



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: SAUDI ARABIA

August 2024

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USCIRF's Mission

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

By Hilary Miller, Policy Analyst

Assessing Religious Freedom in Saudi Arabia in the Context of Vision 2030

Introduction

Since 2016, the government of Saudi Arabia has been reforming some of its restrictions on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). These reforms have been gradual and will require sustained momentum before the country meets its minimal obligations under international human rights law. As it stands, the government continues to implement particularly severe restrictions on FoRB and imposes harsh penalties upon individuals who deviate from the state's singular interpretation of Sunni Islam. Religious minorities and women are often the primary targets of these FoRB violations.

This country update provides an overview of current religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia. A USCIRF delegation traveled to the country in March 2024 and met with various Saudi civil society and government interlocutors. This report addresses key issues that emerged in discussions during the trip, such as the changing role of religion and national identity; systematic barriers to religious freedom in the judicial system; curriculum reform; the Saudi legal apparatus; and the targeting of religious minorities, women, and other vulnerable groups on the basis of religion.

"Saudi Vision 2030" and the Consolidation of Saudi National Identity

Under the [Saudi Vision 2030](#) plan, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) seeks to transform Saudi Arabia into a global center for trade, economic development, and tourism. As part of a broader set of reforms that include Vision 2030, Saudi leadership has granted certain civil, social, and political rights to the country's largely young and globally connected population. In recent years, the Saudi ruling family has sought to consolidate a Saudi national identity that, while still heavily rooted in religion, also emphasizes a common heritage and social identity. The intent of these changes is to create a Saudi national identity that is cosmopolitan and modern while also respecting the historically conservative and religious nature of the country. One example of this initiative has been the creation of nonreligious public holidays such as Flag Day and National Day, symbolizing an ongoing shift in power from the Saudi religious establishment to the ruling family.



In recent years, the Saudi government has continued to support [religious tolerance](#) and interfaith relations. The state-funded Muslim World League (MWL) has undertaken various initiatives, such as organizing [global conferences](#), to promote interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance. These activities are useful initial steps toward fostering the right for freedom of religion or belief.

Systematic Barriers to Religious Freedom

Discrimination against Shi'a Muslims

The institutional strongholds of Shi'a religious life in Saudi Arabia are based in the Eastern Province, specifically in the Qatif region, which has the highest concentration of Shi'a in the country. Qatif and Hasa are the only two cities in Saudi Arabia with Shi'a mosques. In recent years, some conditions for Shi'a in the Eastern Province have improved. Whereas in the past Saudi authorities often confronted Shi'a at checkpoints, they now travel with greater ease and with less fear of targeting. MBS's appointment of a Shi'a Muslim to be the chief executive officer of the new city of NEOM three years ago reportedly increased Shi'a approval and favorability toward the Crown Prince. For the Shi'a religious observance of Ashura, the government in recent years has provided security to protect against potential terrorist attacks, particularly by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Furthermore, despite historically lacking equitable access to government services, Shi'a women can now access 36 programs offered by the Saudi Ministry of Social Development. The ministry also recently opened a branch in Qatif, which allows improved Shi'a access to these services.

Despite these improvements, discrimination against Shi'a remains systematic and ongoing. Shi'a have limited representation in the Saudi judicial system. Shi'a mosques do not exist outside of the Eastern Province, relegating Shi'a religious life to only one part of the country. The government, however, has approved more Shi'a *husseiniyas* (congregation halls for Shi'a commemoration ceremonies) in recent years. Government surveillance of Shi'a worship remains pervasive. The Ja'afri Endowment, which is under the Saudi Ministry of Justice, oversees the work of Shi'a imams. Inter-marriage between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims is limited; it requires government approval and can be annulled by a judge on the grounds of "unbalanced ancestral blood."

In January 2024, Saudi authorities [detained](#) 12 soccer fans for performing a Shi'a religious folklore chant commemorating the birth of Imam Ali. The fans were among a group of 150 individuals summoned for questioning after a video circulated online of Al Safa Football Club supporters performing the chant. Court documents indicate that authorities charged the fans under Article 6 of the 2007 Anti-Cybercrime Law, which prohibits the "production, preparation, transmission, or storage of material impinging on public order, religious values, public morals and privacy, through the information network or computers."

Restrictions on Non-Muslim Minorities

Governance in the Kingdom is based on the Saudi government's interpretation of Islamic Shari'a. According to the 1992 Saudi Basic Law of Governance, the constitution is the Qur'an and the sunna (traditions

of the Prophet). The public practice of non-Muslim religions is forbidden in Saudi Arabia, although the government does permit private religious worship under strict conditions. To gather collectively, religious leaders must adhere to a strict protocol in cooperation with the government, which often includes notifying authorities about the time and place of worship ceremonies, not posting on social media, and using only worship materials approved by authorities. State security officials have at times confiscated worship materials, often with little consistency related to their content. Additionally, since there is no legal pathway for non-Muslim religious communities to register as organized groups, they cannot have formally authorized bank accounts. This restriction puts them at risk of prosecution for violating finance laws, including those related to money laundering. Nevertheless, Christians of various denominations report they can hold private worship services without interference from the government. In addition, MBS invited the leader of the Coptic Church to lead Mass in Saudi Arabia in both 2018 and 2023.

In October 2023, prior to the October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel, the government permitted an Israeli delegation to hold *Sukkot* services in a Riyadh hotel. The annual Riyadh Book Fair in September and October 2023 included the display of a 16th century Torah. Furthermore, as opposed to previous years, some stores now sell religious holiday decorations for Christmas and Easter, and some supermarkets in Riyadh also now sell Easter eggs and Advent calendars.

However, during USCIRF's March 2024 visit to the Diriyah United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site in Riyadh, authorities requested that then USCIRF Chair Rabbi Abraham Cooper remove his religious head covering (kippah), citing a policy against non-Muslim religious clothing at the site. When he respectfully declined the [request](#), officials required the USCIRF delegation and U.S. embassy officials to leave the site. This incident starkly illustrates that despite some progress on some issues for non-Muslim minorities, the gap between Saudi policy and international legal protections [guaranteeing](#) freedom of religion or belief persists.

Male Guardianship

Saudi Arabia's male guardianship system, which is explicitly [based](#) on religious concepts, relegates women to the status of legal minors for life. Saudi women continue to face [discrimination](#) related to marriage, divorce, child

custody, and inheritance. Guardianship laws designate the father as a child's primary legal guardian on religious grounds without due consideration of the child's best interest. In recent years, U.S. citizens have been affected by these provisions. For example, Carly Morris has been embroiled in a legal dispute with her ex-husband for custody of her daughter and subjected to spurious religiously grounded [charges](#) of "renouncing Islam," "hate speech against Islam," and "crimes of immorality" based on unsubstantiated allegations from her ex-husband's family.

The Saudi government has rolled back some aspects of the male guardianship system, though its core tenets remain in place. During its March 2024 trip to Saudi Arabia, USCIRF observed that dress standards for women, at least in certain urban areas, are more relaxed than in years prior. Men and women are also more able to interact with one another in public spaces. In addition, women in Saudi Arabia are represented in the workforce to a greater extent than in years past, including as senior advisors in government ministries.

During USCIRF's visit, the delegation observed women driving without a male guardian in metropolitan areas. However, many activists who advocated for now-implemented changes to these laws have been [imprisoned](#) and—in some cases—subjected to harassment, torture, sexual assault, and abuse in prison. Loujain al-Hathloul, a prominent activist against the religious guardianship system and religious restrictions on women driving, [remains](#) unable to leave Saudi Arabia despite her travel ban expiring in 2023.

Intolerant Religious Content in Textbooks

Over the last two decades, the Saudi government has been engaged in a slow process of [textbook reform](#) to remove intolerant and inflammatory content on religious subjects. A May 2024 [study](#) of Saudi textbooks reported "further progress and improvement" regarding the removal of problematic content. Authorities removed from these textbooks some religiously grounded intolerant portrayals of non-Muslim minorities, women, and LGBTQI+ individuals. However, several concerning passages remain.

For example, official Saudi textbooks claim every infant is born Muslim and characterize Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism as "false." They state that everyone who does not believe in Allah or the message of the Prophet will be sent to Hell. Textbooks also contain content critical of Shi'a and Sufi Muslims (often described derisively as polytheists or idolators), claiming that

members of these groups will be sent to Hell as well. Official Islamic studies textbooks in Saudi Arabia note the importance of “women’s chastity” to justify restrictions on women’s dress in public on religious grounds.

Legal Constraints on FoRB

Saudi Arabia’s formal penal code is in the drafting process. The draft code reportedly does not [amend](#) provisions in existing laws that have been used to crack down on religious dissenters. These include the Anti-Cybercrime Law and the Counterterrorism Law, which both equate peaceful freedom of expression with “terrorism” and “impinging on public order.”

In addition, significant issues remain with how the judicial system prosecutes cases and issues punishments on religious grounds. *Tāʿazir* sentences—those that Shari’a leaves to a judge’s discretion—create a lack of transparency and consistency. This religiously grounded discretion is also subject to a wide range of interpretation and potentially subject to abuse. Saudi judges in recent years have issued death sentences in such cases.

Religious Prisoners of Conscience

The Saudi government continues to impose egregious prison sentences and other punishments on those expressing dissenting religious views it alleges violate the country’s repressive cybercrime and counterterrorism laws. Based on data from USCIRF’s Frank R. Wolf Victims List [database](#), the average prison sentence for a Saudi prisoner targeted on a religious basis—excluding cases where individuals have been given life sentences and death penalty cases—and in detention as of July 2024 is 16 years and seven months. In March 2023, the [Specialized Criminal Court](#) (SCC) resentedenced [Salma al-Shehab](#) to 27 years in prison—a reduction from 34—over tweets supporting activists peacefully challenging the guardianship system. In January 2024, [Manahel al-Otaibi](#) was [sentenced](#) to 11 years in prison on multiple charges under Saudi Arabia’s social media, counterterrorism, and male guardianship laws. Al-Otaibi, a social media fitness influencer, was detained in November 2022 for reportedly not wearing “decent” clothing and for promoting female empowerment on her social media, which included calls to end the country’s male guardianship rules. She was unable to contact her family for months while at al-Malaz Prison in Riyadh. Once she was allowed to speak to them in April 2024,

she [reported](#) that authorities held her in solitary confinement and broke her leg.

Saudi human rights lawyer [Waleed abu al-Khair](#) continues to languish in Dhahban Prison, serving a 15-year sentence handed down by the SCC in 2015 for allegedly violating the country’s counterterrorism law. Authorities have reportedly harassed him in prison and [denied](#) him vital medical care. Al-Khair served as the legal counsel for former religious prisoner of conscience [Raif Badawi](#), who was jailed in 2012 for criticizing the government and sentenced to prison for “insulting Islam” and violating the cybercrime law. Badawi was [released](#) in 2022 after a decade of unjust detention, but he remains under a media and travel ban. The Saudi government continues to deny Badawi the ability to resettle with his family in Canada.

Transnational Repression

The government of Saudi Arabia engages in a broad campaign of transnational repression against dissidents and their families, including those who dissent from the government’s singular religious interpretation. By targeting relatives of dissidents abroad and concomitantly punishing Saudi detainees for their family members’ criticism of the government, the Kingdom demonstrates its continued campaign to stifle opposing religious views and restrict religious freedom. [Abdulrahman al-Sadhan](#), whose sister is a U.S. citizen and critic of Saudi policy, remains jailed on a 20-year sentence for satirizing religious officials. Fouz al-Otaibi, the sister of Manahel al-Otaibi, fled Saudi Arabia to avoid arrest over her activism and now lives in the United Kingdom (UK). She alleged in May 2024 that Manahel’s mistreatment is intended to restrict her current activism in challenging the state’s official interpretation of Islam, [noting](#), “I believe they are punishing and torturing Manahel because they are unable to punish me.”

Four detained Chinese Uyghurs remain at risk of forcible repatriation to China by Saudi authorities. In February 2020, religious scholar Aimidoula Waili and his friend Nuermainaiti Ruze traveled from Turkey to Saudi Arabia on tourist visas to perform *umrah*, a Muslim religious pilgrimage. In November 2020, authorities [arrested](#) Waili and Ruze in Jeddah. Since their arrest, the two men have been transferred multiple times between detention centers in Jeddah and Riyadh. The government has not given Waili and Ruze a reason for their arrest. In April 2022, authorities [detained](#) Buheliqiemu Abula and her teenage daughter near Mecca. Abula is the former wife



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of Aimidoula Waili and was arrested because her ex-husband's residency was canceled due to his own arrest. Chinese Communist Party authorities had previously subjected Waili to torture in Xinjiang, China, where the Chinese government continues to perpetrate genocide and crimes against humanity against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims.

In another case targeting a family member in Saudi Arabia of a critic abroad, in August 2023 the SCC sentenced [Mohammed al-Ghamdi](#) to death after holding him incommunicado in solitary confinement for four months and charging him with "supporting a terrorist ideology" over tweets calling for the release of religious clerics. Al-Ghamdi's brother Saeed is a UK-based religious scholar and dissident who has challenged the Saudi state's official interpretation of Islam. In July, a court sentenced Malik al-Dowaish, son of cleric [Sulaiman al-Dowaish](#), to 27 years in prison after he posted a video inquiring about his father's mistreatment.

Conclusion

Saudi Vision 2030 has driven reforms that have permeated some aspects of Saudi society over the last few years, but severe challenges to religious freedom remain. Reforms to the male guardianship system and removal of some religiously intolerant passages in textbooks constitute meaningful changes toward improving religious freedom conditions in the Kingdom. However, the government continues to enforce laws that systematically restrict religious freedom in the country, including through the prohibition of public non-Muslim worship, the criminalization of blasphemy and other religious offenses, a repressive male guardianship system based on a singular religious interpretation, and widespread discrimination against Shi'a Muslims.

In its [2024 Annual Report](#), USCIRF recommended the U.S. Department of State continue to designate Saudi Arabia as a Country of Particular Concern for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The chapter also outlined a number of steps the U.S. government can take to address religious freedom issues in Saudi Arabia. The U.S. government should publicly and privately encourage Saudi leaders to continue the reform agenda by granting more civil, social, and political rights to Saudi Arabia's population. In particular, U.S. efforts to support the implementation of Vision 2030 should center freedom of religion or belief as an essential component of the bilateral relationship.

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