

SAUDI ARABIA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

According to the 1992 Basic Law of Governance, the country's official religion is Islam and the constitution is the Quran and Sunna (traditions and practices based on the life of the Prophet Muhammad). The legal system is based largely on sharia as interpreted by the Hanbali school of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence. Freedom of religion is not provided under the law. The government does not allow the public practice of any non-Muslim religion. The law criminalizes "anyone who challenges, either directly or indirectly, the religion or justice of the King or Crown Prince." The law criminalizes "the promotion of atheistic ideologies in any form," "any attempt to cast doubt on the fundamentals of Islam," publications that "contradict the provisions of Islamic law," and other acts including non-Islamic public worship, public display of non-Islamic religious symbols, conversion by a Muslim to another religion, and proselytizing by a non-Muslim. In January and May, police raided predominantly Shia villages in al-Qatif Governorate, stating the raids were carried out to arrest terrorist cells or preempt terrorist attacks. On November 13, rights groups announced that Hussein al-Ribh, a 38-year-old Shia activist who was in detention since 2017, died in Dammam Prison. Some Shia activists outside the country stated that authorities tortured al-Ribh while he was detained. In April the government executed 37 citizens for "terrorism crimes," the largest mass execution since 2016. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), at least 33 of the 37 were from the country's minority Shia community and had been convicted following what they stated were unfair trials for various alleged crimes, including protest-related offenses. In January rights groups reported Islamic scholar Sheikh Ahmed al-Amari died as a result of poor prison conditions and mistreatment, and in August, Sheikh Saleh Abdulaziz al-Dhamiri died due to a heart condition while held in solitary confinement in Tarafia Prison. Authorities detained Thumar al-Marzouqi, Mohammed al-Sadiq, and Bader al-Ibrahim, three Shia Muslims who have written in the past on the discrimination faced by Shia Muslims, in April with no official charges filed; they remained in detention at year's end. On February 1, human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported that the public prosecutor was no longer seeking the death penalty for female Shia activist Israa al-Ghomgham, detained since 2015 after participating in antigovernment protests in the Eastern Province. During the year, government leaders, including the crown prince and the head of the government-sponsored Muslim World League (MWL), took new steps to combat religious extremism and

to encourage interreligious tolerance and dialogue, conducting prominent public outreach, particularly with Christian and Jewish leaders and groups.

According to press and NGO reports, in February in Medina, an unidentified man beheaded a six-year-old boy on the street in front of his mother reportedly because he was Shia. In September an academic at Qassim University, Dr. Ahmed al-Hassan, called in a tweet for rooting out heretic Shia from the holy city of Medina. Instances of prejudice and discrimination against Shia Muslims continued to occur in legal and security matters and in private sector employment. Some social media platforms for discussion of current events and religious issues included disparaging remarks about members of various religious groups or “sects.” Terms such as “rejectionists,” which Shia considered insulting, were commonly found in social media discourse. Anti-Semitic comments appeared in the media.

In his address to the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom on July 18, Vice President Pence called on the Saudi government to release blogger Raif Badawi, stating that Badawi, among others he highlighted, “stood in defense of religious liberty, the exercise of their faith, despite unimaginable pressure.” The Vice President added that “the United States calls on Saudi Arabia to “respect the freedom of conscience and let these men go.” In discussions with the Human Rights Commission (HRC), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Ministry of Islamic Affairs (MOIA), and other ministries and agencies, senior U.S. embassy and consulate officials continued to raise and discuss reports of abuses of religious freedom, arbitrary arrests and detentions, enforcement of laws against religious minorities, promotion of respect and tolerance for minority Muslim and non-Muslim religious practices and beliefs, the country’s counterterrorism law, and due process standards.

Since 2004, Saudi Arabia has been designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Most recently, on December 18, the Secretary of State redesignated Saudi Arabia as a CPC and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompany designation as required in the important national interest of the United States pursuant to section 407 of the Act.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the country’s total population at 33.6 million (midyear 2019 estimate), including more than 12 million foreign residents.

Between 85 and 90 percent of the approximately 20 million citizens are Sunni Muslims.

Shia Muslims constitute 10 to 12 percent of the citizen population and at least one-quarter of the Eastern Province's population. Approximately 80 percent of Shia are "Twelvers" (Shia who recognize 12 imams) and are primarily located in the Eastern Province. The 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 Ja'afari school of jurisprudence. Most of the remaining Shia are Sulaimani Ismailis, also known as "Seveners" (those who branched off from the Twelvers to follow Isma'il ibn Ja'afar as the Seventh Imam). Seveners number approximately 500,000 and reside primarily in Najran Province, where they probably constitute a majority of the province's inhabitants. Another branch of Sevenser Shia, the Bohra Ismailis, probably number at least a few hundred, most of whom are of South Asian origin. Pockets of Zaydis, members of another branch of Shia Islam, numbering a total of approximately 20,000, reside primarily in the provinces of Jizan and Najran along the border with Yemen.

Foreign embassies indicate the noncitizen population, including many undocumented migrants, is mostly Muslim. According to a 2010 survey by the Pew Research Center, of the country's total population (including foreigners), there were approximately 25.5 million Muslims, 1.2 million Christians (including Eastern Orthodox, Protestants, and Roman Catholics); 310,000 Hindus; 180,000 religiously unaffiliated (including atheists, agnostics, and individuals who did not identify with any particular religion); 90,000 Buddhists; 70,000 followers of folk religions; and 70,000 adherents of other religions.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The Basic Law of Governance establishes the country as a sovereign Arab Islamic state in which Islam is the official religion. The Basic Law says sharia is the "foundation of the Kingdom" and states the country's constitution is the Quran and the Sunna. The Basic Law contains no legal recognition or protection of freedom of religion. Conversion from Islam to another religion is grounds for the charge of apostasy, which is legally punishable by death, although courts have not carried out a death sentence for apostasy in recent years.

Blasphemy against Islam may also be legally punishable by death, but courts have not sentenced individuals to death for blasphemy in recent years. Punishments for blasphemy may include lengthy prison sentences and lashings. Criticism of Islam, including expression deemed offensive to Muslims, is forbidden on the grounds of preserving social stability.

The 2017 counterterrorism law criminalizes “anyone who challenges, either directly or indirectly, the religion or justice of the King or Crown Prince.” On January 25, authorities issued implementation regulations that criminalize “calling for atheist thought in any form or calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion.” The right to access legal representation for those accused of violating the counterterrorism law is limited; according to the law, “the Public Prosecutor may, at the investigative stage, restrict this right whenever the interests of the investigation so require.” There is no right to access government-held evidence.

The Basic Law states the duty of every citizen is to defend Islam, society, and the homeland. Non-Muslims must convert to Islam before they are eligible to naturalize. The law requires applicants for citizenship to attest to being Muslim and to obtain a certificate documenting their religious affiliation endorsed by a Muslim religious authority. Children born to Muslim fathers are deemed Muslim by law.

The country is the home of Mecca and Medina, Islam’s two holiest sites. The government prohibits non-Muslims from entering central Mecca or religious sites in Medina. Muslims visit these cities on the annual Hajj pilgrimage and during Umrah pilgrimage throughout the rest of the year. The government has stated that caring for the holy cities of Mecca and Medina is a sacred trust exercised on behalf of all Muslims. The country’s sovereign employs the official title of “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques,” in reference to the two cities. The government also establishes national quotas for foreigners and issues permits to Muslim residents (including its own nationals) to participate in the Hajj.

Muslim clerics are vetted and employed by the MOIA. Only government-employed clerics are permitted to deliver sermons, which must be vetted by the MOIA in advance.

Clerics traveling abroad for proselytization activities must be granted approval by the MOIA and operate under MOIA supervision. The stated purpose of the regulation is to limit the ability of religious scholars to travel or to preach overseas.

and to prevent the appearance of interference, or actual interference, by clerics in the domestic affairs of other states.

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. Private international schools are required to teach Saudi students and Muslim students of other nationalities an Islamic studies course, while non-Muslim, non-Saudi students sometimes receive a course on Islamic civilization, or alternative coursework in place of the curriculum designed for Saudi students; courses amount to one hour of instruction per week. Private international schools may also teach courses on other religions or civilizations.

The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) is a government agency with authority to monitor social behavior and report violations of moral standards to law enforcement authorities. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) oversees CPVPV operations on the king's behalf. By decree, the CPVPV's activities are limited to providing counseling and reporting individuals suspected of violating the law to the police. The CPVPV may not detain, arrest, pursue, or demand the identification documents of any person; those actions are explicitly reserved as the purview of the police and counternarcotics units. According to law, the CPVPV must "uphold its duties with kindness and gentleness as decreed by the examples of the Prophet Mohammed." CPVPV field officers do not wear uniforms, but they are required to wear identification badges. The CPVPV's religious purview includes the prohibited public practice of non-Islamic faiths or displaying emblems (such as crosses) thereof; failing to respect Islam, including Ramadan fasting; "immodest" dress; displaying or selling media "contrary to Islam;" and venerating places or celebrating events inconsistent with approved Islamic practices.

The judicial system is largely based on laws derived from the Quran and the Sunna. All judges are religiously trained, although they often also have specialized knowledge of nonreligious legal subjects. In several areas, including commercial and financial matters, and criminal law related to electronic and cybercrimes or terrorism, jurisprudence increasingly is based on international models rather than religious texts. Law on religious matters, which often affects civil law, particularly on personal status issues, is developed by fatwas (official interpretations of religious law) issued by the 21-person Council of Senior Scholars (CSS) that reports to the king. The Basic Law states governance is based on justice, *shura* (consultation), and equality according to sharia and further identifies the Quran and

the Sunna as the sources for fatwas. The law specifies a hierarchical organization and composition of the CSS, the Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Religious Rulings (*ifta*), and the Office of the Mufti, together with their functions. The Basic Law recognizes the CSS, supported by the Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Religious Rulings, as the supreme authority on religious matters. The CSS is headed by the grand mufti and is composed of Sunni religious scholars and jurists, 18 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 many serving for life.

The country's legal architecture does not derive from a common law system, and judges are not bound by legal precedent. In the absence of a comprehensive criminal code, rulings and sentences can diverge widely. Criminal appeals may be made to the appellate and supreme courts, where in some instances, appellate decisions have resulted in a harsher sentence than the original court decision. Government universities provide training in all four Sunni schools of jurisprudence, with a focus on the Hanbali school.

In legal cases involving accidental death or injury, compensation sometimes differs 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, a court may rule the plaintiff is entitled to receive 50 percent of the compensation a Muslim male would receive; in some circumstances, other non-Muslims may only receive one-sixteenth the amount a male Muslim would receive.

Judges have been observed to discount the testimony of Muslims whom they deemed deficient in their knowledge of Islam, and to favor the testimony of Muslims over the testimony of non-Muslims. Under the government's interpretation of the Quran, judges may place the value of a woman's testimony at half that of a man's in certain cases.

The Basic Law requires the state to protect human rights in accordance with sharia. The 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. There are no formal requirements regarding the composition of the HRC; during the year, the commission had approximately 28 members from various parts of the country, including two Shia members.

Social media users who post or share satire attacking religion face imprisonment for up to five years under the Anti-Cyber Crime Law. Those found guilty of distributing content online deemed to disrupt public order or disturb religious values would also be subject to a fine of three million riyals (\$800,000). The country's public prosecutor's office said in a statement on Twitter: "Producing and distributing content that ridicules, mocks, provokes and disturbs public order, religious values and public morals through social media will be considered a cybercrime."

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

There were NGO and Shia activist reports of prison authorities abusing Shia prisoners, including two cases of abuse that led to prisoners' deaths. On November 13, human rights NGOs announced that Hussein al-Ribh, a 38-year-old Shia activist in detention since 2017, died in Dammam Prison. Some Shia activists outside the country said that authorities tortured al-Ribh while detained. In January another Shia activist, Naif al-Omran, died after eight years in detention, while serving a 20-year sentence for protest-related charges in Qatif dating back to 2011. According to al-Omran's family, his body bore visible marks of abuse.

On April 23, the MOI announced the execution of 37 citizens in Riyadh, Mecca, Medina, the Eastern Province, Qassim, and Asir regions in connection with "terrorism crimes." According to HRW, at least 33 of the 37 were from the country's minority Shia community and had been convicted following unfair trials for various alleged crimes, including protest-related offenses, espionage, and terrorism. Shia Rights Watch (SRW) reported that Shia cleric Sheikh Mohammed al-Attiyah was among the executed. Amnesty International said those executed were convicted after sham trials that violated international fair trial standards and which relied on confessions extracted through torture. In a statement, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet commented, "It is particularly abhorrent that at least three of those killed were minors at the time of their sentencing." According to the European Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR), at least six of the executed were minors at the time of their alleged offenses: Abdullah Salman al-Sarih and Abdulkarim Mohammed al-Hawaj, whose charges date back to age 16; and Said Mohammed al-Sakafi, Salman Amin al-Quraysh, Mujtaba Nadir al-Sweiket, and Abdulaziz Hassan al-Sahwi, whose charges date back to age 17. The government denied the individuals were minors

and disputed the ages reported by HRW and ESOHR. The mass executions were the largest since January 2016.

On January 7, security forces raided the predominately Shia al-Jish village for suspected “links to cases of state security” in al-Qatif Governorate, killing six people and arresting others after an exchange of fire, according to Saudi Press Agency. Five officers were also wounded in the operation.

On May 11, security forces killed eight members of an alleged Shia terrorist cell in a security operation in Taroot in Qatif Governorate in the Eastern Province, according to the Presidency of State Security. The statement added the newly formed “terrorist cell” had plans to carry out terrorist operations targeting vital installations and security sites.

On January 8, security forces stormed the Shia village of Umm al-Hamam, killing five persons and injuring an unspecified number, according to SRW. SRW said authorities also used armored vehicles in a separate operation in Jaroudiya town. SRW also reported a number of arrests during these operations, including Qatif-based Shia rights activist Mohammemod Nabil al-Jowhar on January 11.

On January 20, the London-based human rights group ALQST (“Justice” in Arabic) reported that Islamic scholar Sheikh Ahmed al-Amari died as a result of poor prison conditions and possible torture. Authorities detained Al-Amari, the former dean of the School of Quran at the University of Medina, in 2018, and he suffered a brain hemorrhage on January 2. The Twitter account Prisoners of Conscience, which monitors and documents arrests in human rights cases in the country, and ALQST reported the 69-year-old’s death was caused by “intentional neglect” on the part of the prison authorities.

On August 3, rights groups reported the death of Sheikh Saleh Abdulaziz al-Dhamiri due to health complications he had developed at Tarafia Prison. Authorities kept Al-Dhamiri, who suffered from a heart condition, in solitary confinement, according to the Prisoners of Conscience Twitter account.

On November 13, family members of Islamic scholar Sheikh Fahd al-Qadi announced that al-Qadi had died in prison. The government detained Al-Qadi in 2016 and sentenced him in October to six years in prison. The circumstances surrounding his death remained unknown at year’s end. Prisoners of Conscience reported he was detained after he sent a letter of advice to the Royal Court.

As many as 39 individuals, most of them believed to be Shia, faced the possibility of execution, according to ESOHR. ESOHR also reported that up to seven minors faced possible execution, including Ali al-Nimr (nephew of Nimr al-Nimr, a Shia cleric executed by the government in 2016), Dawood al-Marhoon, and Abdullah al-Zaher. The government disputed the claim that these individuals were minors at the time they committed the acts for which they were convicted, and noted the courts use the *hijri* (lunar/Islamic) calendar for age computations (which could differ from Western Gregorian calendar ages by a few months). Five Shia individuals, including al-Nimr, al-Marhoon and al-Zaher, faced a final death sentence and nine faced preliminary death sentences, which still needed to be upheld by an appellate court, the Supreme Court, and the king. The trials of 25 individuals, most of them Shia, on charges carrying potential death sentences were ongoing at year's end, and one of those convicted was awaiting the ruling of the Court of Appeal after his second verdict. Some human rights NGOs reported that many of the convictions were "based on confessions extracted through prolonged solitary confinement and torture." International human rights NGOs reported that these individuals said authorities tortured them during pretrial detention and interrogation. Local Shia activists and international human rights groups questioned the competence, independence, and impartiality of the judiciary, and noted that the underlying charges were inconsistent with international principles of freedom of assembly, expression, and association.

According to Shia groups that track arrests and convictions of Shia Muslims, more than 300 persons remained in detention in prisons throughout the Eastern Province and additional individuals remained barred from international travel. Authorities had arrested more than 1,000 Eastern Province Shia since 2011 in connection with public protests demanding greater rights for Shia, including acts of violence, according to NGO reports. Most were held on charges involving nonviolent offenses, including participating in or publicizing protests on social media, inciting unrest in the country, and insulting the king.

At year's end, international NGOs stated they were unable to obtain any information on the status of Ahmad al-Shammari, who had been sentenced to death for charges related to apostasy in April 2017, and was believed still to be incarcerated. According to media reports, al-Shammari posted videos to social media accounts in which he renounced Islam and the Prophet Mohammed. It was unknown whether any appeals in his case remained pending.

On August 25, the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) sentenced prominent Shia cleric Sheikh Mohammed al-Habib, who was serving a seven-year prison sentence,

to an additional five years in prison and a five-year ban on international travel after he was convicted of supporting demonstrations in Qatif and cybercrimes.

According to human rights groups, authorities detained al-Habib in response to his public statements urging the government to address anti-Shia sectarianism, including in the educational curriculum, and criticizing government clerics who had espoused anti-Shia views.

On February 1, human rights NGOs reported the public prosecutor was no longer seeking the death penalty for female Shia activist Israa al-Ghomgham, who was detained in 2015 after participating in antigovernment protests. At year's end, she was on trial at the SCC along with five other Shia individuals, including her husband.

On June 16, a government official told Reuters the Specialized Criminal Court in Riyadh sentenced Murtaja Qureiris, a Shia who was arrested as a juvenile, to 12 years in prison, sparing him from execution. The public prosecutor had sought the death penalty for Qureiris in 2018 for protest-related offenses, some of which dated to when Qureiris was 10 years old, according to human rights groups, including Amnesty International.

Raif Badawi remained in prison at the end of the year based on his 2013 conviction for violating Islamic values, violating sharia, committing blasphemy, and mocking religious symbols on the internet. Originally sentenced to seven years in prison and 600 lashes in 2013, a court increased Badawi's sentence on appeal to a 10-year prison term and 1,000 lashes. Badawi received 50 lashes in 2015; the government has not carried out the remaining 950 lashes and authorities suggested informally that there were no current plans to do so. According to international human rights contacts, Badawi declared a hunger strike in September to protest his poor treatment and lack of medical attention while in prison. In December he reportedly went on a second hunger strike to protest his placement in solitary confinement.

The government continued to imprison individuals accused of apostasy and blasphemy, violating Islamic values and moral standards, insulting Islam, black magic, and sorcery. In January local media reported authorities arrested an Arab expatriate of unspecified nationality for sorcery.

In April, authorities detained Thumar al-Marzouqi, Mohammed al-Sadiq, and Bader al-Ibrahim, who wrote in the past on the discrimination faced by Shia in the country. By year's end, authorities had not filed official charges against them and they remained in detention. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, al-

Sadiq and al-Ibrahim write regularly for *Al-Arabi al-Jadeed*, a Qatari funded news website based in London, while al-Marzouqi published articles on his own blog as well as contributing to *Al-Arabi al-Jadeed* and to the *Okaz* newspaper.

During the year, the SCC continued trials against some clerics, academics, and members of the media for alleged association with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). The accused included prominent Muslim scholars Salman al-Odah, Awad al-Qarni, and Ali al-Omari. The three were arrested in 2017. According to Saudi and international rights groups, the public prosecutor sought the death penalty against them. The public prosecutor leveled 37 charges against al-Odah, the vast majority of which were connected to his alleged ties with the MB and the Qatari government, and his public support for imprisoned dissidents. In reviewing some of the specific charges, HRW noted, “The initial charges are mostly related to his alleged ties to the MB and other organizations supposedly connected to it.” The 30 charges against al-Omari included “forming a youth organization to carry out the objectives of a terrorist group inside the Kingdom.” The government continued to regard the MB as a terrorist organization. Amnesty International reported al-Odah was ill-treated while in prison, including solitary confinement.

On May 18, authorities released Shia cleric Tawfiq al-Amer from prison after he completed his eight-year jail term. Officers arrested al-Amer in 2011 and the SCC convicted him in August 2014 of slander against the state and abuse of the faith, stirring up sectarian strife, and calling for change in a series of sermons delivered in 2011.

In March authorities detained Shia cleric Majed al-Sadah for three days over comments criticizing concerts sponsored by the government’s General Entertainment Authority (GEA) in his hometown of Saihat, Qatif Governorate. According to online activists, al-Sadah had to sign a written pledge to refrain from interfering in internal affairs. According to *Al-Jazeera*, authorities arrested cleric Omar al-Muqbil in September after he criticized music concerts sponsored by GEA, calling them a threat to the kingdom’s culture, according to the Prisoners of Conscience rights group. Al-Muqbil described in a video the GEA’s actions as “erasing the original identity of society.”

A court sentenced an Indian national to 10 years for “misusing social media,” “blasphemy,” and “hurting the religious and national sentiment of the Kingdom.”

During the year, social media reported the SCC held many hearings in the trial of influential religious scholar Safar al-Hawali. The government detained al-Hawali

along with three of his sons in 2018. Al-Hawali, often linked to the MB, rose to prominence 25 years ago as a leader of the Sahwa (Awakening) movement, which agitated to bring democracy to the country and criticized the ruling family for corruption, social liberalization, and working with the West.

During the year, the SCC held at least five hearings on the case of cleric Hassan Farhan al-Maliki, described by HRW as a religious reformer, in detention since September 2017. In 2018, the public prosecutor sought the death penalty for al-Maliki on 14 charges, including calling into question the fundamentals of Islam by casting doubt on prophetic Sunna and *hadith* (the record of the traditions or sayings of the Prophet Mohammed), propagating deviant beliefs, holding an impure (*takfiri*) ideology, insulting the rulers and CSS and labeling them as extremists, glorifying the Khomeini-led revolution in Iran, and supporting Hizballah and ISIS.

In February Deputy Governor of Makkah Province Badr bin Sultan bin Abdul Aziz ordered the arrest of comedian Yasir Bakr for allegedly mocking the CPVPV at an entertainment event in Jeddah. Bakr, founder of Al-Comedy Club in Jeddah, later appeared in a video on Twitter apologizing for his comments.

On April 20, local media reported that the public prosecutor summoned a man for investigation regarding a tweet that “disturbed public order” under the Anti-Cyber Crime Law. According to press reports, the man tweeted a call for all women in the country wearing a *niqab* to come together at Riyadh Boulevard in order to burn them, according to media reports.

On June 23, authorities arrested Damman-based Shia cleric Sheikh Abdullatif Hussain al-Nasser when he attempted to travel to Bahrain. The government provided no reason for his arrest. Security officials interrogated Abdullatif and then transferred him to the State Security Prison in Damman, according to activists.

On June 27, the SCC held the first hearing for three Shia men, Ramzi al-Jamal, Ali Hasan al-Zayyed, and Mohammed Issa al-Labbad, who turned themselves in to security authorities in 2017 after their names appeared on a list of 23 individuals wanted by the authorities. The public prosecutor sought the death penalty for the three on protest-related charges, according to ESOHR and activists.

Human rights NGOs and legal experts continued to criticize antiterrorism laws for using overly broad and vague language, making them susceptible to politicization and other abuse.

The government continued to prohibit the public practice of any non-Islamic religion. According to civil society sources and media reports, non-Muslims and many foreign and local Muslims whose religious practices differed from the form of Sunni Islam promoted by the government could only practice their religion in private and remained vulnerable to detention, discrimination, harassment, and, for noncitizens, deportation. According to members of the expatriate community, some Christian congregations were able to conduct large Christian worship services discreetly and regularly without substantial interference from the CPVPV or other government authorities.

The MOIA maintained active oversight of the country's religious establishment and provided guidance on the substance of Friday sermons; it restricted the inclusion of content in those sermons considered sectarian, political, or extremist, promoting hatred or racism, or including commentary on foreign policy. Mosques continued to be the only legally permissible public places of worship. The government continued to address ideology it deemed extremist by scrutinizing clerics and teachers closely and dismissing those found promoting views it deemed intolerant, extreme, or advocating violence. The MOIA continued to use ministry inspectors, regional branch inspectors, field teams, citizen feedback, and the media to monitor and address any violations of the ministry's instructions and regulations in mosques. MOIA oversight of mosques in less populated areas was not always as strict as it was in urban areas. In 2018 the MOIA created a hotline for individuals to report statements by imams that observers considered objectionable. A May article in a government-linked newspaper described the hotline as a 24/7 service to report "undisciplined imams and mosques that need maintenance." In 2018 the MOIA launched a mobile phone app called *Masajed* (mosques) which monitors sermons and allows mosque-goers to rate their preacher on a number of aspects of their work.

In March the MOIA revealed in a statistical report that it printed 90,000 books in English and French to combat religious extremism and radicalization, including books titled *Moderation in Islam*, *Human Rights in Islam*, and *Introducing Islam*.

In March the Council of Ministers approved a new regulation for imams and muezzins of the two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina stipulating that the clerics be "moderate," among other requirements.

Practices diverging from the government's official interpretation of Islam, such as public celebrations of Mawlid al-Nabi (the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad)

and visits to the tombs of renowned Muslims, remained forbidden. Some Shia community members reported that Shia pilgrims were permitted to celebrate Eid al-Ghadir, a Shia-specific holiday, after the Hajj. Sources also stated that Shia pilgrims were permitted to approach, but not touch, the graves of the four Shia imams buried in the al-Baqi Cemetery in Medina for a period of two hours after morning prayers and two hours after noon prayers.

While authorities indicated they considered members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community to be Muslims, the group's legal status remained unclear, and community members said the mainly foreign resident Ahmadi Muslims hid their faith to avoid scrutiny, arrest, or deportation.

Since 2016, authorities have permitted large-scale public commemorations of Ashura and other Shia holidays in Qatif, home to the largest Shia population in the country. These commemorations included significant deployment of government security personnel in the Qatif area during the Ashura commemoration in September. According to community members, processions and gatherings appeared to increase over previous years due to decreased political tensions and greater coordination between the Shia community and authorities.

The government stated that individuals who experienced infringements on their ability to worship privately could address their grievances to the MOI, HRC, the National Society for Human Rights (a quasi-governmental organization), and, when appropriate, the MFA. Religious groups reported, however, that officials typically charged those arrested during private worship services with gender-mixing, playing music, or other infractions not explicitly related to religious observance. There were again no reports of individuals contacting these or other governmental agencies for redress when their ability to worship privately was infringed.

According to government policy, non-Muslims generally were prohibited from being buried in the country. There is, however, a public, non-Islamic cemetery in Jeddah, although the government did not support it financially. There also is a private, non-Muslim cemetery only available to Saudi Aramco employees. Diplomatic missions reported most non-Muslims opted to repatriate their deceased to their home countries whenever financially possible.

In mixed neighborhoods of Sunni and Shia residents, authorities generally required all mosques, including Shia mosques, to use the Sunni call to prayer. In predominantly Shia areas such as Qatif, however, and in some Shia areas of al-

Ahsa Governorate in the Eastern Province, authorities allowed Shia mosques to use the Twelver Shia variant of the call to prayer. In smaller Shia villages, community members stated it was common for Shia businesses to close for three prayer times (not five times per Sunni practice), or in some instances not to close at all.

The government continued to set policy aimed at enforcing Islamic norms; for example, the government prohibited eating, drinking, or smoking in public during Ramadan. According to media reports, the government prohibited parents from giving their children any of 50 listed names deemed blasphemous, non-Arabic, or non-Islamic.

The government did not recognize certificates of educational attainment for graduates of some Shia religious centers of instruction for employment credit, while the government generally recognized graduates of Sunni religious training institutions for government positions and religious jobs.

The government continued a multi-year project, begun in 2007, to revise textbooks, curricula, and teaching methods with the stated aim of removing content disparaging religions other than Islam. The Institute for Gulf Studies found that Saudi textbooks in 2019 were still teaching students that “Christians, Jews, and other Muslims are ‘enemies’ of the true believer, and to befriend and show respect only to other true believers, specifically the Wahhabis.” According to the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education, Saudi textbooks in 2019 taught students “to consider Jews ‘monkeys’ and ‘assassins’ bent on harming Muslim holy places, and to punish gays by death.” Shia community representatives in the Eastern Province reported throughout 2018-19 that textbooks no longer disparaged Shia beliefs. The Anti-Defamation League reported the newest edition of textbooks for the fall of 2019 continued to contain problematic passages.

Some travelers entering the country reported they were able to import a Bible for personal use, but the government regularly exercised its ability to inspect and confiscate personal non-Islamic religious materials.

Some academic experts reported the government continued to exclude perspectives at variance with the Salafi tradition within Sunni Islam from its extensive government-owned religious media and broadcast programming.

The government continued to block certain websites as part of a broader policy of censoring online content that contained “objectionable” content such as views of

religion it considered extremist or ill-informed. The government shut down or blocked Twitter accounts for users “committing religious and ethical violations,” and authorities arrested an undisclosed number of social media users in accordance with the anti-cybercrimes law. The government also located and shut down websites used to recruit jihadis or inspire violence. In 2017 authorities announced they unblocked the calling features of certain private messenger apps, including Viber, FaceTime, and Facebook Messenger. Some users reported that the calling features of WhatsApp and Skype still remained blocked.

The government financially supported approximately 70 percent of Sunni mosques, while the remaining 30 percent were at private residences or were built and endowed by private persons. The construction of any new mosque required the permission of the MOIA, the local municipality, and the provincial government, which allocated space and issued building permits. The MOIA supervised and financed the construction and maintenance of most Sunni mosques, including the hiring of clerics.

Shia Muslims managed their own mosques under the supervision of Shia scholars. Most existing Shia mosques in the Eastern Province did not seek official operating licenses, as doing so would require asking the government to approve extension of endorsement of these mosques, according to some NGO reports. The government did not finance the construction or maintenance of Shia mosques; Shia congregations self-funded construction, maintenance, and repairs. Authorities prohibited Shia Muslims outside of the Eastern Province from building Shia-specific mosques. Construction of Shia mosques required government approval, and Shia communities were required to receive permission from their neighbors to start construction on mosques. Authorities allowed Shia communities to rebuild a mosque in Taroot, near Qatif, during the year. Two Shia mosques in Dammam remained licensed by the government and served approximately 750,000 worshippers. There continued to be no licensed Shia mosques in major urban centers such as Jeddah, Riyadh, or al-Khobar. Shia in those areas were therefore forced to hold prayers in private homes and community centers, where some Shia said they were subject to police harassment. Expatriate Shia reported threats of arrest and deportation if they gathered privately in large groups to worship and were detected by authorities.

Following ISIS attacks against Shia mosques and gathering places in 2015, security services continued to provide protection for many Shia mosques and gathering places in the Eastern Province. Additionally, media and other sources reported coordination between Shia volunteers and government security services to

ensure security outside mosques and other gathering places during Friday sermons or other large public events.

Multiple reports from Shia groups cited discrimination in the judicial system as the catalyst for lengthy prison sentences handed down to Shia Muslims for engaging in political expression or organizing peaceful demonstrations. The government permitted Shia judges in the Eastern Province to use the Ja'afari school of Islamic jurisprudence to adjudicate cases in family law, inheritance, and endowment management. There were five Shia judges, all government-appointed, located in the Eastern Province cities of Qatif and al-Ahsa, where the majority of Twelver Shia live. Community sources reported Sunni judges sometimes completely disregarded or refused to hear testimony by Shia Muslims.

Reported instances of prejudice and discrimination against Shia Muslims continued to occur, particularly with respect to educational and public sector employment opportunities. Shia stated they experienced systemic government discrimination in hiring. There was no formal policy concerning the hiring and promotion of Shia in the private sector, but some Shia stated 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 stated that openly identifying as Shia would negatively affect career advancement.

Representation of Shia Muslims in senior government positions continued to be well below their proportion of the population, including in national security-related positions in the Ministry of Defense, the National Guard, and the MOI. The 35-member cabinet contained one Shia minister, Mohammed bin Faisal Abu Saq, a Shia Ismaili, who has held the position of Minister of State for Shura Affairs since 2014. There were no Shia governors, deputy governors, ministry branch directors, or security commanders. There were seven Shia members of the 150-member Shura Council. A small number of Shia Muslims occupied high-level positions in government-owned companies and government agencies.

Multiple municipal councils in the Eastern Province, where most Shia Muslims were concentrated, had significant proportions of Shia members, including in the two major Shia population centers of Qatif and al-Ahsa, where five of the 12 government-appointed municipal council members were Shia, and Shia Muslims held 16 of the 30 elected seats on the municipal councils. Eastern Province Shia judges dealing with intra-Shia personal status and family laws operated specialized courts. Shia Muslims were significantly underrepresented in national security-

related positions, including the Ministries of Defense and Interior and the National Guard. In predominantly Shia areas, there was some Shia representation in the ranks of the traffic police, municipal government, and public schools. According to HRW, the Saudi government systematically discriminated against Muslim religious minorities, notably Twelver Shia and Ismailis, including in the justice system, education, and employment.

According to international human rights groups, Shia Muslims were not represented in proportion to their percentage of the population in academic positions in primary, secondary, and higher education, and virtually all public school principals remained Sunni, although some teachers were Shia. Along with Sunni students, Shia students received government scholarships to study in universities abroad under the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Program for Foreign Scholarship.

There were continued media reports that some Sunni clerics, who received government stipends, used anti-Semitic and religiously intolerant language in their sermons. Reports of government-employed clerics using anti-Semitic language in their sermons, including some instances at Friday prayers in Mecca, reportedly were rare and occurred without authorization by government authorities. During the year, the MOIA issued periodic circulars to clerics and imams in mosques directing them to include messages on the principles of justice, equality, and tolerance and to encourage rejection of bigotry and all forms of racial discrimination in their sermons. Unlicensed imams, however, continued to employ intolerant views in internet postings or unsanctioned sermons in areas without government monitoring.

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

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

The government hosted many Jewish and Christian religious leaders, but did not officially permit most non-Muslim clergy to enter the country for the purpose of conducting religious services. Entry restrictions made it difficult for non-Muslims

to maintain regular contact with resident clergy, according to non-Muslim religious groups in neighboring countries. Catholic and Orthodox Christians, whose religious traditions require they receive sacraments from a priest on a regular basis, continued to hold low-profile services without government harassment, although they reportedly found restrictions on clergy travel particularly problematic. Authorities also allowed regular visits by the Catholic bishop, resident in Bahrain, who has responsibility for Catholics in the country, and by evangelical Protestant leaders.

In November the Presidency of State Security released a video on Twitter that categorized feminism, homosexuality, and atheism as extremist ideas. The animated clip said “all forms of extremism and perversion are unacceptable.” It also included *takfir*, the practice by some Muslims of labeling followers of other schools of Islam unbelievers, among the categories of unacceptable behavior. The security agency later deleted the post and said the video contained “many mistakes” while suggesting that those behind it would face a formal investigation, according to a statement posted by the official press agency.

According to NGO reports, Umm al-Qura University’s Department of Islamic Studies continued to teach a course on Judaism saying that Jews rely on three texts: “The Torah, The Talmud, [and] *The Protocols of [the Elders of] Zion*.” In addition, the reports characterized the university’s course curriculum as heavily anti-Semitic, speaking of the “evil traits” of the Jewish people.

On April 5, August 23, October 11, and December 27, Sheikh Saleh bin Humaid, a royal advisor and a CSS member, delivered Friday sermons in the Holy Mosque in Makkah in which he prayed to God to “destroy the usurping occupying Zionist Jews.”

In May the Muslim World League’s (MWL) Secretary-General Mohammed al-Issa called for the protection of followers of religions and places of worship after the terrorist attack on a Jewish temple in California and previous terrorist crimes. Al-Issa offered condolences to a number of Jewish religious leaders in New York.

During the May MWL International Conference on Moderation in Islam in Mecca, King Salman called for encouraging “concepts of tolerance and moderation, while strengthening the culture of consensus and reconciliation.” He added that the country was founded on values of moderation. The conference adopted the “Mecca Charter,” which calls for laws “to deter the promotion of hatred, the

instigation of violence and terrorism, or a clash of civilizations, which foster religious and ethnic disputes.”

In March Shia vocalist Saber al-Modhi appeared on the Saudi Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) channel in a talk show hosted by Dawood al-Shirian, the former head of SBC, during which al-Modhi recited religious poems typically recited in *husseiniyas*, Shia prayer halls. This is believed to be the first appearance on an official TV channel by a Shia religious chanter.

During the year, some Qatari nationals again reported being unable to perform the annual Hajj pilgrimage due to logistical obstacles stemming from border closures and restrictions imposed by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt on Qatar in 2017. The Saudi Press Agency announced that Qataris and foreign residents of Qatar would be allowed to land at Jeddah or Medina airports to perform the Hajj. The government offered Qatari pilgrims internet registration and visa issuance on arrival in Jeddah and Medina. In May, however, the government of Qatar stated that the Saudi government continued to deny Qatar-based religious tour operators’ access to Saudi Arabia to make Hajj and Umrah arrangements for pilgrims. Deputy Minister of Hajj and Umrah Abdul Fattah Mashat said that the government rejected the politicization of the holy rituals, adding that it has never barred any nationalities from performing them.

On September 10, the crown prince met with U.S. evangelical Christian figures in Jeddah. Following the meeting, the group met with MWL Secretary-General Mohammed al-Issa to discuss ways both parties could counter extremism and exchanged ideas on possible initiatives and programs to increase mutual respect at the grass roots level. The delegation and the MWL agreed in a joint statement to promote respect for religions and mutual trust and to encourage religious harmony.

On April 28, al-Issa visited a New York synagogue, the first such trip by an MWL leader to a Jewish house of worship in the United States, and signed an agreement with the NGO Appeal of Conscience Foundation supporting the protection of religious sites around the world. On April 30, al-Issa signed a memorandum of understanding with American Jewish Committee (AJC) in which the MWL and AJC agreed “to further Muslim-Jewish understanding and cooperate against racism and extremism in all its forms.” In May the MWL invited a Jewish delegation to visit the country in January 2020. Al-Issa said discussions during the visit, the first ever by a Jewish group, would address the issue of Holocaust denial.

In November the Saudi Press Agency reported that al-Issa visited Utah and met with leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to discuss “ways of supporting bridging relations between followers of religions and cultures to promote peace and positive harmony.”

At the annual Jeddah International Book Fair, several vendors sold anti-Semitic material, including *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and *Mein Kampf*. Additional titles were observed that linked Jews to conspiracies.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to press and NGO reports, in February in Medina, an unidentified man beheaded a six-year-old boy on the street in front of his mother, reportedly because he was a Shia. Local media reported the public prosecutor’s office in Medina assured the victim's family that it was investigating the perpetrator.

Social media provided an outlet for citizens to discuss current events and religious issues, which sometimes included making disparaging remarks about members of various religious groups or “sects.” In addition, terms like “rejectionists” (of the first three caliphs that Sunni Muslims recognize as the Prophet Mohammed’s legitimate successors), which Shia consider insulting, were commonly found in public discourse. In September an academic at Qassim University, Ahmed al-Hassan, called in a tweet for rooting out Shia from the holy city of Medina, stating that “myths and self-flagellation of Persians has reached the holiest place on earth... They must be uprooted and eradicated before this disease spreads.” In January cleric Nasser Saleh al-Muazaini named Shia “rejectionists” in a tweet. In February another tweet described Shia as “enemies of God” and “infidels.”

Instances of prejudice and discrimination against Shia Muslims continued to occur in private sector employment.

Community members reported that individuals who converted from Islam to Christianity almost always did so in secret, fearing the reactions of family members and the threat of criminal charges, up to and including execution. The NGO Open Doors reported that women in particular feared loss of parental rights or being subjected to physical abuse as a result of converting from Islam.

While discussion of sensitive topics on social media was frequent, self-censorship on social media remained prevalent when discussing topics such as politics, religion, or the royal family.

Anti-Semitic comments occasionally appeared in the media. In January columnist Muhammad al-Sa'idi wrote in an article in *Al-Watan* newspaper that Jews deliberately promote the publication and circulation of anti-Semitic literature in Arab countries that describes them as secretly running the world “in order to convince the Arabs of their power and thereby demoralize and frighten them.” When the same literature appears in the West, he added, the Jews fight it in order to maintain their positive image and present themselves as victims.”

On March 3, journalist and businessman Hussein Shobakshi wrote in his column in the London-based *Asharq al-Awsat* Arabic daily, owned by a member of the royal family, of the “deeply rooted hatred of Jews in Islamic culture,” in which the term “Jew” is strongly derogatory. He stated, “Anti-Semitism in the Arab world is the product of loathsome, racist education that is rooted in the Arab mentality that is used to labeling people according to tribal, family, and racial affiliation, and according to the religious school to which they belong.”

On April 5 and August 23, Sheikh Saleh bin Humaid, a royal advisor and a CSS member, delivered Friday sermons in the Holy Mosque in Mecca in which he prayed to God to “destroy the usurping occupying Zionist Jews.” His prayer included, “Oh Allah, show us the wonders of Your might and ability inflicted upon them.”

In May columnist Mansour al-Nugaidan, who U.S. National Public Radio described as a former “jihadi” turned “moderate,” said in an interview with Dubai-based Rotana Khalijiah TV channel “atheism is a faith that should be respected because it’s man’s choice.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In his address to the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom on July 18, the Vice President called on the government to release blogger Raif Badawi, stating Badawi and others “stood in defense of religious liberty, the exercise of their faith, despite unimaginable pressure.” The Vice President added the United States calls on Saudi Arabia to “respect the freedom of conscience and let these men go.” Senior embassy and consulate general officers pressed the government to respect religious freedom, eliminate discriminatory enforcement of laws against religious minorities, and promote respect and tolerance for minority religious practices and beliefs. The Ambassador and embassy officers engaged Saudi leaders and officials at all levels on religious freedom and tolerance. The Ambassador and embassy

officers raised religious freedom principles and cases with the HRC, members of the Shura Council, the MFA, the MOIA, the Muslim World League, and other ministries and agencies during the year. Senior embassy and consulate officials raised reports of abuses and violations of religious freedom, arbitrary arrests and detention, the country's counterterrorism law, and due process standards. They also discussed the importance of respect for the rights of minorities and their religious practices.

Senior embassy and consulate officials continued to query the legal status of detained or imprisoned individuals and discussed religious freedom concerns, such as religious assembly and importation of religious materials, with members of religious minorities, including Shia and citizens who no longer consider themselves Muslims, as well as with non-Muslim foreign residents.

Since 2004, Saudi Arabia has been designated as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Most recently, on December 18, the Secretary of State redesignated Saudi Arabia as a CPC and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompany designation as required in the important national interest of the United States pursuant to section 407 of the Act.