

SAUDI ARABIA 2017 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 on sharia as interpreted within 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 government published a new counterterrorism law in November that replaced the 2014 counterterrorism law and 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 deemed contrary to sharia, 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 July authorities executed four Shia individuals convicted on terrorism-related charges in connection with the 2011-12 Eastern Province violence and protests. Also in July the Supreme Court upheld death sentences on at least 15 individuals from the Eastern Province, presumed to be largely Shia, some of whom may have been minors at the time they committed offenses. At year's end, at least 33 individuals, presumed to be largely Shia, were on death row for their roles in protests in the Qatif area of the Eastern Province in 2011 and 2012. Some human rights organizations stated the convictions and executions were motivated by sectarianism, while the government stated the individuals were investigated, prosecuted, and sentenced as a result of the security-related crimes they committed and in accordance with the law. In April a court sentenced Ahmad al-Shammari to death after he was convicted on charges related to apostasy for allegedly renouncing Islam and the Prophet Muhammad on social media. Beginning in September authorities detained dozens of persons, including prominent clerics, religious scholars, and academics, according to multiple media reports. Human rights groups said the detentions resulted from an investigation into the individuals' purported connections to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) or MB-inspired groups. Some human rights groups said authorities also arrested Shia clerics and activists who advocated for equal treatment of Shia Muslims. The government convicted and imprisoned individuals on charges of apostasy, blasphemy, violating Islamic values and moral standards, insulting Islam, black magic, and sorcery. The government sometimes harassed, detained, arrested, and

occasionally deported some foreign residents who participated in private non-Islamic religious activities, citing prohibitions on gender mixing, noise disturbances, and immigration violations. Observers noted a pattern of prejudice and discrimination against Shia Muslims with respect to access to public services and equitable representation in government, educational and public sector employment opportunities, and judicial matters. The government continued to censor or block some religion-related content in the media, including social media and the internet. The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV, understood by some outside the country as the “religious police”) monitored social behavior in order to enforce laws and regulations protecting “public morals.” Some observers noted a decreased public presence of CPVPV officers in major cities, with the exception of Mecca and Medina. During the year the government undertook activities it stated were aimed at promoting “moderate” Islam as well as curbing radical ideology and intellectual extremism. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman stated during an investment conference in Riyadh in October that “we are returning to a centrist version of Islam, to a moderate version of Islam that is open to the world, to all faiths, and to all traditions and peoples,” according to press reports. In May authorities inaugurated the Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology (GCCEI)—known as “*Etidal*” (moderation) – which aims to promote moderation and “expose, combat and refute extremist ideology.” In April the government launched the Saudi Ideological Warfare Center (IWC) to confront the “roots of extremism and promote an accurate understanding of Islam.”

A pattern of societal prejudice and discrimination against Shia Muslims continued regarding access to private sector employment. Social media provided an outlet to discuss current events and religious issues, which sometimes included making disparaging remarks about members of religious groups.

Senior embassy and consulate officials continued to press the government to respect religious freedom, eliminate discriminatory enforcement of laws against religious minorities, and promote respect and tolerance for minority Muslim and non-Muslim religious practices and beliefs. In discussions with the Human Rights Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other relevant ministries and agencies, senior embassy and consulate officials continued to raise and discuss reports of abuses and violations of religious freedom, arbitrary arrests and detentions, the country’s counterterrorism law, and due process standards. Embassy and consulate officials continued to query the legal status of detained and imprisoned individuals and discuss religious freedom concerns, such as religious assembly and importation of religious materials, with members of religious

minorities, including Shia Muslims and citizens who no longer considered themselves Muslims, as well as with non-Muslim foreign residents.

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 22, 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 28.6 million (July 2017 estimate), including more than eight million foreign residents. Between 85 and 90 percent of the approximately 20 million citizens are Sunni Muslims.

Shia Muslims constitute 10 to 15 percent of the citizen population. Approximately 80 percent of Shia are “Twelvers” (followers of Muhammad ibn Hasan al-Mahdi, whom they recognize as the Twelfth Imam) and are primarily located in the Eastern Province. 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 Jafari 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 Jafar as the Seventh Imam). Seveners number an estimated 700,000 and reside primarily in Najran Province, where they constitute the majority of the province’s inhabitants. Another branch of Sevenser Shia, the Bohra Ismailis, number approximately 2,000, half of whom are Saudi citizens of Yemeni or South Asian origin and half expatriates, primarily from South Asia. Pockets of Zaydis, members of another branch of Shia Islam, numbering approximately 20,000, reside primarily in the provinces of Jizan and Najran along the border with Yemen.

Foreign embassies indicate the foreign population in the country, 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 are 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 (traditions and practices based on the life of the Prophet Muhammad). 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, a crime which is legally punishable by death, although courts have not carried out a death sentence for apostasy in recent years.

Blasphemy against Islam is a crime that may also legally be punished by death but courts have not sentenced individuals to death for blasphemy in recent years. Punishments for blasphemy can 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 government published a new counterterrorism law in November that replaced the 2014 counterterrorism law “with immediate effect” and ordered the Ministry of Interior (MOI) to draft implementation regulations within 180 days. The new law criminalizes “anyone who challenges, either directly or indirectly, the religion or justice of the King or Crown Prince.” By year’s end, authorities had not yet issued new implementation regulations. The implementation regulations for the 2014 counterterrorism law criminalized “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 Attorney General 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, two of Islam's holiest sites. The government prohibits non-Muslims from entering Mecca or Medina. Muslims visit the cities on the annual Hajj pilgrimage and on the Umrah pilgrimage. The government has stated that caring for the holy cities of Mecca and Medina is a sacred trust exercised on behalf of all Muslims. Since 1986 under King Fahad, 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.

Since 2016 Saudi-based clerics traveling abroad for proselytization activities must first obtain the permission of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs (MOIA). The stated purpose of the regulation is to limit the ability of religious scholars with what the government regards as questionable credentials to travel, and to prevent the appearance of interference, or actual interference, by Saudi-based 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 else "free time" in place of the curriculum designed for Saudi students; both courses amount to one hour of instruction per week. Private international schools may also teach courses on other religions or civilizations.

The CPVPV is a semiautonomous government agency with authority to monitor social behavior and enforce moral standards consistent with the government's policy and in coordination with law enforcement authorities. CPVPV field officers do not wear uniforms but are required to wear identification badges and legally may only act in their official capacity when accompanied by regular police. The CPVPV reports to the king through the Council of Ministers, and the Ministry of Interior (MOI) oversees its operations on the king's behalf. A 2016 decree limits its activities to providing counseling and reporting individuals suspected of violating the law to the police.

The purview of the CPVPV includes combating public socializing and private contact between unrelated men and women (gender mixing); practicing or displaying emblems of non-Islamic faiths or failing to respect Islam; “immodest” dress, especially for women; displaying or selling media contrary to Islam, including pornography; producing, distributing, or consuming alcohol; venerating places or celebrating events inconsistent with approved Islamic practices; practicing “sorcery” or “black magic”; and committing, facilitating, or promoting acts, publications, or thoughts considered lewd or morally degenerate, including adultery, homosexuality, and gambling.

The judicial system is based on laws derived from the Quran and the Sunna, fatwas (legal opinions or interpretations) issued by the 21-person Council of Senior Scholars (CSS, or *ulema*) that reports to the king, and other royal laws and ordinances. 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 most members serving for life.

Judges are not bound to adhere to the legal principle of precedent and, in the absence of a formal, written uniform criminal code, rulings and sentences can diverge widely. Appeals may be made to the appellate and supreme courts. Government universities provide training in all four Sunni schools of jurisprudence, with a focus on the Hanbali School.

The calculation of accidental death or injury compensation 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, the plaintiff is entitled to receive only 50 percent of the compensation a Muslim male would receive; all other non-Muslims are entitled to 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.

The Basic Law requires the state to protect human rights in accordance with sharia. The Human Rights Commission (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.

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

Government Practices

Summary Paragraph: On July 11, authorities executed four Shia individuals on terrorism-related charges and in the same month the Supreme Court upheld the convictions and death sentences of at least 15 other individuals, presumed to be Shia, for involvement in the 2011-12 Eastern Province violence and protests. Human rights organizations reported their convictions were based on confessions extracted through prolonged solitary confinement and torture while the government stated they were investigated, prosecuted, and sentenced fairly and in accordance with the law. Between May and the end of the year, security forces reportedly killed multiple individuals and displaced residents when they confronted armed groups and nonviolent resistance to the government's decision to demolish the predominantly Shia al-Musawara neighborhood of Awamiya in Qatif Governorate; 12 security officers were killed in the course of the security operation. The government imprisoned individuals accused of apostasy and blasphemy, violating Islamic values and moral standards, insulting Islam, black magic, and sorcery. Authorities reportedly detained and imprisoned prominent clerics, religious scholars, and academics, including Shia clerics and activists, according to multiple media reports. Many foreign residents worshiped privately within their homes or in other gatherings, but authorities raided some private Shia and non-Muslim religious meetings and arrested, detained, or deported participants. The government continued to censor and block content in the media, including social media and on the internet. It continued to employ religious police to enforce

“public morals.” Authorities continued to engage in instances of prejudicial treatment and discrimination against Shia Muslims with respect to access to public services, equitable representation in government, educational and public sector employment opportunities (including in the military and other security services), and judicial matters.

On July 11, authorities executed four Shia individuals – Amjad al-Moaibad, Yusuf al-Mushaikhas, Zaher al-Basri, and Mahdi al-Sayegh – on terrorism-related charges connected to the 2011-12 Eastern Province violence and protests. The government characterized that unrest as terrorism, while one nongovernmental organization (NGO) attributed the unrest to the Shia perception of economic neglect and political marginalization by the government. Human rights organizations stated their convictions were based on confessions extracted through prolonged solitary confinement and torture, while some third-party observers questioned the impartiality of the judiciary, citing sectarianism.

Up to 33 individuals, presumed to be largely Shia, faced the possibility of execution as they awaited implementation orders for death sentences already confirmed by the Supreme Court for their roles in protests in the Qatif area of the Eastern Province in 2011 and 2012, according to human rights organizations. Up to nine of these persons – including Ali al-Nimr (the nephew of Nimr al-Nimr, who was executed in 2016), Dawood al-Marhoon, Abdullah al-Zaher, Abdulkareem al-Hawaj, and Mujtaba al-Sweikat – may have been minors at the time they committed the acts for which they were convicted; however, the government disputed these claims, noting the courts and sharia system use the Islamic hijri calendar for age computations. Human rights organizations said many of the convictions were based on confessions extracted through prolonged solitary confinement and torture. Many of these individuals alleged authorities tortured them during pretrial detention and interrogation. Some Shia and international human rights groups questioned the competence, independence, and impartiality of the judiciary.

In January the government began demolition operations in the predominately Shia, 400-year old neighborhood of al-Musawara in Awamiya, Qatif Governorate, which were met by nonviolent protests, according to press reports. Beginning in May, security forces reportedly killed more than 15 persons and displaced thousands of residents in the course of security operations there. The government stated the security action was a counterterrorism effort and reported that eight members of the police and four members of the special forces had been killed, according to

press reports. The demolition and future redevelopment of al-Musawara had been announced in 2016.

Human rights organizations alleged that security forces used heavy-handed tactics against some civilians, and razed hundreds of buildings, including a historic Shia mosque. Authorities reportedly promised compensation for many al-Musawara residents who evacuated, according to media reports. Human Rights Watch reported that some residents who remained were restricted to their homes due to fear of a security response. NGOs also received reports alleging security forces fired on areas outside of Musawara, occupied a public school, closed clinics and pharmacies, and prevented access to other essential services. In April UN special rapporteur experts warned that demolitions would “erase” the neighborhood’s “unique regional heritage.” As of the end of the year, some residents whose houses were not destroyed had returned, according to press reports, while others accepted compensation and left the area.

The government imprisoned individuals accused of apostasy and blasphemy, violating Islamic values and moral standards, insulting Islam, black magic, and sorcery.

In April a court sentenced Ahmad al-Shammari to death after he was convicted on charges related to apostasy, according to media reports. Shammari allegedly posted videos to social media accounts in which he renounced Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. At year’s end, the status of Shammari’s judicial appeal was unknown.

Beginning in September, authorities detained dozens of individuals, including prominent clerics Salman al-Awda, Awad al-Qarni, and Ali al-Amri, and other religious scholars and academics, according to multiple media reports. The government announced arrests related to a “foreign spy cell” with links to the MB. Human rights groups said the detentions resulted from an investigation into the individuals’ purported connections to the MB or MB-inspired groups.

On January 15, the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) sentenced an unnamed Yemeni expatriate to 21 years in prison followed by deportation for insulting Islam, the Prophet Muhammad, and the movement of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab on his Facebook page, according to media reports. At year’s end, the disposition of the case was unknown.

On March 16, the SCC banned imam Awad al-Qarni from tweeting and ordered his Twitter account closed on charges related to spreading content that “could jeopardize public order and provoke public opinion,” according to the newspaper *Arab News*. Qarni has more than two million followers on Twitter, according to press reports. The SCC said the content “could affect the relationship of the people with the leadership, and the relationship of Saudi Arabia with other countries.” The court also fined him 100,000 Saudi riyals (SR) (\$26,700). Qarni was said to be among the individuals detained beginning in September according to human rights organizations.

In May authorities arrested two women on allegations of practicing witchcraft, after a video that purported to show a woman trying to photocopy images of talismans circulated widely on social media, according to media reports.

On July 20, a criminal court convicted cleric Hassan Farhan al-Maliki on charges of extremism, fanaticism, and holding an impure (*takfiri*) ideology. Authorities reportedly arrested Maliki in 2015 after he made public statements suggesting a link between Wahhabism and ISIS. His supporters attributed the arrest to his condemnation of anti-Shia discrimination. The court’s initial sentence included a three-month prison sentence, a fine of 50,000 SR (\$13,300), and closure of his Twitter account. Maliki was among the clerics reportedly detained in September.

On August 20, Riyadh police arrested a 15-year-old boy who appeared in a video clip that purported to show him abusing a copy of the Quran. According to media reports, he could face up to five years in prison under the anticybercrimes law for disrespect for religious values.

There was one report of government authorities calling for the prosecution of an individual for apostasy. Security officials detained several foreigners on charges of sorcery and witchcraft, according to local media reports. In August authorities referred cleric Ali Al-Rabieei for prosecution for allegedly tweeting sectarian and anti-Shia content, according to media reports.

By year’s end, the government had not carried out the remaining 950 lashes on Raif Badawi in accordance with a sentence based on his 2013 conviction for violating Islamic values, violating sharia, committing blasphemy, and mocking religious symbols on the internet. In 2015, authorities publicly lashed Badawi 50 times. 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 remained imprisoned at year’s end.

Authorities arrested more than 1,000 Eastern Province Shia since 2011 in connection with public protests demanding greater rights for Shia and violence, according to NGO reports. Shia groups that track arrests and convictions of Shia reported more than 300 persons remained in detention in prisons throughout the Eastern Province and others remained subject to travel bans. 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.

Human rights organizations and legal experts criticized both the old and new 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-Muslim religions. According to civil society sources and media reports, non-Muslims and many foreign and Saudi 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 discrimination, harassment, detention, and, for noncitizens, deportation.

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 abroad, including in Syria and Iraq. 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.

Practices diverging from the 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, were forbidden.

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

Authorities again permitted large-scale public commemorations of Ashura and other Shia holidays in Qatif, Eastern Province, where the population is majority Shia Muslim. As a result of several 2015 ISIS-inspired or directed attacks on Shia

gathering places in the Eastern Province, there was again a significant deployment of government security personnel in the Qatif area during the Ashura commemoration in September. Processions and gatherings appeared to increase over previous years due to decreased political tensions and greater coordination between the Shia community and authorities. Outside of the Eastern Province, Saudi and expatriate Shia reported it was either difficult or not possible to engage in public commemorations or worship, fearing repercussions from authorities.

Certain Christian congregations were reportedly able to conduct large Christian worship services discreetly and regularly without substantial interference from the CPVPV or other government authorities.

The government reported 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 Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 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 no known 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 were prohibited from being buried in the country. There was, however, at least one public, non-Islamic cemetery in Jeddah, although the government did not support it financially. The only other known non-Muslim cemetery was private and only available to employees of the Saudi Arabian Oil Company (also known as Saudi Aramco). Diplomatic missions reported most non-Muslims opted to repatriate their deceased to their home countries whenever financially possible.

Authorities generally required Shia mosques to use the Sunni call to prayer, including in mixed neighborhoods of both Sunni and Shia residents. In some predominantly Shia areas of al-Ahsa Governorate, authorities allowed Shia mosques to use the Shia call to prayer. In smaller Shia villages where there was virtually no CPVPV presence, reports indicated it was common for Shia businesses to close for three prayer times (not five times per Sunnis practice), or not at all.

The government continued to set policy aimed at enforcing Islamic norms; for example, the government threatened to expel foreigners who did not refrain from eating, drinking, or smoking in public during Ramadan, and it prohibited parents

from giving their children any of 50 listed names deemed blasphemous, non-Arabic, or non-Islamic, according to media reports.

The CPVPV continued to monitor social behavior and promote official standards of morality. Instances of CPVPV field officers who approached and harassed individuals reportedly continued to decrease in most urban areas, such as Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam.

The government did not recognize certificates of educational attainment for graduates of some Shia religious centers of instruction or provide them employment benefits, which the government provided to graduates of Sunni religious training institutions.

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 project continued as part of the government's Vision 2030 announced in April 2016. The government continued to distribute revised textbooks, although intolerant material remained in circulation, particularly at the high school level, including content justifying the execution of "sorcerers" and social exclusion of non-Muslims, as well as statements that Jews, Christians, Shia, and Sufis did not properly adhere to monotheism. In September Human Rights Watch reported some school textbooks continued to employ biased, anti-Semitic, and anti-Shia language. Some teachers reportedly continued to express intolerance of other faiths and of alternative viewpoints regarding Islam.

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 religious materials.

The government continued to exclude perspectives at variance with the prevailing Sunni interpretation of Islam from its extensive government-owned religious media and broadcast programming.

The CPVPV, in coordination with the Information and Communication Technologies Authority, continued to block certain websites as part of a broader policy of censoring online content which reportedly contained "objectionable" content and "ill-informed" views of religion. The CPVPV 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 anticyber crimes law. The government also reportedly located and shut down websites used to recruit jihadis or inspire violence. In September authorities announced they unblocked the calling features of certain private messenger apps, including Viber, Facetime, and Facebook Messenger. Some users reported that WhatsApp and Skype 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 new mosques 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 clerical workers.

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 extend its explicit endorsement of these mosques, according to some NGO reports. The government did not finance the construction or maintenance of Shia mosques. 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. Two Shia mosques in Dammam remained licensed by the government and served approximately 750,000 worshippers. According to NGO reports, construction of Shia mosques was not approved outside Shia enclave areas. 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 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 lived. According to a Human Rights Watch report issued in September “the Saudi judicial system...is controlled by the religious establishment and often subjects Saudi Shia to discriminatory treatment or arbitrary criminalization of Shia religious practices.”

Reported instances of prejudice and discrimination against Shia Muslims continued to occur 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 that 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 reportedly stated that openly identifying as Shia would negatively affect career advancement.

Although Shia constituted approximately 10 to 15 percent of the total citizen population and at least one-quarter of the Eastern Province's population, 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. There was only one Shia minister in the national government. There were no Shia governors, deputy governors, or ministry branch directors in the Eastern Province. There were five Shia members of the 150-member Shura Council. In the two major Shia population centers of Qatif and al-Ahsa, five of the 12 government-appointed municipal council members were Shia, and Shia held 16 of the 30 elected seats on these municipal councils. In predominantly Shia areas, there was some Shia representation in the ranks of the traffic police, municipal government, and public schools. A very small number of Shia occupied high-level positions in government-owned companies and government agencies.

Shia were reportedly 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, while 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.

Some Sunni clerics continued to employ anti-Shia, anti-Christian, and anti-Semitic rhetoric in Sunni mosques during the year, according to media reports. The MOIA maintained active oversight of the country's religious establishment and provided guidance on the substance of Friday sermons and restricted the inclusion of content in those sermons it considered sectarian or political, promoting hatred or racism, or including commentary on foreign policy. Despite these efforts by the government to tone down some of the more intolerant language in sermons, there were reports from local groups that some Sunni clerics, who received government stipends, used religiously intolerant language in their sermons. Cases of government-employed clerics using anti-Semitic language in their sermons were rare and occurred without authorization by government authorities. The law requires government-employed clerics to give all sermons delivered in mosques in the country. The sermons must first be vetted and cleared by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. During the year the ministry 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. According to the ministry, during the year no clerics publicly espoused intolerant views warranting dismissal. Unauthorized imams, however, continued to employ intolerant views in their sermons.

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 did not formally 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 officials in neighboring countries. This was reportedly particularly problematic for Catholic and Orthodox Christians, whose religious traditions require they receive sacraments from a priest on a regular basis.

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, The Protocols of Zion." ("The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" is an anti-Semitic tract originally disseminated by the Czarist secret police

alleging a Jewish plot aimed at world domination.) In addition, the reports characterized the course curriculum as heavily anti-Semitic, speaking of the “evil traits” of the Jewish people.

Observers noted the presence of some anti-Semitic texts at government-sponsored book fairs during the year.

The government’s stated policy was 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.

In May the country hosted the Arab-Islamic-American summit in Riyadh, which focused on “promoting coexistence and constructive tolerance between different countries, religions, and cultures” and emphasized “the importance of renewing and rationalizing intellectual discourse to be consistent with moderate Islam, which calls for tolerance, love, mercy, and peace, stressing that the misconceptions about Islam must be addressed and clarified,” according to the Riyadh Declaration published after the event. In April the government launched the Saudi Ideological Warfare Center, headed by Dr. Mohammed al-Issa under the auspices of the Ministry of Defense, to confront the “roots of extremism and promote an accurate understanding of Islam.” According to social media postings by the center, the IWC aimed to promote a “message of moderation, tolerance, dialogue, and the appreciation of diversity, as well as moderation in Islam.” Also in April, the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue launched the *Tabayan* (clarification) program intended to confront the religio-ideological underpinnings of violent extremism by encouraging critical thinking at the country’s universities.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in October stated during an investment conference in Riyadh that “we are returning to a centrist version of Islam, to a moderate version of Islam that is open to the world, to all faiths, and to all traditions and peoples,” according to local press reports. There were several high-profile examples of outreach to other faiths. In November the Maronite Christian patriarch of Lebanon, Bechara Boutros al-Rai, met with King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh in what Reuters described as the second such visit since 1975. Muslim World League Secretary General, Royal Court Advisor, and member of the *ulema* Mohammed al-Issa visited the Vatican in September to meet with the pope. He visited Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris in November.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Unlike in previous years, there were no reports of so-called religious vigilantes and/or “volunteers” unaffiliated with the CPVPV harassing and assaulting citizens and foreigners.

Instances of prejudice and discrimination against Shia Muslims continued to occur in private sector employment. 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,” which Shia considered insulting, were commonly found in public discourse.

NGOs reported that Nakhawala Shia faced more discriminatory practices than did Twelvers in the Eastern Province. Discrimination in employment and education was based on the Nakhawala surname “al-Nakhly,” which roughly translates as “farmers” and identifies their minority status and group.

While discussion of sensitive topics on social media was frequent, according to Freedom House, “self-censorship [on social media] remained prevalent when discussing topics such as politics, religion, or the royal family.”

During the year a study by Human Rights Watch documented the use of social media by prominent clerics and others to demean Shia Muslims using derogatory terms or by attacking their beliefs and practices.

Anti-Semitic comments by journalists, academics, and clerics appeared in the media. For example, according to press reports, Mohammed al-Arefe, a religious leader based in Saudi Arabia with a large following on social media, delivered repeated anti-Semitic speeches, according to *Politico*.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Senior embassy and consulate officials continued to press 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. In discussions with the Human Rights Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other relevant 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 as well as the role of and impediments imposed by guardianship laws considered as Islamic. 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.

At the May Arab-Islamic-American summit, President Trump joined with King Salman in inaugurating the Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology, known as *Etidal* (moderation), with the aim of promoting moderation and “exposing, combating, and refuting extremist ideology.”

Embassy and consulate officials sponsored nearly 30 individuals to participate in exchange programs in the United States focused on such topics as interfaith dialogue, countering radical ideologies, and the role of faith and religious organizations in providing social services.

Embassy and consulate officials continued to meet with members of religious minorities, including Shia Muslims and citizens who no longer considered themselves Muslims, as well as with non-Muslim foreign residents, to discuss religious freedom concerns.

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 22, the Secretary of State re-designated 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.