

SAUDI ARABIA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia remained poor, despite some recent improvements. At the Organization of Islamic Cooperation's 14th summit in May, Muslim clerics from 139 countries convened by the Muslim World League signed the [Mecca Declaration](#), which rejects extremism and religious intolerance. The Saudi government lifted several religious restrictions on women's rights and passed a parliamentary bill [restricting](#) child marriages. However, it continued to engage in other systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. The government prohibits public practice of any religion other than Islam, and no houses of worship other than mosques are allowed in the kingdom. Non-Muslims who gather in private houses are subject to surveillance and Saudi security services may break up their private worship services. Saudi Arabia continued to advance the economic changes of [Saudi Vision 2030](#) under King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. However, the government's tolerance remained low for those who chose not to accept its state-endorsed version of Hanbali Sunni Islam. In December 2019, police [arrested 120 people](#) for offending public morals, including by wearing "inappropriate clothes." The government also arrested or persecuted several Muslim clerics from the dissident Sahwa movement in 2019. One of these sheikhs, Fahd al-Qadi, [died](#) in December following alleged [medical neglect](#) in prison. The Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) continued to operate with a limited mandate, as CPVPV President Sheikh Abdullah al-Sanad [assured](#) USCIRF it would during a September 2018 meeting. Nonetheless, comedian Yaser Baker was [detained briefly](#) by police in February after making [jokes](#) about the CPVPV during a standup comedy act.

Shi'a Muslims in Saudi Arabia continue to face discrimination in education, employment, and the judiciary, and lack access to

senior government and military positions. 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 *housseiniyas* (prayer halls). Saudi Arabia also restricts the establishment of Shi'a Muslim cemeteries. In 2019, government authorities conducted a mass [execution](#) of 37 Shi'a Muslim protesters, including some who were minors at the time of their alleged crimes.

The kingdom continues to impose the religious guardianship system on Saudi women, regardless of their individual beliefs. In August 2019, it amended its laws to [allow](#) women to obtain passports and travel without a guardian's permission; to register births, marriages, and divorces; to be issued official family documents; and to serve as guardians to minors. However, it continues to enforce the religious prohibitions on parental disobedience (*'uquq*) and absence from the home (*taghayyub*), significantly limiting women's autonomy on religious grounds. Saudi Arabia has used egregious violence against women like Loujain al-Hathloul for peacefully asserting their right to be free of these religious restrictions. In several instances in 2019, the government [used state resources internationally](#) to try to use force to repatriate women fleeing the guardianship system. Domestically and on social media, the Saudi government repeatedly characterized feminism as a form of radical extremism, comparing women who espouse it to members of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In one egregious [case](#), the Saudi Human Rights Commission [issued a statement](#) clarifying that "feminism is not criminalized in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia."

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Saudi Arabia as a "country of particular concern" (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.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Press the administration to determine whether Saudi officials responsible for the detention and mistreatment of religious prisoners of conscience are subject to sanctions or visa bans under the Global Magnitsky Act;
- Hold public hearings in order to pressure Saudi Arabia to release prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia, including

Raif Badawi and his counsel Waleed Abu al-Khair, and work with like-minded parliamentarians in other countries to advocate for their release; and

- Pass the bipartisan [Saudi Educational Transparency and Reform Act](#), which requires the U.S. Department of State to report annually on religious intolerance in Saudi textbooks and efforts to remove this content.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Saudi Arabia in 2019](#)
- **Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** four prisoners from Saudi Arabia added

Background

Saudi Arabia is officially an Islamic state. There are more than 33 million Saudis, [85–90 percent](#) of whom are Sunni Muslims and 10–15 percent of whom are Shi'a Muslims. The United Nations (UN) estimates that 37 percent of the Saudi population are expatriates, including at least two million non-Muslims, including Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, practitioners of folk religions, and the unaffiliated. Some Saudi citizens identify as non-Muslim or atheist, but hide this identity to avoid the harsh social and official consequences of leaving Islam. 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, which imposes capital punishment for apostasy, identification with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community, and peaceful political dissent, among other activities. The ruling monarch holds the title "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques." Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has overseen the Saudi Vision 2030 economic reform program while also cracking down on religious and political dissent.

Mistreatment of Religious Minorities

In April 2019, Saudi Arabia [executed](#) 37 people, [32 of whom](#) were Shi'a Muslims, on charges [including](#) "provoking sectarian strife," "spreading chaos," and "disturbing security." Those beheaded [included](#) prominent Shi'a Muslim cleric Sheikh Mohammed al-Atiya, who was charged with attempting to "spread the Shi'a confession," and Abdulkareem al-Hawaj, a Shi'a Muslim arrested after participating in a protest at the age of 16. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet [condemned](#) the killings.

Christians in Saudi Arabia cannot practice their religion freely without fear. Expatriate Christian communities face government surveillance and occasional raiding of their worship services by the Saudi security apparatus. Saudi Muslim converts to Christianity cannot identify as such without facing severe repercussions from Saudi authorities, including the CPVPV. While these severe violations continued in 2019, the King Faisal Center in Riyadh [displayed](#) a first edition King James Bible, and the government allowed a group of Evangelical Christian leaders to [visit](#) several significant Christian and Jewish sites.

Religious Incitement in Textbooks

For more than 15 years, USCIRF has [documented](#) the Saudi government's failure to address intolerant content in official textbooks sufficiently. Despite progress in recent years, [Saudi textbooks](#) have seen some backsliding regarding language inciting hatred and violence toward non-Muslims. While the 2019–2020 textbooks showed marginal improvements in the discussion of Christians, textbooks [still teach](#) that Christians and Jews "are the enemy of Islam and its people," and that members of the LGBTI community will "be struck [killed] in the same manner as those in Sodom." An unknown number of old textbooks with even stronger intolerant passages reportedly remain in circulation both within Saudi Arabia and at Saudi-funded schools abroad.

Religious Prisoners of Conscience

Raif Badawi, a [USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience](#), is among Saudi Arabia's highest-profile prisoners of conscience. Badawi, the founder and editor of the website Free Saudi Liberals, has been in prison since 2012 for "insulting Islam through electronic channels." A 2015 court ruling upheld his sentence of 10 years, 1,000 lashes, and a fine of one million Saudi riyals (\$266,000). In September 2019, Badawi was [denied](#) access to books and crucial medicine, and declared a hunger strike in protest. His lawyer, Waleed Abu al-Khair, is also in prison and began a [hunger strike](#) in early 2020 after being moved into solitary confinement and denied access to books. Both were hospitalized multiple times. In early 2020, al-Khair was moved out of solitary confinement.

Palestinian poet Ashraf Fayadh remains in prison for allegedly questioning religion through his poetry and for spreading atheist thought during an argument at a coffee shop in 2013. In November 2015, Fayadh was sentenced to death for apostasy, but in February 2016 the sentence was reduced to eight years, 800 lashes, and a renunciation of his poetry on Saudi state media.

Sheikh Mohammed Habib was arrested in 2016 after [delivering sermons](#) critical of the government and in support of his close associate, Shi'a Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, whom Saudi Arabia executed in 2016. Sheikh Habib was [sentenced](#) to a total of 12 years in prison with a subsequent five-year travel ban.

Key U.S. Policy

In February, the White House declined to respond to a [request](#) from Congress under the Global Magnitsky Act to determine whether Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bore responsibility for the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Saudi Arabia has continued to support U.S. policy in the Middle East, including cooperation on counterterrorism initiatives and the administration's maximum pressure strategy toward Iran. Following a September 2019 attack on Saudi oil facilities likely conducted by Iran, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo [visited](#) Saudi Arabia to emphasize that it had U.S. support. In October, Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper [announced](#) the deployment of two additional squadrons to Saudi Arabia. Despite this tightening of relations, in July 2019, at the State Department's second [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#), Vice President Michael R. Pence [called on Saudi Arabia](#) to release Badawi. In January, Representatives Joe Wilson (R-SC) and William Keating (D-MA) reintroduced the bipartisan Saudi Educational Transparency and Reform Act of 2019 ([H.R.554](#)) while Senators Marco Rubio (R-FL), Ron Wyden (D-OR), and Edward Markey (D-MA) introduced a bipartisan companion bill ([S.R.357](#)). The bills would require the State Department to issue an annual report on religious intolerance in Saudi textbooks. On December 18, the State Department [redesignated](#) Saudi Arabia as a CPC under IRFA, but again issued a waiver on imposing any related sanctions on the country "as required in the 'important national interest of the United States.'"

INDIVIDUAL VIEWS OF COMMISSIONER JOHNNIE MOORE

While objectively—and, obviously—still a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, Saudi Arabia continues to reform in ways that are remarkable and transformative and the Kingdom’s progress must be measured against its past. I believe the international community should continue to positively reinforce these historic reforms. While it remains incomplete, the progress is undeniable. Therefore, I continue to support the State Department’s decision to maintain its waver for Saudi Arabia. Punitive measures will not speed the effect of change; rather it would complicate it, and likely, slow it. A strong relationship with the United States—contra malign actors—will likely accelerate change. It is now clear that change is possible and it must continue and it must accelerate.