



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: SAUDI ARABIA

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To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

Religious Freedom Conditions in Saudi Arabia

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Overview

In 2022, the government of Saudi Arabia has continued to systematically restrict freedom of religion or belief. Shi'a Muslims who participated in protests against religious discrimination over a decade ago remain tied up in legal battles or imprisoned. Many Shi'a Muslims facing execution as a result of this participation were minors when they allegedly committed their offenses. Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and other non-Muslim communities are prohibited from building houses of worship or manifesting their beliefs in public in Saudi Arabia. In August, an imam at the Grand Mosque in Mecca [called](#) for God to "bring annihilation on the plundering and occupying Jews." Saudi Arabia has recently begun issuing egregiously long sentences against those who dissent from its singular interpretation of Sunni Islam. The Saudi government also [detained](#) Uyghur Muslims who, if deported to China, face grave risk to their well-being. Women, while demonstrably enjoying more rights than in recent years, continue to face systematic restrictions because of the religiously grounded male guardianship system. In light of the religious freedom conditions, the State Department [announced in December 2022](#) that it had redesignated Saudi Arabia as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for its particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

This country update provides an overview of religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia in 2022. It discusses shifts in Saudi government control over religious matters, highlights concerning new trends of persecution of religious dissidents, outlines conditions for religious minorities and members of other vulnerable groups, and highlights U.S. engagement related to religious freedom.

Consolidation of Ruling Family Control

As USCIRF has previously [reported](#), the Saudi leadership continues to centralize control of governance. This process has sidelined the country's religious establishment and reconfigured the Saudi national narrative in ways that diminish (but do not eliminate) the role of religion. In February, Saudi Arabia [celebrated](#) its first "Founding Day," marking the day Mohammed bin Saud [gained control](#) of the town of Diriyah in 1727, rather than the anniversary of the 1744 alliance between Saud and the religious figure Mohammed Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. This change symbolized ongoing shifts in power from the Saudi religious establishment to the ruling family.



In September, King Salman [appointed](#) his son Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) as prime minister. The Saudi leadership has also purged judges it sees as threatening from the Ministry of Justice. In April, security forces [arrested](#) nine prominent judges at their places of work, including some involved in religious freedom cases, on charges including “high treason” which carry a death sentence. In June, a royal decree [appointed](#) prosecutors and detectives aligned with the Crown Prince to the Saudi Specialized Criminal Court (SCC), which hears many cases against religious dissenters. In November, a second royal decree appointed and promoted 161 additional [judges](#) in the Ministry of Justice. Amidst this power consolidation, the Saudi leadership has taken important initial steps to reform male guardianship laws and standardize punishments rooted in religious justifications. Experts also assess that Saudi Arabia has undertaken significant efforts to remove many intolerant passages from official textbooks. Additionally, the government has initiated teacher trainings to ensure that these changes are communicated in classroom settings. In May 2022, prior to hosting the Muslim World League’s “Common Values Among Religious Followers” conference, Saudi Arabia released the four remaining detained members of the Bohra Shi’a community who were arrested in 2017. The government has also relaxed some social prohibitions rooted in its interpretation of religion. It plans to [allow](#) alcohol sales in the future city of NEOM despite a religiously-grounded prohibition in the rest of the country. The government also plans to introduce [yoga](#) (banned in the past as a Hindu religious practice) in universities and permitted a yoga [festival](#) in

Jeddah in January 2022. Whereas in the past Halloween celebrations were not permitted, the government [allowed](#) a costume [event](#) at a Riyadh shopping complex in 2022. While such changes do not necessarily advance religious freedom, they reflect shifts in how the government uses the enforcement of its interpretation of religion as a policy tool.

Egregious Mistreatment of Religious Dissidents

Saudi Arabia continues to treat freedom of religion as a privilege granted by the state rather than a right guaranteed under international law. To that end, the systematic repression of peaceful religious dissent not only runs afoul of Article 18 of the United Nations [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) but also undercuts the Saudi narrative of progress toward being a global cosmopolitan hub of business and tourism. These initiatives are a driving force in Saudi domestic and foreign policy, including its relationship with the United States.

In 2022, the government escalated its punishment of individuals who dissented peacefully from its official religious interpretations, including United States citizens. The government re-tried religious dissidents approaching the ends of their sentences, and began issuing [egregiously](#) long sentences—decades in some cases—against religious dissidents for peaceful expression of their views. In October 2022, the Court of Appeal [increased](#) the sentence of [Sheikh Abdul Majeed al-Arkani](#) to 10 years, just as it was nearing completion. Al-Arkani was imprisoned in 2020 after he [communicated](#) with a senior member of the

Turkish AK Party. Also in October, the SCC [sentenced](#) Sheikh Abdullah Basfar to 12 years in prison following his 2020 arrest over a video of him [leading](#) prayers at the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul at a time of strained Saudi-Turkish relations. In November 2022, the Court of Appeal [added](#) 17 years to the sentence of [Sheikh Khaled al-Rashed](#), arrested in [2006](#) after [calling](#) for protests against cartoons in a Danish magazine depicting the Prophet. Abdulrahman al-Sadhan, whose mother and sister are U.S. citizens, [continues](#) serving a 20-year sentence for parodying religious figures on Twitter. The SCC sentenced him in 2021 on charges of “preparing, storing and sending material prejudicial to public order and religious values.” In September 2022 the United Nations (UN) Working Group on Arbitrary Detention [declared](#) that al-Sadhan’s detention was arbitrary and called for his immediate release.

Blogger [Raif Badawi](#) and poet [Ashraf Fayadh](#) were released from prison in 2022 following the completion of their sentences on charges related to their religious beliefs. Fayadh was held for [months](#) after his eight-year sentence on apostasy charges ended in 2021. Badawi remains under a [travel](#) and media ban following the completion of his 10-year sentence for insulting Islam and allegedly violating Saudi Arabia’s cybercrime law. The Saudi government continues to deny Badawi the ability to settle with his family in Canada after over a decade of unjust detention.

Shi’a Muslims

Shi’a Muslims comprise [10–12](#) percent of the Saudi population, many of whom live in the country’s Eastern Province. Shi’a Muslims in Saudi Arabia face discrimination in education, employment, and the judiciary, and they lack access to senior positions in the government and military. However, Shi’a Muslims were [permitted](#) to hold public Ashura commemorations in Qatif in 2022 in cooperation with Saudi authorities. While Saudi textbooks have [removed](#) certain egregious passages about “polytheists,” a derogatory term used often to refer to Shi’a Muslims who make pilgrimages to the graves of influential religious figures, they still say that “polytheism is the greatest sin.”

Saudi Arabia continues to prosecute Shi’a Muslims, including minors, who protested in 2011 against discrimination on the basis of their religious identity. Members of the Shi’a community [demanded](#) political and economic equality and greater freedom from the Saudi government. In March 2022, the Saudi government conducted the largest mass [execution](#) in the

country’s history, putting 81 people to death, including 41 Shi’a Muslims on charges [including](#) “deviant beliefs.” At least two Shi’a Muslims were executed based on their participation in the 2011 protests. Defending the executions on the official al-Ekhbaria television channel in March 2022, the head of the Saudi Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice [said](#) that the best way to ensure “preservation of religion, lives, and funds” is to “implement the provisions of Shari’a against [violators] and rid the people and the country of their evil.” Following international pressure, Saudi Arabia released some Shi’a prisoners, including those arrested for crimes allegedly committed as minors. In June, Saudi Arabia released [Murtaja Qureiris](#), who had reportedly been facing a death sentence related to participation in the 2011 protests at the age of 10.

Death sentences and executions of Shi’a Muslims in Saudi Arabia extend to other defendants who were minors when they are alleged to have committed crimes. In July, the SCC [sentenced](#) a Shi’a man, Jalal al-Labbad, to death on charges including “participation in demonstrations.” The appeals branch of the SCC upheld the sentence in October 2022. Labbad, born in [1995](#), was a minor when he allegedly committed these crimes. In August, the same court upheld a death sentence against [Abdullah al-Derazi](#), sentenced over his participation in 2011 protests, during which he also was a minor.

In October, Saudi Arabia’s Court of Appeal [increased](#) the sentence of Shi’a activist [Israa al-Ghomgham](#) from eight to 13 years in prison. Al-Ghomgham and her husband Moussa al-Hashim were arrested in 2015 for their activism against the mistreatment of Shi’a in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province.

Sunni Dissident Scholars

Sunni religious scholars and their family members who criticize the government or disagree with its religious interpretations continue to face imprisonment. Malik al-Dowaish, son of imprisoned Sunni religious scholar [Suleiman al-Dowaish](#), was [arrested](#) in July 2022 after calling for his father’s release. One of his brothers, Abdulwahhab, was [arrested](#) in August 2021 and sentenced by the SCC to 3.5 years in prison with an 18-month suspension, followed by a travel ban. His other brother, Abdulrahman, was sentenced to two years in prison, a verdict [upheld](#) in February 2022 by the Court of Appeal. Malik and Abdulwahhab were [released](#) in September 2022, but Malik was [re-arrested](#) later that month. Suleiman al-Dowaish was last [seen](#) in a detention cell in July 2018. He 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 2022, 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, seeking to destabilize the social fabric and national harmony, and several other crimes.

Non-Muslim Religious Minorities

Public worship continued to be prohibited for non-Muslim religious minorities in Saudi Arabia. However, these communities were reportedly subjected to less harassment by security officials than in years past. Expatriates comprise more than 30 percent of the Saudi population and [represent](#) Buddhist, Hindu, and Sikh religious communities. A Christian community leader in the Gulf expressed [optimism](#) that current restrictions on public Christian worship in Saudi Arabia may be “reviewed and eased.” In June, the Muslim World League [hosted](#) a delegation of 13 American Jewish leaders who were afforded space for Jewish prayer as well as kosher food.

Women’s Right to Religious Freedom

The Saudi government has made meaningful initial reforms of the religiously-based male guardianship system but has not yet addressed its underlying structural, religiously justified elements that position women as legal minors for life. Saudi textbooks use religious texts to [teach](#) students that “Shari’a has given men guardianship over women in what is right,” and warns that “women who are lenient with their veil” invite “men to be seduced by them.” They teach that women “cannot be appointed as judges” and that a woman ruler “will never be successful.” Wives are expected to “obey the husband and not go against his wishes.”

Saudi Arabia has also continued to crack down on women calling for greater freedom from religiously grounded restrictions on their rights. In August 2022, the SCC [sentenced](#) Salma al-Shehab to 34 years in prison and a 34-year travel ban over tweets [supporting](#) women activists advocating for greater freedom, including reforms to the guardianship system. The State Department [raised](#) “significant concerns with Saudi authorities” over the decades-long sentence. In October,

the SCC retried [Mohammad al-Rabiah](#) despite having already completed his six-month sentence following his activism in support of women’s religious freedom. In December, he [received](#) a 17-year sentence. Authorities arrested al-Rabiah in 2018 for his activism against the male guardianship system, and he was reportedly subjected to [beatings](#), electric shock, waterboarding, and upside down suspension by his feet in prison.

In September 2022, the Saudi Public Prosecution [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. During the raid, reportedly in response to protests over mistreatment in 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. Women and girls can be sent to social education houses for [disobedience](#) and [running away](#) from a guardian’s home, in which case a male guardian can file a claim with the state to have his ward returned through the use of state resources. Moral indecency (e.g., extramarital relations) is also a reason women can be sent to a social education house. Women can remain in these facilities at the request of a guardian and without their consent, regardless of whether the guardian is abusive or has the woman’s best interests in mind. Women in social education houses have [committed](#) suicide over treatment including [strip searching](#), beatings, and solitary confinement. They are also reportedly denied proper hygiene and medical care.

LGBTQI+ Saudis’ Right to Religious Freedom

Saudi Arabia uses its official interpretation of religion to deny lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) people freedom of religion or belief. Same sex relations are [punishable](#) by death in Saudi Arabia, though the government has not sought this punishment in recent years. Saudi Arabia has, however, jailed those who have [expressed](#) support for the LGBTQI+ community on religious grounds.

In June, police [arrested](#) TikTok creator Tala Safwan, who has 4.9 million [followers](#), for posting suggestive content toward another woman on the grounds that it could “negatively impact public morality.” That same month, Saudi officials removed colorful toys, pencil cases, backpacks, crayons, and clothes from shops in Riyadh. [According](#) to a Ministry of Commerce official, these items “violate the rules of Islam and public morals like promoting homosexuality colors.” In October, Saudi Arabia released gay Twitter influencer Suhail al-Jameel

from prison after three years. Police reportedly [arrested](#) Jameel on cybercrimes charges and on charges of posting nudity after he tweeted a suggestive picture of himself wearing a pair of shorts.

The Saudi government also [banned](#) several movies released in 2022 for depicting LGBTQI+ characters. In September, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries issued a statement demanding the streaming service Netflix [remove](#) content that “violates Islamic and societal values and principles” related to programming depicting a same-sex kiss.

The government also perpetuates intolerance of LGBTQI+ people on the basis of its interpretation of religion in official textbooks. Saudi textbooks for Islamic Studies classes [teach](#) that men and women imitating each other in terms of “speech, movement, dress, voice, or appearance” 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.” A textbook from 2021 used harsher language than 2020, calling cross-dressing not merely “an abominable prohibited manner,” but rather “one of the major sins.”

U.S. Engagement

The United States government has expressed concern regarding Saudi Arabia’s religious freedom violations in 2022 but has imposed limited tangible consequences in [light](#) of [security](#) and [economic](#) interests, exacerbated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In April 2022, the Joseph R. Biden administration [nominated](#) Michael R. Ratney to be U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia. However, the Senate has not yet held a confirmation hearing for the nomination. During his July 2022 meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, President Biden [raised](#) “specific cases of concern” related to Saudi Arabia’s [human rights](#) and committed to engage in “regular and direct dialogue” with Saudi Arabia on human rights issues, including freedom of religion or belief.

U.S. Special Envoy to Combat and Monitor Antisemitism Deborah Lipstadt made her first official overseas trip to Saudi Arabia in July 2022 to [discuss](#) antisemitism with Saudi officials. She indicated a Saudi openness to hosting a [discussion](#) on “Judeo-Arabic issues” and the history of Jews in Saudi Arabia in the future.

Conclusion

Reforms to the male guardianship system and removal of some religiously intolerant passages in textbooks constitute meaningful changes toward greater religious freedom in Saudi Arabia. Both of these changes are the result of sustained pressure by the United States and like-minded countries. In continuing to pursue a strong bilateral U.S.-Saudi relationship, the U.S. government should continue to publicly and privately express to Saudi government officials its great concern over Saudi Arabia’s particularly severe religious freedom violations. Such restrictions impede Saudi progress toward its goal of becoming a regional economic hub and raise the cost of public U.S. government engagement with Saudi Arabia.

The ongoing repression of religious minorities risks domestic instability with international implications at a critical time for Saudi economic development. Egregiously long sentences, media bans, and travel restrictions exacerbate religious freedom concerns and stand in the way of the Saudi leadership’s ambitious plans to take the country into the future. In June 2022, the chairs of six committees of the U.S. House of Representatives sent a [letter](#) to President Joseph R. Biden expressing concern for the well-being of several religious prisoners of conscience, including including [Mohammed al-Rabiah](#), [Abdulrahman al-Sadhan](#), [Raif Badawi](#), [Loujain al-Hathloul](#), and [Aziza Youssef](#), and two dual Saudi-U.S. citizens who supported protests against guardianship, [Saleh al-Haidar](#) and [Bader Ibrahim](#). The U.S. government should continue to convey these concerns frankly and push for reforms that substantially open opportunities for greater freedom of religion or belief in Saudi Arabia.



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