for four foreign residents—and called for clerics nationwide to condemn the shooting. Instances of prejudice and discrimination against Shia continued to occur with respect to educational and private sector employment opportunities, judicial matters, and coverage in the media.

The government considered its legitimacy to rest in part on its custodianship of the two holy mosques in Mecca and Medina and its promotion of Islam. The government’s official interpretation of Islam was based on the Hanbali school of Sunni jurisprudence and was influenced by the writings and teachings of 18th-century Sunni religious scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who advocated a return to the practices of the early Muslim era, urging Muslims to adhere to a strict

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interpretation of Islam. (Elsewhere this variant of Islamic practice was often referred to as “Wahhabism,” a term not used inside the country.)

The Saudi Press Agency reported that the government beheaded Muhammad Bakur Al-Alaawi on August 5 in Qurayyat for practicing “black magic and sorcery.” According to Ministry of Justice Spokesperson Ibrahim al-Tayyar, in the first half of the year, 141 sorcery cases had been reviewed, a 5 percent increase from the prior year. A CPVPV spokesperson said most cases involved foreign residents and allegations of fraud.

In May Shia activists Ali Mohammed Baqir al-Nimr and Rida al-Rubh were sentenced to death after being convicted of attacking security forces in the Eastern Province. Though charges included encouraging sedition, rioting, protesting, and robbery, many Shia considered the death sentences motivated by sectarian hostility toward Shia. Baqir al-Nimr also drew attention as he was originally detained for his crimes as a 17-year-old.

On September 1, the Jeddah Court of Appeals affirmed a May judgment that Ra’if Badawi had violated Islamic values, violated sharia, committed blasphemy, and mocked religious symbols on the internet. Originally sentenced to seven years in prison and 600 lashes in July 2013, the appeals court sentenced Badawi to a 10-year prison term and 1,000 lashes.

On August 17, a judge upheld a sentence of a month-long prison term and 50 lashes for a Jeddah businesswoman who was convicted of insulting officers of the CPVPV during an argument after the men entered her shop to investigate possible “immoral activity.”

Reports from international human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) indicated the government continued to detain two members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, Sultan Hamid al-Enezi and Saud Falih al-Enezi, brothers who were allegedly arrested for apostasy and imprisoned after refusing to recant their beliefs. No additional information on their judicial status or whereabouts could be confirmed. Some authorities indicated they consider Ahmadis to be Muslims, but the group’s legal status in the country remained unclear, and the mainly foreign resident Ahmadis hid their faith to avoid scrutiny, arrest, or deportation.

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In November local media reported that Saudi authorities arrested Souad Al-Shammari, a women's rights defender and co-founder of a liberal human rights group, on charges of allegedly insulting Islam in a social media post in 2013.

The government continued to target Shia clerics and activists for arrest and prosecution. For example, in October Sunni cleric Hassan Farhan al-Maliki was arrested after making public statements suggesting a link between Wahhabi religious ideology and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Many of his supporters attributed his arrest to his advocacy for closer relations between Shia and Sunni as well as his criticism of discrimination against Shia in the country.

On October 15, the Special Terrorism Court handed down a death sentence for Awamiyah-based Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr on charges of "disobeying the ruler, firing on security forces, sowing discord, undermining national unity, and interfering in the affairs of a sisterly nation," presumably referring to Bahrain. Nimr had been arrested in July 2012, after a series of sermons in which he allegedly demanded greater rights for Shia and defended four men accused of celebrating the death of then-Crown Prince Naif, whom they viewed as promoting anti-Shia discrimination.

In April the Special Terrorism Court convicted Fadhil al-Manasif, a Shia human rights activist who documented Shia protests in 2011, sentencing him to 15 years in prison and a 15-year travel ban for "breaking allegiance with the king" and "being in contact with foreign news agencies in order to exaggerate news and harm the reputation of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its people," among other charges.

More than 1,000 Eastern Province Shia were arrested over the last three years in connection with public protests demanding greater rights for Shia. Shia groups in Qatif that track arrests and convictions of Shia reported that more than 230 remained in detention in prisons throughout the Eastern Province and numerous others remained subject to travel bans. Of the 230, approximately 37 have been convicted of crimes. The majority are held on non-violent charges, including participating in or publicizing protests (through social media), inciting unrest in the country, and insulting the king.

The government limited freedom of religious assembly, including by restricting non-Muslims' worship, both publicly and in private. Police arrested 12 Ethiopian Christians in their Dammam apartment building in February during their private

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Christian worship service. The government deported all 12, according to members of the faith community.

In September members of the CPVPV and local police raided a private residence in Khafji in the Eastern Province after receiving reports that an Indian national was using his home there to conduct church services. Government authorities allegedly arrested 27 foreign residents and seized copies of the Bible and various musical instruments reportedly used at church services. Reports indicate that all those arrested were released within two days.

In July CPVPV members raided a gathering of foreign resident Catholics in a private home in Riyadh by climbing over a wall. Attendees were questioned but, after the resident pointed out the illegal nature of the entry of the CPVPV members, who were not accompanied by police, no one was arrested.

Police and members of the CPVPV dispersed a Catholic Good Friday service of approximately 3,000 foreign residents at a farm in the Eastern Province on April 18. The Catholic congregation subsequently canceled the remainder of its Easter weekend services, but other small gatherings took place in private homes and apartments.

A domestic Arabic language news site, Akhbaar 24, reported on October 21 that the CPVPV raided a store run by two Asian nationals, who were allegedly using it to practice Buddhism and spread polytheism. The photograph featured in the article showed a small shrine with images of Hindu gods and the Bhagavad Gita, along with ostensibly Buddhist religious items.

There were numerous reports of government authorities calling for prosecution of atheists. For instance, in August the CPVPV threatened to find and arrest those who post online videos in support of atheism.

CPVPV confirmed in statements to the media, on August 17, its coordination with the Information and Communication Technologies Authority to block certain websites as part of a broader policy of censoring online content considered objectionable. Media reported that the CPVPV blocked over 20,000 websites with “objectionable content” or promotion of unorthodox or “ill informed” views of religion. Local newspapers reported in August that the CPVPV disclosed the role of the Ministry of Interior in arresting a number of people who “engaged in apostasy,” or insulting God or the Prophet, online. In addition to blocking

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websites, the CPVPV's spokesperson reported, on December 15, that the CPVPV's information technology crime department shut down or blocked more than 10,000 twitter accounts for "committing religious and ethical violations," and an undisclosed number of social media users were arrested in accordance with the Anti-Cyber Crime Law. The government also sought to locate and shut down extremist websites used to recruit jihadis or inspire violence.

The government repeatedly blocked the Shia news website Al-Rasid, which published Friday sermons and op-eds by prominent Shia clerics until it was closed down by its founders on June 6. Although the founders and contributing authors of this website remained anonymous and never offered an official reason for the website's closure, sources close to them reported that government intimidation, including threats of arrest, played a major role in their decision to cease operations.

In April the Jeddah Court of Appeals ordered the Liberal Saudi Network website to cease operations, even though it had been inactive since 2012. The internet forum was founded by human rights activist and blogger Ra'if Bawadi to serve as a platform for debating religious and political matters in the country. The website was ordered to close for publishing allegedly anti-Islamic material, such as articles critical of senior religious figures in the country.

The government continued to exclude Shia perspectives from the extensive government-owned religious media and broadcast programming. Shia bookstores reportedly could not be licensed. In addition, terms like "rejectionists" that Shia considered insulting were commonly found in public discourse.

The government restricted the ability of religious leaders and activists to express views critical of the religious establishment. For example, in October the Specialized Criminal Court in Riyadh sentenced a preacher to eight years in jail and a 10-year travel ban for exploiting Friday sermons to incite sectarianism and trying to create division in the country, and uttering racist descriptions and words to ridicule and insult the Council of Senior Religious Scholars members, whom he described as "weak." The government also censored material it considered blasphemous, for example, by removing works by Palestinian novelist Mamoud Darwish at the Riyadh International Book Fair in March.

The government took actions to counter violence against Shia perpetuated by Sunni violent extremists. After an Ashura attack on November 4, outside of a *husseiniya* (a congregation hall for Shia commemorative ceremonies) in al-Dalwa,

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the Ministry of Islamic Affairs (MOIA) sent out an immediate notice to clerics across the country instructing them to speak out against the attack, stop inciting people against Shia, and call for national unity. Reports indicate that most clerics complied with the instruction to stop inciting hatred of Shia, and many Sunni and Shia clerics explicitly condemned the attack and called for national unity.

Government authorities arrested 77 people suspected of involvement in planning, financing, and carrying out the attack. The minister of interior visited Shia victims in the hospital.

On November 5, the minister of culture and information ordered the closure of the office of the Al Wesal television channel in Riyadh and banned its broadcasts in the country, noting the government would not tolerate any news organization which attempted to foment sectarian tension or “target the homeland's national unity, security and stability.” The religiously-oriented channel often criticized Shia as “rejectionists,” a pejorative label which dates back to the seventh century schism between Sunni and Shia Islam. At year’s end, however, Al Wesal was still operating.

Anti-Shia rhetoric in Sunni mosques in the Eastern Province continued during the year, according to local reports. The government called at least one imam in for questioning after he had made anti-Shia remarks, according to Shia sources. Although less pervasive than previous years, there were reports from local groups that Sunni clerics, who received government stipends, used anti-Semitic, anti-Christian, and anti-Shia language in their sermons. Embassy and consulate officials reported that some preachers occasionally ended Friday sermons with a prayer for the well-being of Muslims and the humiliation of polytheism and polytheists.

The government continued its multi-year project to revise textbooks, curricula, and teaching methods to remove content disparaging religions other than Islam. Despite these efforts, however, intolerant material remained in textbooks, including directives to kill “sorcerers” and socially exclude infidels as well as accusations that Jews, Christians, Shia, and Sufis did not properly adhere to monotheism. The government indicated preliminary interest in consulting with the U.S. government on education in general, including textbook content.

The CPVPV continued to monitor social behavior and promote “morality.” For example, the CPVPV ruled in February that women would be prohibited from visiting hospitals without male guardians. The announcement followed a Council

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of Senior Scholars pronouncement indicating sharia did not permit male doctors to see female patients without a male guardian present.

CPVPV Chief Al al-Sheik announced the establishment of a human rights department to investigate public grievances against the CPVPV and hold officers accountable, according to news reports on December 14.

Mosques were the only public places of worship. The construction of churches, synagogues, or other non-Muslim places of worship was illegal. Certain Christian congregations, however, were able to conduct large Christian worship services discreetly and regularly without substantial interference from the CPVPV or other government authorities.

The government's stated policy was for its diplomatic and consular missions abroad to inform foreign workers applying for visas that they have the right to worship privately and to possess personal religious materials. The government also provided the name of the offices where grievances could be filed.

Thousands of government-supported Sunni mosques were prominently located in both large and small cities. All new Sunni mosques required the permission of the MOIA, the local municipality, and the provincial government, which was functionally part of the MOI. The MOIA supervised and financed the construction and maintenance of most Sunni mosques, including the hiring of clerical workers, while approximately 30 percent of Sunni mosques were at private residences or were built and endowed by private persons.

The government did not finance construction or maintenance of Shia mosques, and the process for obtaining a required government license for a Shia mosque remained unclear. Shia managed their own mosques, however, under the supervision of Shia scholars. Virtually all existing Shia mosques in the Eastern Province were unable to obtain official licenses to operate, leaving them with the threat of closure at any time. Shia outside of the Eastern Province were not allowed to build Shia-specific mosques. Shia mosques required government approval, Shia communities were required to receive permission from all of the neighbors to start construction on mosques and were not allowed to build as closely together as Sunni mosques. Reports indicated, however, that Ismailis in Najran Province did not face similar obstacles to building and renovating mosques. Shia mosques were generally required to recite the Sunni call to prayer, including in neighborhoods having both Sunni and Shia residents. In some predominantly

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Shia areas of al-Ahsa Governorate, however, Shia mosques were allowed to recite the Shia call to prayer as opposed to the Sunni call to prayer. Public commemorations of Ashura, a Shia religious holy day, and lesser Shia holidays were permitted in Qatif, in the Eastern Province, whose population is almost completely Shia. The same commemorations were required to be conducted in private, however, in al-Ahsa, an area in the Eastern Province with an almost equal proportion of Sunnis and Shia.

The government neither recognized nor financially supported several centers of Shia religious instruction located in the Eastern Province; it did not recognize certificates of educational attainment for their graduates or provide them employment, benefits which the government provided to Sunni religious training institutions.

Multiple reports from Shia groups cited discrimination in the judicial system as the catalyst for lengthy prison sentences handed down to Shia for engaging in political expression or organizing peaceful demonstrations. The government permitted Shia judges in the Eastern Province to use the Jafari School of Islamic jurisprudence to adjudicate cases in family law, inheritance, and endowment management. There were seven Shia judges, all government appointed, located in the Eastern Province cities of Qatif and al-Ahsa, where the majority of Shia live.

Shia experienced systemic government discrimination in hiring. Although Shia constituted approximately 10 to 15 percent of the total citizen population and approximately one-third to one-half of the Eastern Province's population, they were underrepresented in senior government positions. Shia were significantly underrepresented in national security-related positions, including the Ministry of Defense, the National Guard, and the MOI. In predominantly Shia areas, Shia representation was higher in the ranks of traffic police, municipalities, and public schools. A very small number of Shia occupied high-level positions in government-owned companies and government agencies. Shia were also underrepresented in hiring in primary, secondary, and higher education. Along with Sunni students, Shia students receive government scholarships to study in universities abroad under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program.

In June the king appointed the first Shia minister of state to the Council of Ministers. There were no Shia deputy ministers in the national government. There were no Shia governors, deputy governors, or ministry branch directors in the Eastern Province. Three of the 59 government-appointed municipal council

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members in the Eastern Province were Shia. Shia held six of 11 elected seats on Eastern Province municipal councils. An elected Shia headed the Qatif Municipal Council.

There were reports of Shia businessmen being forced to close their shops during all five prayer times in accordance with the country's official Sunni practices, despite Shia observance of only three of the five daily prayers that Sunnis observe.

The government continued to set policy aimed at enforcing Islamic norms, for example by threatening to expel foreigners who did not refrain from eating, drinking, or smoking in public during Ramadan and by prohibiting certain names for children deemed blasphemous. The CPVPV continued to enforce such norms, for example, by removing a cemetery in Al-Baha in March over concern about the use of headstones and prayer near graves, some of which reportedly were 3,000 years old.

According to government policy, non-Muslims were prohibited from being buried in the country. There was, however, at least one public, non-Islamic cemetery in the country. The only other known non-Muslim cemetery was private and only available to employees of the Saudi Arabian Oil Company (also known as Saudi ARAMCO). Diplomatic missions reported that most non-Muslims opted to repatriate their deceased to their home countries whenever financially possible.

The government did not legally permit non-Muslim clergy to enter the country for the purpose of conducting religious services. Entry restrictions in the country made it difficult for non-Muslims to maintain regular contact with resident lay clergy. This was particularly problematic for Catholics and Orthodox Christians, whose religious traditions require they receive sacraments from a priest on a regular basis. The government did not permit public religious training of non-Sunni religious leaders and clergy.

The government required noncitizen legal residents to carry an identity card containing a religious designation for "Muslim" or "non-Muslim." Some residency cards, including some issued during the year, indicated more specific religious designations such as "Christian."

The government reported that individuals who experience infringements on their ability to worship privately could address their grievances to the MOI, HRC, the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR, a quasi-autonomous NGO), and, when

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appropriate, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In practice, however, religious groups reported that those arrested during private worship services typically were charged with gender-mixing, playing music, or other infractions not explicitly related to religious observance. There were no reports of individuals contacting these or other governmental agencies for redress when their ability to worship privately was infringed.

On September 23, the emir (governor) of the Eastern Province participated in a national day celebration in the Shia enclave of Qatif. This was reportedly the first time a member of the royal family had gone to Qatif for the celebration since the holiday was established in 2005.

The government continued to combat “extremist” ideology by scrutinizing religious clerics and teachers closely and dismissing those found promoting views it deemed intolerant or extreme or advocating violence abroad, including in Syria and Iraq. The MOIA confirmed in December that a remotely controlled camera system would soon be installed in mosques around the country. The MOIA stated that the camera system would provide the government with the option of monitoring and investigating preachers for “irregularities in speeches” or sermons. MOIA Undersecretary for Mosques, Dr. Tawfiq Al-Sudairi, reported to media outlets, on December 15, that the MOIA used ministry inspectors, regional branch inspectors, field teams, citizen feedback, and media comments to monitor and address any violations of the ministry’s instructions and regulations in mosques. Special committees were responsible for following-up on preachers’ implementation of MOIA instructions and the extent of their commitment to achieve the stated goals of the Friday sermon.

Practices diverging from the official interpretation of Islam, such as public celebrations of Maulid al-Nabi (the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad) and visits to the tombs of renowned Muslims, were forbidden.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There was no formal policy concerning the hiring and promotion of Shia in the private sector, but some Shia stated that public universities and employers discriminated against them, occasionally by identifying an applicant for education or employment as Shia simply by inquiring about the applicant’s hometown. Many Shia reportedly stated that openly identifying themselves as Shia would negatively affect career advancement.

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Nakhawala Shia faced more discriminatory practices in comparison to the Twelvers in Eastern Province. Discrimination in employment and education was based on the Nakhawala surname “al-Nakhly,” which roughly translates as “farmers” and identifies their minority status and group.

Religious vigilantes and/or “volunteers” unaffiliated with the CPVPV sometimes harassed and assaulted citizens and foreigners. In Najran, a group of young men, known as religious vigilantes, used social media sites to warn women to wear veils and travel with a male guardian or risk being lashed with a stick. On May 12, the CPVPV branch in Najran denied any affiliation with the group.

Editorial cartoons exhibited anti-Semitism characterized by the use of stereotypical images of Jews along with Jewish symbols, particularly at times of heightened political tension with Israel. For example, during the summer conflict in Gaza, local newspapers often ran cartoons that depicted a blood-covered Star of David as well as yarmulke-wearing figures murdering Palestinian children. On at least two occasions, Saudi scholars participating as guests on Iqraa TV made anti-Semitic comments, one blaming Jews for 9/11 and another blaming “Jewish-owned” Western media for moral depravity throughout the world and destroying humanity.

A private university agreed to sponsor a visa for a visiting U.S. judge to speak to its law students. Approximately two weeks before the scheduled visit, however, a representative from the university informed the U.S. Consulate General in Dhahran that, despite months of planning, the university would not sponsor the visa because it had discovered the judge was Jewish.

Twitter remained a key forum for Saudis to discuss current events and religious issues, as public gatherings to discuss such matters were rare. According to an *Arab Social Media Report* survey in June, there were 2.4 million active Twitter users in the country. Domestic social media reaction to a September raid on a private Christian gathering in Khafji included many comments that expressed anger at the CPVPV for harassing Christians. Some users shared photos of Muslims praying in U.K. streets to demonstrate religious tolerance elsewhere. There were reports of social media users calling for prosecution of atheists. For instance, in April Twitter users in the country issued calls to find and punish the owner of an account purportedly owned by an atheist woman in Makkah that posted sacrilegious photos of a torn Quran.

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Saudis proselytizing overseas received some criticism by Saudi users of social media because of the restrictions on non-Muslim proselytizing in the country, although reaction to such efforts was generally positive. Social media users were supportive of two Saudi students' conversion of Americans to Islam. The two students, who were studying in the United States with financial support from the government, were praised for being role models abroad, noting that it is one of the many advantages of the government scholarship program. Some users expressed their objection and called for tolerating other religions. One user with more than 185,000 followers posted, "If he was [sic] an American who caused his Saudi female neighbor to convert to Christianity,... people [in Saudi Arabia would] call for applying the punishment of apostasy on her," inferring public calls for the death penalty against the convert.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy and consulate officials at all levels pressed the government to respect religious freedom, eliminate discrimination against religious minorities, and promote respect for non-Muslim religious belief. During the year, the embassy raised and discussed alleged violations of religious freedom, and inquired about the legal status of those detained, with officials from various government entities, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Human Rights Commission, and the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue. Embassy officials provided an overview to the government on the contents of the 2013 International Religious Freedom Report and facilitated meetings between religious freedom and civil society organizations and the government.

Embassy and consulate officials continued to meet with members of religious minorities, including Shia Muslims and citizens who no longer considered themselves Muslims, as well as with non-Muslim foreign residents to discuss religious freedom concerns.

Since 2004, Saudi Arabia has been designated a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. In connection with the Secretary of State's redesignation of Saudi Arabia as a CPC in August, the Secretary issued a waiver of sanctions "to further the purposes of the act."