

SAUDI ARABIA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2022, religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia remained poor despite some nominal improvements. The Saudi government continued to systematically deny non-Muslims the ability to build houses of worship or worship in public. 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 a Saudi interpretation of Shari'a as informed by Hanbali jurisprudence. Apostasy (including conversion away from Islam) and blasphemy are both crimes carrying the potential for a death sentence, though blasphemy is more often punished through prison sentences, fines, and lashings, and no executions on either charge have taken place in recent years.

Power in Saudi Arabia is highly centralized within the Al Saud ruling family. The ruling monarch, King Salman bin Abdel Aziz Al Saud, holds the title "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques." In September, King Salman bin Abdelaziz [appointed](#) his son Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as prime minister, further centralizing the family's power. Crown Prince Mohammed has systematically cracked down on both religious and political dissent despite overseeing economic reforms associated with Saudi Vision 2030. Saudi law is largely uncodified, but in 2022 the government made progress toward digital [procedures](#) for the law of evidence and a [written penal code](#), both of which could reduce the risk of arbitrary and inconsistent sentencing of religious dissidents and enhance accountability within the Saudi judicial system.

Shi'a Muslims also faced ongoing discrimination in housing, employment, and the judiciary, and they remained without access to senior positions in the government and military. The government continued to prosecute, jail, sentence, and execute Shi'a Muslims involved in protests in 2011 against discrimination on the basis of their religious identity. While some were released in 2022, many of those charged and [sentenced](#) were [minors](#) when they are alleged to have committed their crimes. In March, Saudi Arabia carried out its largest known mass execution, [killing](#) 81 people, including 41 Shi'a Muslims who participated in the 2011 protests. The head of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of

Vice [commented](#) on the executions, saying that "one of the most legitimate actions is to preserve religion . . . and one of the ways to achieve that is to eliminate violators and eradicate them."

The Saudi leadership's continued centralization of governance has sidelined the country's religious establishment but has not eliminated state-imposed religious interpretations that restrict freedom of religion or belief. The government took steps to increase its control of the judiciary by [arresting](#) sitting judges and appointing new ones, potentially impacting ongoing legal cases against religious minorities and dissenters. Beginning in the summer of 2022, Saudi courts began issuing [egregiously](#) long prison sentences against dissidents—including religious dissidents—who peacefully expressed their beliefs. Several detained prisoners of conscience had their sentences [extended](#) arbitrarily and for excessively long lengths of time. In April, the Saudi government made preparations to [deport](#) four Uyghur Muslims to China but delayed the deportation following international pressure.

Saudi women have benefited from recent legal reforms but continue to face restrictions on their religious freedom. The March 2022 Saudi [Personal Status Law](#) standardizes in writing laws that were previously subject to the discretion of Saudi officials and ensures certain protections for women's consent to marriage. At the same time, it codifies systematic religious freedom restrictions affecting women, [including](#) the male guardianship system and a legal prohibition on Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men. Saudi women who have protested the guardianship system began receiving appallingly long prison sentences in 2022. In August, the Saudi Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) [sentenced](#) Salma al-Shehab to 34 years in prison and an additional 34-year travel ban over her tweets [supporting](#) women activists advocating for guardianship system reform.

The Saudi government also continued to restrict the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) community's freedom of religion or belief. Same-sex relations are [punishable](#) by death based on the government's interpretation of religion, though the government has not executed anyone on these grounds in recent years.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Saudi Arabia as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation; and
- Explore legal options for penalizing U.S. companies complicit in the Saudi

government's religious freedom violations, including those enabling the electronic surveillance of the cellular phones, emails, social media accounts, and private messages of religious minorities and religious dissidents.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Hold public hearings to amplify congressional concerns over religious freedom violations in Saudi Arabia, including the

prolonged detention of religious prisoners of conscience, and work with like-minded parliamentarians in other countries to advocate for them and other prisoners of conscience to be released; and

- Convey publicly to the administration bipartisan concern over religious freedom violations in Saudi Arabia.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Saudi Arabia](#)

Background

Out of [34 million Saudis](#), 85–90 percent are Sunni Muslim and 10–15 percent are Shi'a Muslim. The United Nations (UN) estimates that 38 percent of the population are expatriates, including at least two million Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, practitioners of folk religions, and the unaffiliated. Non-Muslim citizens gather for religious purposes in private and often hide their identity to avoid harsh social and official consequences. The government has also been increasingly tolerant of practices with non-Muslim religious origins like [yoga](#), [Halloween costumes](#), and Christmas [decorations](#).

Muslim Dissidents

In 2022, the Saudi government released two Shi'a Muslims whose death sentences were [converted](#) to life sentences in 2021. Authorities released [Dawood al-Marhoon](#) in February and [Murtaja Qureiris](#) in June, both of whom were minors when they are alleged to have committed crimes. However, in July the SCC sentenced [Jalal al-Labbad](#) to death for his participation in 2011 protests despite being a minor at the time. In August, the court also upheld a death sentence against [Abdullah al-Derazi](#), who was a minor when he is alleged to have committed his crimes.

Saudi Arabia also continued to persecute dissident Sunni religious leaders and their families. Malik al-Dowaish, son of imprisoned Sunni religious scholar [Suleiman al-Dowaish](#), was [arrested](#) in July after calling for his father's release. In February, the Court of Appeal [upheld](#) a two-year prison sentence against Malik's brother Abdulrahman. Malik and his other brother Abdulwahhab (arrested in August 2021) were [released](#) in September, but Malik was [rearrested](#) later that month. Suleiman al-Dowaish was arrested in 2016 following tweets about a religious sermon he gave in Mecca. Sheikh [Salman al-Ouda](#), arrested in 2017 over his religious beliefs, continues to be detained despite reports in 2021 of his deteriorating health. There are similar health [concerns](#) for [Mohammad Hassan al-Habib](#), [arrested](#) in July 2016 over the content of his sermons. In October, the SCC again [postponed](#) a court hearing for religious scholar [Hassan Farhan al-Maliki](#), arrested in 2017 and charged with calling into question the fundamentals of Islam, among other charges.

Non-Muslim Religious Minorities

Saudi textbooks reflect [some](#) improvement regarding the portrayal of non-Muslims, but they still teach that Jewish and Christian holy books were "corrupted" and "distorted" in their interpretation and compare Jews to "donkeys carrying books." During a sermon at the Grand Mosque in Mecca in July, Imam Saleh bin al-Humaid [called](#) for bringing "annihilation upon the plundering and occupying Jews."

During the Muslim World League's [Forum](#) on Common Values among Religious Followers, held in May, non-Saudi leaders from the

Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities came to Saudi Arabia to discuss religious issues, though not issues related to religious freedom in Saudi Arabia itself.

Women and LGBTQI+ People and Religious Freedom

In September, the Public Prosecution and the governor of the Asir region [opened](#) an [investigation](#) into a violent August [raid](#) by security forces on a "social education house" (*Dar al-Reaya*) for women and girls in Khamis Mushait. Women and girls can be sent to social education houses for religiously grounded violations, including [disobedience](#) (*'uquq*) and [running away](#) (*taghayyub*) from a male guardian's home. During the raid, reportedly in response to protests over the mistreatment of residents at the facility, Saudi security officials [assaulted](#) women and girls living at the facility, whipped them with belts and sticks, and dragged them by their hair. During the year, the government continued to detain activists who protested the guardianship system and those who expressed support for them on social media.

Saudi Arabia has jailed members of the LGBTQI+ community on religious grounds and has [arrested](#) LGBTQI+ social media [influencers](#) on the basis that their content could "negatively impact public morality." Saudi textbooks, while reflecting considerable improvement in other areas, continue to use religion as a basis to [claim](#) that fluid gender identity is "among the greatest of sins" that "make one deserving of a curse" and that dressing in the manner of a different gender will be "cursed with expulsion and banishment from the mercy of Allah Almighty."

Key U.S. Policy

The Joseph R. Biden administration has expressed concern over religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia but has imposed limited tangible consequences in [light](#) of [security](#) and [economic](#) interests exacerbated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In April, President Biden [nominated](#) Michael Ratney as U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, but Ratney was not confirmed by the end of the reporting period. He was [renominated](#) in January 2023. In July, President Biden visited Saudi Arabia and [met](#) with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, where he "underscored" human rights concerns.

U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism Deborah E. Lipstadt made her first official overseas [trip](#) to Saudi Arabia in July to discuss antisemitism with Saudi officials. She indicated an openness to hosting a [discussion](#) on "Judeo-Arabic issues" in Saudi Arabia in the future.

On November 30, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) Saudi Arabia as a CPC under IRFA but reimposed the longstanding waiver on taking any presidential action as a consequence of the designation.