

SAUDI ARABIA 2021 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 for under the law. The law criminalizes "anyone who challenges, either directly or indirectly, the religion or justice of the King or Crown Prince." The law bans "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 practice, there is limited tolerance of private, non-Islamic religious gatherings and public displays of non-Islamic religious symbols, but religious practitioners at variance with the government-promoted form of Sunni Islam remained vulnerable to detention, harassment, and, for noncitizens, deportation. According to Shia community members, processions and gatherings continued due to decreased sectarian tensions and greater coordination between the Shia community and authorities, and Ashura commemorations were marked by improved relations between the Shia and other communities and public calls for mutual tolerance. Shia activists stated, however, that authorities continued to target members of the Shia community while carrying out security operations and legal proceedings against them specifically because of their religious beliefs. On June 15, authorities carried out a death sentence against Shia citizen Mustafa al-Darwish, initially arrested for involvement as a minor in antigovernment protests in 2012. Government authorities stated al-Darwish received the sentence not for crimes he committed as a minor but rather for crimes that he committed subsequently as an adult. As many as 41 individuals faced the possibility of execution, according to an October report by the Berlin-based European Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR), which stated that an undetermined number were Shia. On October 12, London-based human rights organization ALQST and Prisoners of Conscience, which monitors and documents arrests in human rights cases in the country, reported that religious leader Musa al-Qarni, a former professor of Islamic jurisprudence, died in prison after his health deteriorated while serving a 20-year prison sentence of which he completed 15 years. On March 29, *al-Watan* newspaper reported that the Ministry of Islamic Affairs (MOIA) fired 54 imams and preachers in Mecca Province because of

ideological and administrative violations. In a September review of Saudi textbooks used in the second semester of the 2020-21 and the first semester of the 2021-22 school years, the Israeli nongovernmental organization (NGO) Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se) reported that the trend of “significant improvement” in content dealing with religions other than Islam had continued from its last review of the Saudi curricula in late 2020. The 2021 Riyadh International Book Fair, organized by the Ministry of Culture under the sponsorship of the King, allowed booksellers to exhibit and sell antisemitic publications. The fair permitted the sale of books about atheism as well.

Some social media platforms carried disparaging remarks about members of various religious groups or “sects.” Terms such as “rejectionists,” which Shia considered insulting, were found in some social media discourse. An Orthodox Jewish rabbi made several unofficial visits to the country to conduct outreach and offer religious services to Jewish residents. His social media posts depicted him in traditional Orthodox clothing and showed positive experiences with Saudis.

In discussions with the Human Rights Commission (HRC), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and other ministries and agencies, senior U.S. officials, including the Charge d’Affaires, 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. Embassy officials engaged regularly with like-minded partners and with religious leaders and participated in interfaith discussions.

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. On November 15, 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 total population at 34.8 million (midyear 2021). In 2019, the UN estimated that approximately 38.3 percent of the country’s residents are foreigners. Between 85 and 90 percent of the approximately 21 million Saudi citizens are Sunni Muslims.

Shia Muslims constitute 10 to 12 percent of the citizen population and an estimated 25 to 30 percent of the Eastern Province's population.

According to Boston University's 2020 World Religions Database, the population includes approximately 31.5 million Muslims, 2.1 million Christians, 708,000 Hindus, 242,000 atheists or agnostics, 114,000 Buddhists, and 67,00 Sikhs.

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, the religion of which is Islam. The Basic Law defines the country's constitution as the Quran and the Sunna and states the "decisions of judges shall not be subject to any authority other than the authority of the Islamic sharia." 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.

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. The law deems children born to Muslim fathers as Muslim.

The judicial system is largely based on laws derived from the Quran and 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. By law, these fatwas must be based on the Quran and Sunna. The Basic Law also states that governance is based on justice, *shura* (consultation), and equality, according to sharia.

The law specifies a hierarchical organization and composition of the CSS, the Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Religious Rulings, 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 (Maliki, 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 counterterrorism law criminalizes, among other things, "calling for atheist thought in any form or calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion." It criminalizes "anyone who challenges, either directly or indirectly, the religion or justice of the King or Crown Prince." The law also bans 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.

According to the Basic Law of Governance, "The Judiciary is an independent authority. The decisions of judges shall not be subject to any authority other than the authority of the Islamic sharia. The courts shall apply rules of the Islamic sharia in cases that are brought before them, according to the Holy Quran and the Sunna, and according to laws which are decreed by the ruler in agreement with the Holy Quran and the Sunna." In the absence of a comprehensively codified 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 that a Muslim male would receive. In some circumstances, other non-Muslims may only receive one-sixteenth the amount that a Muslim male would receive.

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 26 members from various parts of the country, including four Shia members.

The law permits death as punishment for blasphemy against Islam. Courts have not sentenced individuals to death for blasphemy since 1992. Punishments for blasphemy may include lengthy prison sentences. Criticism of Islam, including expression deemed offensive to Muslims, is forbidden on the grounds of preserving social stability.

In 2020, as the result of a Supreme Court decision, the government ended flogging as a *ta'zir* (discretionary) criminal sentence and replaced it with prison sentences or fines. As a result, flogging may no longer be used against those convicted of blasphemy, public immodesty, sitting alone with a person of the opposite sex, and a range of other crimes. However, judicial officials have stated that flogging still may be included in sentences for three *hudood* offenses (crimes that carry specific penalties under the country's interpretation of Islamic law): drunkenness, sexual conduct between unmarried persons, and false accusations of adultery.

In 2020, a royal decree abolished *ta'zir* death penalty sentences for those who committed crimes as minors. The juvenile law sets the legal age of adulthood at 18, based on the Hijri (Islamic lunar) calendar. Minor offenders, however, who are convicted of *qisas*, a category of crimes that includes various types of murder, or *hudood* offenses could still face the death penalty. The royal decree also capped prison sentences for minors at 10 years.

The country is the location 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 King employs the official title of “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques,” in reference to the two cities. Citing reasons of public safety and logistics, the government establishes national quotas for foreigners and issues permits to Muslim residents (including its own nationals) to participate in the Hajj. Saudi authorities continued to limit access to Mecca and Medina, including for the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages, due to ongoing COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

The MOIA vets, employs, and supervises Sunni Muslim clerics. Those who preach at government-owned mosques are government employees who receive a monthly stipend. The MOIA permits only government-employed clerics to deliver sermons and vets the sermons in advance.

The MOIA must approve clerics traveling abroad to proselytize and they operate under MOIA supervision. The stated purpose of this regulation is to limit the ability of religious scholars to travel or to preach overseas and to prevent the actual or apparent 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 must also follow 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 may receive a course on Islamic civilization or alternative coursework in place of the curriculum designed for Saudi students; courses entail one hour of instruction per week. The government permits private international schools to teach courses on other religions or civilizations.

The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) is a government agency charged with monitoring social behavior and reporting violations of moral standards to law enforcement authorities. The CPVPV provides counseling and reports individuals suspected of violating the law to police. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) oversees CPVPV operations on the King's behalf. According to law, the CPVPV must "uphold its duties with kindness and gentleness as decreed by the examples of the Prophet Muhammad." CPVPV field officers do not wear uniforms, but they are required to wear identification badges.

A royal decree bans publishing anything "contradicting sharia, inciting disruption, serving foreign interests that contradict national interests, and damaging the reputation of the Grand Mufti, members of the Council of Senior Religious Scholars, or senior government officials."

Social media users who post or share content considered to attack religion face imprisonment for up to five years under the Cyber Crimes Law. Those found guilty of distributing content online deemed to disrupt public order, public morals, or religious values may also be subject to a fine up to three million riyals (\$800,000).

The government requires 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, indicate other religious designations, such as “Christian.”

The law does not allow for political parties or similar associations. The law does not protect the right of individuals to organize politically and specifically bans organizations with political wings, including the Muslim Brotherhood, as regional and local terrorist groups.

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

Government Practices

Because religion and politics are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. NGOs and Shia activists said authorities committed a range of abuses against members of Shia communities. While NGOs and Shia activists stated that the prosecution of Shia was often based on religious affiliation, observers said that members of other religious groups faced arrest and trial for similar offenses.

On February 7, according to NGOs, the government commuted the death sentences of Dawood al-Marhoon, Abdullah al-Zaher and Ali al-Nimr (nephew of Nimr al-Nimr, a Shia cleric executed by the government in 2016) to 10 years in prison. On October 27 and November 16, authorities released Shia youths Ali al-Nimr and Abdullah al-Zaher following completion of their 10-year prison sentences. Al-Nimr and al-Zaher, along with Dawood al-Marhoon, who remained imprisoned, were among a group of 13 Shia youth previously arrested as minors who faced possible execution, according to ESOHR. The government reviewed their sentences as part of the implementation of a royal decree announced in 2020 abolishing ta’zir death sentences for crimes committed as minors. In a March 3 statement, UN human rights experts welcomed the government’s decision to commute the death sentences given to the three men “for crimes allegedly committed when they were less than 18 years old.” The statement also said the government should “quash” the convictions and release the three men.

The news website Middle East Eye reported that authorities arrested Ali al-Nimr’s father Mohammed Bakr al-Nimr on February 24 in his home in the Eastern

Province town of Awamiyah. The government released Mohammed al-Nimr on February 26. The reason for his detention was not known.

On February 8, according to the NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW), prosecutors amended charges against eight Shia detainees, seeking prison sentences rather than the death penalty for five of the eight – Ahmed Abdul Wahid al-Faraj, Ali Mohammed al-Bati, Mohammed Hussein al-Nimr, Ali Hassan al-Faraj, and Mohammed Issam al-Faraj – who were minors at the time of the alleged commission of the offenses. The remaining defendants were Haidar al-Saffar, Hussein Saeed al-Subaiti, and Mujtaba Abu Kabus. According to ESOHR, in October, the government dropped the request for the death penalty against the five younger prisoners, but all eight still face trial. The men faced charges that included “seeking to destabilize the social fabric by participating in protests and funeral processions,” and “chanting slogans hostile to the regime.” According to ESOHR, in late October, the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC), which focuses on terrorism and national security cases, held a new hearing in the case of eight detainees, including the five minors. The NGO stated the hearing was the first after a break of more than seven months.

On February 10, the SCC sentenced Shia activist Israa al-Ghomgham, detained in 2015 for participating in antigovernment protests, to eight years in prison and an eight-year travel ban, according to ALQST and Amnesty International. The SCC also sentenced al-Ghomgham’s husband, Mousa al-Hashim, to 17 years. The court sentenced four other Shia arrested along with them to prison, with sentences ranging from eight to 15 years: Ahmed al-Matrood received a sentence of 15 years, Khaled al-Ghanim 13 years, Ali al-Ouwaisher 10 years, and Mujtaba al-Muzain eight years.

On August 24, SANAD Rights Organization, a London-based human rights NGO, reported that Shia prisoner Mustafa al-Khayat, convicted on charges involving demonstrations, disrupting security, and carrying weapons, awaited a death sentence upheld by the Supreme Court in 2020.

In February and March, authorities released three activists who had written about discrimination faced by Shia in the country, pending trial. According to an April tweet by Prisoners of Conscience, the government also released one of the men’s wives, who – like her husband – had been held for two years. In October, authorities found one of the men guilty under the Cyber Crimes Law and sentenced him to two years in jail, followed by a two-year travel ban. The judge ruled that

the defendant would be credited with two years of time served but that the travel ban would remain in effect.

As many as 41 Shia individuals faced the possibility of execution, according to an October report by ESOHR. The report added that trials of 32 individuals, most of them Shia, on charges carrying potential death sentences were ongoing, with 10 of them facing preliminary death sentences. As is the case for detainees of any religious group, international human rights NGOs said that many of the convictions were “based on confessions extracted through prolonged solitary confinement and torture” 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.

On June 15, authorities carried out a ta’zir death sentence against Shia citizen Mustafa al-Darwish, initially arrested for involvement as a minor in antigovernment protests in 2012 and charged with membership in a terror cell and participation in an armed revolt. Authorities stated that al-Darwish received the death penalty for crimes that he committed subsequently as an adult. Reprieve, a London-based NGO opposed to the death penalty, said that Darwish’s execution “once again show[ed] that the Kingdom’s claim to have eliminated capital punishment for childhood crimes is not true.” The NGO said that the government told the UN Human Rights Council in February that “anyone who commits a death-eligible crime as a child” will be subject to “a maximum sentence of 10 years in a juvenile institution.” Reprieve also said that Darwish’s execution was contrary to a 2020 Royal Decree that abolished ta’zir death penalty sentences for those who committed crimes as minors and capped prison sentences for minors at 10 years. On May 28, prior to al-Darwish’s execution, UN experts called on the government to halt the process leading to his eventual death, stating that authorities sentenced him for crimes when he was younger than the age of 18 and that the government did not provide due process and a fair trial. Following al-Darwish’s execution, on July 7, the UN experts stated that they were “shocked” after the government did not address their May 28 concerns and that the government’s failure to provide details to his family about his execution inflicted “additional, unjustifiable, and useless pain” on his loved ones.

On August 3, authorities executed Shia Ahmed al-Janabi under a ta’zir sentence for armed rebellion and protesting against the state in Shia-majority Qatif. On September 6, authorities carried out a ta’zir death sentence against Shia citizen

Adnan al-Sharfa for joining a terrorist cell that aimed to “destabilize security in the country” and smuggling.

On July 1, ESOHR said at least four individuals accused of crimes committed as minors remained on death row, including Shia Jalal Hassan al-Labbad. ESOHR reported on December 3 that Labbad was still at risk of execution. Authorities sought the hudood penalty against Labbad in 2019 for *hirabeh* (unlawful warfare or insurgency) on a variety of charges, including participating in protests, some of which dated to when he was a minor.

In May, the NGOs Shia Rights Watch (SRW), Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN), ALQST, and SANAD each reported that Shia Zaheer Ali Sharida al-Mohammed Ali died on May 8 in al-Hai'r Prison. They blamed prison authorities' medical negligence for Ali's death and said he contracted COVID-19 in April.

In August, the SCC upheld a ta'zir death sentence issued on February 21 against Shia citizen Mohammed al-Shakhouri, according to ESOHR and UN experts. Authorities arrested al-Shakhouri in 2017 and tried him in 2019 on charges of destabilizing the social fabric and national cohesion by calling for sit-ins and demonstrations and chanting antistate slogans. The government also charged him with possession of arms, as well as photos and information of individuals classified as terrorists. According to an August 27 letter by UN experts to the government, the appeals court upheld this verdict on August 2, and at year's end the case was pending before the Supreme Court.

In the same August 27 letter to the government, the UN experts raised the case of Asaad Makki Shubbar, a Shia citizen, whom, according to the experts' letter, authorities arrested in Asir Province in 2017 and held without trial for more than two years, subjecting him to “various types of torture and ill-treatment.” According to the letter, interrogators reportedly used “sectarian terms denigrating minority Shia believers and insulted [Shubbar's] religious beliefs.” In 2019, the government charged him with several crimes under the counterterrorism law, including joining a group from Qatif in acts of sabotage, participating in demonstrations, chanting slogans, and calling for participation in demonstrations and sit-ins. The SCC sentenced Shubbar to death in January and, in July, the Specialized Appeals Court upheld his sentence. At year's end, the case was pending before the Supreme Court.

On November 1, the Saudi Press Agency, citing MOI, reported that a ta'zir death sentence had been carried out against Makki Kazem al-Obeid in Damman. The ministry statement said that al-Obeid participated in attacks against security forces and was “linked to people wanted for terrorism-related activities.” The Committee for Human Rights in the Arabian Peninsula “condemned the Saudi regime’s execution” of al-Obeid and said that he was a “Shia prisoner of conscience.”

In February, media reported authorities arrested 65-year-old Aisha al-Muhajiri, reportedly because she continued to preach and teach the Quran at her home in Mecca. Authorities also arrested two other women along with al-Muhajiri, one of whom, according to a news site, was 80 years old.

ALQST alleged in March 2021 that the health of imprisoned Shia cleric Mohammad al-Habib was deteriorating due to neglect. He was closely associated with Nimr al-Nimr, who was executed in 2016.

During the year, the SCC held several hearings in the case of cleric Hassan Farhan al-Maliki, described by HRW as a religious reformer, in detention since September 2017. Earlier in 2017, a criminal court convicted and sentenced al-Maliki to three months on charges of extremism, fanaticism, and holding an impure (*takfiri*) ideology. In December 2020, his son tweeted that the public prosecutor had 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 (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad reported by multiple sources, and thus deemed especially reliable). According to HRW, the charges against him also included criticism of several early Islamic figures, insulting the country’s rulers and the Supreme Council of Religious Scholars, and describing them as extremist.

The SCC continued trials of some clerics, academics, and members of the media for alleged association with the Muslim Brotherhood, which the government continued to regard as a terrorist organization, a view also expressed by the CSS, which stated the Muslim Brotherhood did not represent the true values of Islam. The accused included prominent scholars of Islam Salman al-Odah, Awad al-Qarni, and Ali al-Omari, who were arrested in 2017. According to Saudi and international rights groups, the public prosecutor sought the death penalty against them.

Amnesty International reported in August that authorities tried al-Odah before the SCC in a secret session, where they charged him with 37 counts. Amnesty International reported that since 2018, courts scheduled more than 10 hearings on

his case, which were postponed for months at a time, with no clear explanation being provided to al-Odah or his family. Al-Odah's son stated in a July tweet that his father's physical and mental condition had declined during four years of solitary confinement and that he had partially lost his sight and hearing due to medical negligence. In July, his son said that authorities had denied al-Odah access to family telephone calls for almost a year. According to HRW, authorities barred 18 members of al-Odah's family from traveling abroad since his arrest. In a report released in August, al-Odah's son Salman told Amnesty International "No legal process or court was involved in the bans against my family, and no reason was given by any authority. The bans are mainly to pressure me into silence, even when I'm overseas, and to further pressure my father in jail." In February, UN experts called for an explanation for the repeated postponements of his trial and asked for information regarding his "right to physical and mental health while detained."

During the year, Prisoners of Conscience reported that the SCC issued verdicts in the trials of a number of clerics, religious leaders, and academics arrested in 2017 and charged for offenses related to free expression and their religious views and increased prison sentences previously issued against some of them, including Nasser al-Omar, Mohammed Mousa al-Shareef, Waleed al-Huwairini, Mohammed al-Bishr, Ali Badahdah, Yousef al-Ahmed, and Khalid al-Muhawish. At the time of their arrests, the government said those arrested had ties to a "foreign spy cell" and the Muslim Brotherhood. According to Prisoners of Conscience, the SCC sentenced them to between four and 10 years in prison.

On August 24, SANAD reported that the government continued to detain Sheikh Saad Matar al-Otaibi, a scholar in Islamic politics and public policy and popular preacher on national TV, whom authorities arrested in 2017.

On April 15, Prisoners of Conscience reported that the SCC commuted prison sentences against clerics Dr. Adel Bana'ma, Dr. Ibrahim al-Harhi, and Sheikh Ali Badahdah to four years from eight, five, and six years, respectively. On August 16, Prisoners of Conscience tweeted and on August 24 SANAD confirmed that authorities released Sheikh Khaled al-Ajeemi, whom authorities arrested in 2017, due to failing health. On November 24, Prisoners of Conscience tweeted that authorities extended al-Harhi's sentence to eight years.

On June 24, Prisoners of Conscience reported that the SCC increased the prison sentence of religious leader Sheikh Yousef al-Ahmed from four to 13 years. In December 2020, the SCC sentenced al-Ahmed to four years in prison and a four-

year travel ban on charges that included visiting prisoners of conscience and appearing in a television show hosted by Fahd al-Sunaidi, who is also serving a four-year prison sentence.

In November, ALQST reported that authorities detained Abdulrahman al-Dowaish, son of missing preacher Sulaiman al-Dowaish, after he asked about the whereabouts of his father. On November 10, Prisoners of Conscience tweeted authorities held a secret trial of Abdulrahman al-Dowaish, which took place without his family or legal representation being present. Officials had previously arrested his brother, Abdulwahhab al-Dowaish, in August, according to ALQST. The NGOs DAWN and MENA Rights Group reported that security personnel arrested Sulaiman al-Dowaish in 2016 after he posted several tweets summarizing a religious lecture he delivered that day during a trip to Mecca that warned about the dangers of individuals providing their sons with great privileges and responsibilities without proper oversight and accountability. In March, ALQST reported that it obtained and confirmed information that high-ranking officials “brutally tortured” preacher Sulaiman al-Dowaish after his 2016 disappearance. ALQST stated that the last reported sighting of al-Dowaish was in July 2018, and that nothing has been heard of him since then.

On September 1, ESOHR stated that from 2016 through the end of August 2021, the bodies of at least 88 persons executed or killed in Saudi security raids, including nine minors and three foreigners, were not returned for burial.

According to NGOs and Shia community members, prison officials held Shia inmates in some cases in separate wings of prisons, and they reportedly faced worse conditions than Sunnis.

According to ESOHR, authorities detained Shia cleric Mojtaba al-Nimr on June 6 at King Fahd Airport when he returned from a trip to the Shia holy city of Qom in Iran. Mojtaba al-Nimr is a member of executed sheikh Nimr al-Nimr’s family, although their exact relationship remained unclear.

Prisoners of Conscience reported that on September 14, authorities arrested Abdulrahman al-Mahmoud, a former professor of Islamic faith at Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, on charges that were not made public. There was no update on his case at the end of the year.

On October 12, ALQST and Prisoners of Conscience reported that religious leader Musa al-Qarni, a former professor of Islamic jurisprudence, died in prison after his

health deteriorated while serving a 20-year prison sentence, of which he completed 15 years. “Qarni was subjected to brutal torture, and the Saudi authorities deliberately harmed him by giving him unsuitable medication,” ALQST said on Twitter, adding that it “questions the causes of death & calls for an international investigation.” Prisoners of Conscience tweeted that al-Qarni died after “extremist prisoners” had beaten him and that prison authorities had refused his request to be housed with other older prisoners. In addition, the authorities waited three days to inform al-Qarni’s family of his death. SANAD stated that authorities did not allow al-Qarni’s family to see his body before his funeral. In November, Prisoners of Conscience reported that prison authorities had beaten and withheld medicines from another prisoner arrested with al-Qarni in 2007, Mukhtar al-Hashimi.

In July, the website Together for Justice reported there were no updates since 2020 regarding the arrest of Quran reciter Sheikh Abdullah Basfar, an associate professor of sharia and Islamic studies at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah and imam of the Mansour al-Shuaibi Mosque in the al-Salama neighborhood of Jeddah. The site stated that until his detention was confirmed in September 2020, a month after his arrest, Basfar had not appeared before any court. On December 8, Prisoners of Conscience reported that Basfar remained in detention. At the time of Basfar’s arrest, observers noted that persons of any religious affiliation who expressed views not supported by the government did so at personal risk and that when clerics were arrested, it was often for expressing views counter to government policy.

In 2020, Prisoners of Conscience reported that authorities had arrested Saud al-Fanisan, the former head of the Faculty of Sharia at Imam Mohammed ibn Saud Islamic University, on undisclosed charges earlier in the year. In November, Prisoners of Conscience and SANAN both reported that the SCC had sentenced the 85-year-old al-Fanisan to two years’ imprisonment.

Several human rights NGOs signed a letter publicly calling on the government to return the remains of individuals executed in 2019 in connection with “terrorism crimes.” At the time, HRW reported that at least 33 of the 37 citizens executed by the government were from the country’s Shia minority. ESOHR reported that at the time authorities carried out the sentences, at least six of those executed were minors, a statement which the government denied. Separately, in August, SANAD reported that authorities were refusing the family of executed Shia activist Yousef al-Mushaikhis access to his remains. The government executed al-Mushaikhis in 2017, after arresting him in 2014.

According to an August 16 tweet sent by Prisoners of Conscience, the government sentenced three sons of prominent religious scholar Safar al-Hawali to four years in prison. Authorities arrested the three men, along with their father, his brother, and another son on undisclosed charges in 2018. In 2019, officials released the youngest son, after detaining him for seven months. According to the website Middle East Monitor, authorities charged Safar al-Hawali, in his seventies and facing chronic health issues, although details of the charges remained unknown. In an August 24 post, SANAD stated that a family member reported that one of the three brothers, Abdullah, had serious medical concerns, due in part to having only one kidney and to prison conditions. In a separate post, SANAD noted that in addition to the sentences given to Safar al-Hawali's three sons, authorities also sentenced his brother, Saadallah, and his office manager, Ismail Hassan, to three and a half year sentences.

The SCC sentenced well-known preacher Nasser al-Omar to 10 years in prison. Authorities arrested al-Omar in 2018. He was a professor at the Faculty of Fundamentals of Religion at Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, near Riyadh. Like Safar al-Hawali, he was associated with the Sahwa (Islamic Awakening) movement.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman al Saud, in an April 27 televised interview, cautioned against adherence to one particular school of Islamic jurisprudence or Islamic scholarship. He said any Saudi with extremist views, even if that person had not yet committed a crime, "is a criminal and will face the full force of the law." In the same interview, the Crown Prince said no sharia punishment could be enforced without a clear Quranic stipulation or an explicit stipulation from the Sunna. He also stated that only hadith were to be enforced.

The government continued to incarcerate individuals accused of apostasy and blasphemy, violating Islamic values and moral standards, insulting Islam, and engaging in "black magic" and sorcery.

At year's end, authorities continued to imprison Raif Badawi based on his 2013 conviction for violating Islamic values, violating sharia, committing blasphemy, and mocking religious symbols. In a June 18 post on its website, the NGO Reporters without Borders (Reporters sans Frontiers, or RSF) stated that the government continued to hold Badawi in solitary confinement and limited his contact with the outside world to two phone calls per week with his wife and children, were living in Canada. According to RSF, authorities monitored these calls, which were very short and sometimes suddenly disconnected. Badawi had

originally been sentenced to seven years in prison and 600 lashes in 2013, but a court increased his sentence on appeal to a 10-year prison term and 1,000 lashes, as well as a one million riyal (\$267,000) fine. Badawi received 50 lashes in 2015; the government has not carried out the remaining 950 lashes. The Supreme Court directed that flogging be ended in 2020.

According to media reports, authorities arrested Ahmad al-Shammari and sentenced him to death for apostasy in 2017 after he posted videos to social media in which he renounced Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. He was believed to be incarcerated as of year's end. It was unknown whether any appeals in his case remained pending.

In June, media reported that the Saudi Zakat, Tax, and Customs Authority said a customs officer at King Fahd International Airport in Dammam thwarted an attempt by an air traveler to smuggle suspected sorcery-related pieces into the kingdom. Authorities referred the smuggler and the seized items for possible prosecution.

In March, a Christian convert faced two court cases as well as threats of violence against him and his family, according to media reports. Authorities charged the man in court on March 11 with trying to convert Muslims after he allegedly discussed his own conversion to Christianity. A second court case, on March 26, concerned financial assistance he gave his sister, also a convert to Christianity, for her and her children to flee the country.

On November 17, RSF called for the immediate release of Yemeni journalist Ali Aboluhom, who received a 15-year prison sentence for tweets that, according to Saudi authorities, promoted apostasy, atheism, and blasphemy. According to the Gulf Center for Human Rights, the Criminal Court in Najran sentenced Aboluhom on October 26 to 10 years in prison after convicting him of apostasy and atheism, and another five years in prison for publishing his writings on social media networks that "would prejudice public order, religious values, and morals."

On November 23, local media reported that Public Prosecutor Sheikh Saud al-Muajab issued an order to arrest a man who posted a video on his Twitter account that showed him making remarks insulting the Divine Essence.

On September 21, Prisoners of Conscience reported that the Supreme Court increased prison sentences issued by the SCC against three clerics and academics: Sanhat al-Otaibi from four years to eight years, Ibrahim al-Nasser from three

months to three years, and Omar al-Muqbil from six months to four years. In August, the NGO Together for Justice reported that authorities arrested al-Nasser in 2017 but did not disclose charges. Authorities arrested al-Muqbil in 2019 for criticizing concerts sponsored by the government's General Entertainment Authority, calling them a threat to the country's culture.

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. Members of the expatriate Christian community said that congregations were able to conduct large Christian worship services discreetly and regularly without substantial interference from the CPVPV or other government authorities. Members of other minority faith communities similarly reported less interference in private religious gatherings than public ones.

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.

Authorities generally permitted Muslim detainees and prisoners to perform Islamic religious observances, such as prayers.

On May 23, the MOIA instructed mosques to set loudspeakers at only one-third of the maximum volume and limited the use of loudspeakers for the call for prayers and to signal for prayers to start. The MOIA mandated that full prayers and sermons could not be broadcast via loudspeaker. The MOIA said the changes were a response to complaints from the public, including from the elderly and parents whose children's sleep was disrupted. On May 28, the MOIA modified its decree to allow use of loudspeakers during Eid and Friday prayers. On July 19, Prisoners of Conscience reported that authorities arrested academic and legal advisor Dr. Omar Abdullah al-Saadoun for an article criticizing the decision to restrict the use of loudspeakers.

On March 17, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah announced that domestic pilgrims between the ages of 18 and 70 would be allowed to perform Umrah. On April 8, an official source at the MOI said pilgrims who performed Umrah without a permit during the month of Ramadan would be fined 10,000 riyals (\$2,700), along with a 1,000 riyal (\$270) fine for anyone entering the Holy Mosque in Mecca without a permit. On June 12, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah announced that it would limit the 2021 Hajj to approximately 60,000 vaccinated pilgrims, all living in-country, who had to be free of chronic diseases and be between the ages of 18 and 65. On August 7, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah said the country would begin receiving Umrah pilgrimage requests from abroad for vaccinated pilgrims starting August 9 after nearly 18 months of barring overseas pilgrims due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Foreign Umrah pilgrims who took two approved doses of Covid-19 no longer needed to be institutionally quarantined upon arrival. On September 7, the ministry announced it increased the number of Umrah pilgrims to 70,000 per day under a plan to gradually raise capacity to two million per month. As of September 14, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah no longer required a quarantine or a negative COVID-19 test result prior to issuing a permit to perform prayers at the Holy Mosque in Medina. On September 18, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah announced that 10 million pilgrims performed Umrah since October 4, 2020, following the launch of its “safe Umrah” procedures and the gradual return of pilgrims to the two Holy Mosques. On October 25, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah announced that pilgrims wishing to perform Umrah would no longer be required to wait for 14 days to book for the ritual.

On June 13, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah allowed women to attend without a male guardian as long as they performed the pilgrimage with other groups of women. Some pilgrimage service providers announced they would not accept women without a guardian. Some companies reportedly charged women more than men.

Authorities continued to permit public commemorations of Ashura and other Shia holidays in Qatif, home to the country’s largest Shia population. According to community members, processions and gatherings continued due to decreased tensions and greater coordination between the Shia community and authorities. They stated that the Shia Ashura commemoration was marked by improved sectarian relations and publicity for mutual tolerance. In May, local media reported that the community in the Eastern Province observed the anniversary of the death of Imam Ali bin Abi Talib (the first of the Twelve Imams) in Shia mosques and *housseiniyas* (prayer halls). In Qatif, authorities eased restrictions

imposed after civil unrest in 2011-2012 and took steps to encourage development and tourism to improve conditions for the town's predominantly Shia residents. Shia activists reported that security authorities closed some Shia mosques and husseiniyas in Qatif and al-Ahsa, summoned the individuals in charge, and fined them 60,000 riyals (\$16,000) for violating COVID-19 precautionary measures.

The MOIA maintained active oversight of the country's religious establishment and provided guidance to Sunni imams on the substance of Friday sermons. The MOIA does not vet sermons in advance, but imams must choose from a list of Friday sermons on the MOIA website. The ministry restricted the inclusion of content in those sermons considered sectarian, political, or extremist, promoting hatred or racism, or including commentary on foreign policy. The MOIA may also issue circular notes directing all imams to dedicate their Friday sermons to certain topics, such as denouncing political Islam groups. In this regard, MOIA supervisors may attend Friday sermons to ensure compliance with MOIA directives. According to local observers, Shia clerics did not receive guidance on their sermons from MOIA and did not submit them for preapproval. However, Shia clerics continued to exercise significant self-censorship in light of the government's well-known views on the scope and substance of acceptable preaching.

On October 22, the website Arabi21 reported that MOIA Minister Abdul Latif al-Sheikh directed mosque preachers to dedicate the Friday sermon to warn against "Sururi" thought and the "terrorist al-Sururiya organization, which pursues secrecy to reach its goals, foremost of which is inciting people to revolt against the rulers, divide the Muslim community, sow division among them, and spread wars in their countries." Commentators have referred to Sururism as a movement that is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, representing a blend of the country's Wahhabi movement and Salafi jihadism.

On December 6, the MOIA said in a tweet that Minister al-Sheikh directed imams to use Friday sermons on December 10 to warn against the Tablighi and Da'wah group, a transnational Islamic revivalist movement that originated in India and also known as al-Ahbab. The minister directed that the sermon cover topics that included a declaration of "the misguidance, deviation and danger of this group, and that it is one of the gates of terrorism, even if they claim otherwise," mentioning its prominent mistakes and its "danger to society," and a statement that affiliation with partisan groups, "including (the Tablighi and Da'wah Group), is prohibited in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia."

There were media reports that some Sunni clerics who received government stipends used antisemitic, anti-Shia, and religiously intolerant language in their sermons. 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 express discriminatory or intolerant views in internet postings and in unsanctioned sermons in areas of the country lacking government monitoring.

According to a January 3 report in the newspaper *Okaz*, the government fired seven imams and preachers in al-Bahah Province for failing to condemn the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, as instructed by the MOIA. On March 29, *al-Watan* newspaper reported that the MOIA fired 54 imams and preachers in Mecca Province because of ideological and administrative violations. In September, the Minister of Islamic Affairs said the MOIA had purged religious institutions of individuals who had adopted extremist ideologies.

The government continued to mandate that imams and muezzins of the two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina be “moderate” and “tolerant,” among other requirements, including holding a degree from a Saudi sharia college.

On April 15, former imam of the Holy Mosque in Mecca Sheikh Adel al-Kalbani tweeted that authorities dismissed him without reason as imam of a Riyadh mosque. His dismissal came hours after he appeared in a video announcing that he contracted COVID-19, despite receiving two doses of the vaccine.

On April 25, the *Mirat al-Jazeera* news website reported that authorities demolished the Shia al-Ahd Mosque in Qatif, which authorities said was part of a road expansion project. The website described the action as “part of an arbitrary and systematic sectarian campaign” aimed at the Shia community.

On June 27, according to ALQST, authorities released orator Mohammed Bou Jabara [Bojbara] on completion of a nine-month prison sentence. Security forces arrested Bojbara in October 2020 with eight other young persons on charges related to his participation in *Arbaeen* ceremonies (the Shia mourning observance occurring 40 days after Ashura and the death of Imam Hussein). The same day, authorities released Shia activist Nassima al-Sadah upon completion of a three-year sentence, although a three-year travel ban remained in effect following her release.

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 prohibited. Shia community members reported that authorities permitted Shia pilgrims to celebrate Eid al-Ghadir, a Shia-specific holiday, after the Hajj.

In a July 16 circular, Ajlan bin Abdul Aziz al-Ajlan, the head of the Council of Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry, announced that the country would allow shops to remain open during prayer times, explaining that the measure was intended to “improve the shopping experience and the level of services for shoppers and clients.” Commenting on the decision, Ali Sameer Shihabi, a commentator on Middle East politics and economics with a focus on Saudi Arabia, tweeted that keeping shops open during prayer time was a “hugely symbolic and practical step to end the dominance of the religious class in daily life.”

On August 30, the Minister of Islamic Affairs instructed all mosques to remove books that called for extremism and partisanship and banned unlicensed preaching activities, including proselytizing non-Muslims without permission. The minister also directed mosque officials to participate in “intellectual security” courses (aimed at countering extremist ideologies) held by MOIA or other state agencies.

On May 18, the CPVPV presidency tweeted a fatwa by CSS member Sheikh Fouzan al-Fouzan obligating citizens to report to government authorities anyone who criticized the government and religious scholars.

On January 1, CPVPV head Sheikh Abdulrahman al-Sanad said in an interview with al Arabiya that the CPVPV fired hundreds of employees after reports confirmed that they embraced extremist ideologies.

Mosques continued to be the only legally permissible public places of worship, although husseiniyas existed in areas inhabited by Shia residents. 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 reported violations of the ministry's instructions and regulations in mosques. MOIA oversight of mosques in less populated areas was not always as strict as in urban areas. MOIA maintained a hotline for individuals to report statements by imams that observers considered objectionable. An MOIA mobile

phone app called *Masajed* (mosques) allowed mosque-goers to monitor sermons and rate their preacher on a number of aspects of their work.

While authorities indicated that 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.

The government continued to enforce Islamic norms, such as prohibiting eating, drinking, or smoking in public during Ramadan. On May 10, local media reported that the CPVPV in Riyadh Province intensified its field presence in markets and malls during the last 10 days of Ramadan and the Eid al-Fitr holiday.

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 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 quasigovernmental organization), and, when appropriate, the MFA.

According to government policy, non-Muslims generally were prohibited from being buried in the country. There were, however, public non-Islamic cemeteries in Jeddah and Riyadh that, according to officials, were used in cases where repatriation was not possible, such as when there were no claimants for a body, the family did not accept the body, or the deceased received the death penalty. There also was a private, non-Islamic cemetery in Dhahran available only to Saudi Aramco employees. Diplomatic missions reported most non-Muslims opted to repatriate their deceased to their home countries whenever financially possible.

The government continued a multiyear project, begun in 2007, to revise textbooks, curricula, and teaching methods with the stated aim of removing content disparaging religions other than Islam. On February 15, an HRW statement said the country had taken important steps to purge its textbooks of hateful and intolerant language.

In a September review of Saudi textbooks used in the second semester of the 2020-21 and the first semester of the 2021-22 school years, IMPACT-se reported that the trend of "significant improvement" in content dealing with religions other than Islam had continued from its last review of the Saudi curricula in late 2020.

According to IMPACT-SE, officials either removed or altered 22 anti-Christian and antisemitic lessons and five lessons about “infidels” and polytheists. The NGO reported that this removal included an entire textbook unit on the possible need for violent jihad to spread Islam and protect Muslim lands and praising it as an act of piety. Specifically, IMPACT-se stated that officials altered several lessons that explicitly blamed “the Jews” as a collective for attacking Muslims and Muhammad, instead attributing responsibility to Arabian tribes and in some cases removing references altogether; in addition, they removed references to forbidding friendships with Jews and Christians, formerly referred to as “infidels, as they are enemies of God.” The NGO also reported that authorities removed a series of ahistorical, harmful, and in some cases antisemitic assertions, such as Jewish connections to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount being fabricated by rabbis, and purported Jewish threats to the al-Aqsa Mosque.

In February, HRW noted separately that the country had taken important steps to purge its textbooks of hateful and intolerant language but said current texts continued to disparage practices associated with religious minorities. HRW’s comprehensive review of Education Ministry-produced textbooks for the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years found that they still stigmatized as un-Islamic and prohibited some practices associated with the Shia and Sufi Islamic traditions.

On January 27, the head of the General Presidency of the Two Holy Mosques inaugurated a Mediation and Moderation Academy in the Grand Mosque in Mecca, with the goals of fighting extremist thoughts and promoting mediation and moderation in all aspects of life, according to the Saudi Press Agency.

On March 16, the Ministry of Education announced the establishment of intellectual awareness units in all universities and education departments that were intended “to promote loyalty to religion,” “to spread the values of moderation, tolerance and coexistence, and to prevent extremist thought and address its effects.”

Some travelers entering the country reported they were able to import Bibles for personal use. There were no reports that the government confiscated personal, non-Islamic religious materials. Media reported the confiscation of sorcery-related items.

The government continued to block certain websites as part of a broader policy of censoring “objectionable” content, such as views of religion it considered extremist or misinformed. The government shut down or blocked Twitter accounts for

“religious and ethical violations,” and authorities arrested an undisclosed number of social media users under the Cyber Crimes Law. The government also shut down websites it regarded as being used to recruit jihadis or inspire violence.

Members of the Shia community complained of discrimination based on their religion and had difficulty securing or being promoted in government positions. They were significantly underrepresented in national security-related positions, including the Ministries of Defense and Interior and the National Guard. In predominantly Shia areas, Shia representation was higher in the ranks of traffic police and employees of municipalities and public schools. A small number of Shia occupied high-level positions in government-owned companies and government agencies. Shia were also underrepresented in employment in primary, secondary, and higher education.

According to HRW, the government systematically discriminated against members of Muslim religious minorities, notably Shia, including in the justice system, education, and employment.

At year’s end, the 35-member cabinet contained one Shia minister, Mohammed bin Faisal Abu Saq, who assumed the position of Minister of State for Shura Affairs in 2014. There were no Shia governors, deputy governors, ministry branch directors, or security commanders. Although Shura Council members’ religious affiliations are not publicly announced, there were an estimated seven or eight Shia on the 150-member council. Multiple municipal councils in the Eastern Province, where most Shia Saudis reside, had large proportions of Shia as members, to reflect the local population, including a majority in Qatif and 50 percent in al-Ahsa. In both cities, five of the 12 government-appointed municipal council members were Shia, and Shia held 16 of the 30 elected seats on the municipal councils.

Shia reported the government did not recognize certificates of educational attainment for employment credit for graduates of Shia religious training centers and that the government did not apply the same standards to graduates of Sunni religious training institutions applying for government positions and religious jobs.

According to 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 were 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.

The government financially supported approximately 70 percent of Sunni mosques, with the remaining 30 percent located in private residences or built and endowed by private persons. The construction of any new mosque required permission from 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.

The government did not finance the construction or maintenance of Shia mosques; Shia congregations self-funded construction, maintenance, and repairs. 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 endorse these mosques, according to some NGOs. Authorities prohibited Shia Muslims outside of the Eastern Province from building Shia-specific mosques. Two Shia mosques in Dammam licensed by the government served approximately 750,000 worshippers. Construction of Shia mosques required government approval, and authorities required Shia communities to receive permission from their neighbors to start construction on mosques. There were no licensed Shia mosques in Jeddah and Riyadh. Shia in those areas were obliged to hold prayers in private homes and community centers, where, some Shia said, they were subject to police harassment. Expatriate Shia resident in the country reported threats of arrest and deportation if they gathered privately in large groups to worship.

State security services continued to provide protection for many Shia mosques and gathering places in the Eastern Province. Media and other sources additionally 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.

Reports from Shia community members 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. Eastern Province Shia judges dealing with intra-Shia personal status and family laws operated specialized courts. 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 Qatif and al-Ahsa. Community

members reported Sunni judges sometimes completely disregarded or refused to hear testimony by Shia Muslims.

Observers stated that judges at times discounted the testimony of Muslims whom they deemed deficient in their knowledge of Islam and favored the testimony of Muslims over the testimony of non-Muslims. In certain circumstances, the testimony of a woman equals half that of a man.

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 to which one should report violations of this policy.

In November, King Salman issued a royal approval to grant Saudi citizenship to Shia Islamic scholar and the Secretary General of the Arab Islamic Council in Lebanon Mohammed al-Husseini, along with 26 other Sunni religious scholars, academics, and physicians. According to the press, the King offered citizenship "in recognition of their distinguished services and outstanding contributions."

There is no religious worker visa category, but non-Muslim clergy were able to enter the country to minister to their communities. Non-Muslim clergy also were able to bring religious items, including books, when traveling.

In May, local media reported that authorities removed the "Muslims only" phrase from traffic signs leading to the Holy Mosque in Medina, adding that the signs now read "Haram area," in reference to Medina's Haram, or sacred site. Authorities did not comment on the decision, but media reports attributed it to the kingdom's efforts to promote moderation.

The Crown Prince announced in February a series of judicial reforms intended to codify the law to increase transparency and predictability in judicial decision-making.

According to an October 5 posting on its website, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) stated that the 2021 Riyadh International Book Fair, organized by the Ministry of Culture under the sponsorship of the King, allowed booksellers to exhibit more than two dozen well-known antisemitic books for sale, including numerous editions of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. According to the ADL, other antisemitic books permitted at the 2021 fair featured

references to blood libel, Holocaust denial, Jewish-Masonic conspiracy theories, and portrayals of Jews as evil puppet masters and the killers of divine prophets. The NGO also reported that there were two books demonizing the Baha'i Faith and Yezidism. Other observers reported that the fair permitted the sale of publications about atheism.

According to the ADL, following violence in Jerusalem between Palestinians at the al-Aqsa Mosque and Israeli police, General President for the Affairs of the Two Holy Mosques Sheikh Abdulrahman al-Sudais delivered a May 11 sermon praying for God to “keep the al-Aqsa Mosque, God keep them from the attacker Zionists, the occupying, combatant brutes.” He added, “We seek refuge in you from their butchery and seek protection in you from their evils and all the rest of the enemies of religion.” The same day, Sheikh Salah al-Badir, an imam of the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, delivered a sermon calling for God to “liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque from the usurper Jews and the traitorous occupying Zionists.”

On May 12, on Eid al-Fitr, marking the end of Ramadan, Sheikh Saleh bin Humaid, a member of the CSS, delivered a sermon at the Grand Mosque in Mecca calling on God to “grant victory to our brothers in Palestine over your enemy and their enemy.” He called for God to “cleanse the al-Aqsa Mosque from the filth of the occupier Zionists.” Saudi state television broadcast the sermon and promoted it on social media. In an Eid sermon at the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, al-Humaid urged God to “cleanse the al-Aqsa Mosque from the befoulment of Jews. Oh God, it is incumbent upon you to deal with the usurper Jews and the aggressor Zionists.”

On May 13, separate Eid al-Adha sermons delivered at the Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina urged God to free the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem from “usurping Zionists” and “occupying Jews.” On May 14, Imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca Sheikh Mahir al-Muayqali likewise concluded his Friday sermon with a prayer to God to free al-Aqsa from “usurping, occupying Jews.” On June 11, Chief of the Presidency of the Two Holy Mosques Sheikh Abdulrahman al-Sudais delivered a sermon in the Holy Mosque in Mecca in which he prayed to God to free al-Aqsa from the “usurping occupiers.” On July 30, Sheikh Saleh bin Humaid, a royal advisor and a CSS member, delivered a sermon in the Holy Mosque in Mecca in which he prayed to God to “destroy the usurping, occupying Zionist Jews.”

On April 8, local media reported that Mohammed al-Issa, the Secretary General of the government-sponsored Muslim World League (MWL), sent a letter to Facebook and Twitter urging them to combat Islamophobia. The letter was part of

a campaign to denounce hate in social media platforms and curb anti-Muslim rhetoric.

On June 11, the MWL convened a Declaration of Peace in Afghanistan Conference, bringing together senior scholars from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan to discuss topics such as peace, tolerance, moderation, and reconciliation in Islam.

On August 4, the MWL sponsored talks in Mecca involving approximately 80 Iraqi Sunni and Shia representatives. The two sides renewed calls for an end to sectarian violence and attacks on houses of worship, the release of innocent detainees, and the return of displaced persons to their homes.

On October 19, al-Issa and World Jewish Congress (WJC) President Ronald Lauder met with U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres, urging him to advocate for religious freedom and an end to violence against houses of worship. On October 4, the MWL and WJC made a joint statement before the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, pledging an interfaith commitment to promote and to protect human rights for all. It was the first time Jewish and Muslim representative groups presented a coordinated statement before a UN body.

On October 20, al-Issa met with students during a visit to Yeshiva University in New York, saying that religious communities “have a shared responsibility toward followers of different faiths to build bridges and improve relationships.” In a March video address to an online conference organized by the U.S. Department of Defense, al-Issa said that there was now greater awareness in the Muslim world of the dangers posed by political Islam, led by the Muslim Brotherhood.

In January, cleric and former director of the CPVPV in Mecca Ahmed al-Ghamdi created controversy when he tweeted that Muslims could pray for mercy for non-Muslims, explaining that there was no religious text prohibiting such prayer.

In January, a group of Israeli drivers traveled to Saudi Arabia to compete in the Dakar Rally race, despite a ban on Israeli travelers to the country. On February 2, the English-language newspaper *Arab News* ran the first-ever op-ed in a Saudi newspaper authored by Israeli writers. In March, local media reported that the Association of Gulf Jewish Communities arranged the shipment of 650 pounds of matzah and kosher food to all six Gulf Cooperation Council countries, including Saudi Arabia, for Passover.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Social media provided an outlet for citizens to discuss current events and religious issues, but local residents said self-censorship was common, given the risk of official reprisals. While discussion of sensitive topics on social media was frequent, self-censorship on social media was believed to be widespread when discussing topics such as religion or the royal family. Online discussions included disparaging remarks about members of various religious groups or “sects.” Terms like “rejectionists” (referring to Shia who view as illegitimate the first three caliphs that Sunni Muslims recognize as the Prophet Muhammad’s legitimate successors) which Shia consider insulting, and images of donkeys, comparing them to Shia, were occasionally found in social media discourse.

An Orthodox Jewish rabbi made several unofficial visits to the country to conduct outreach and offer religious services to Jewish residents. His social media posts depict him in traditional Orthodox clothing and show positive experiences with Saudis, whom he publicly described as “happy” to have a rabbi in the kingdom. International media described local residents as stopping to take photographs with the rabbi and offering Hebrew greetings.

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.

On October 31, the Association of Gulf Jewish Communities (AGJC) told the Saudi-owned al Arabiya English-language news channel that the first-ever Jewish dating website, JSG, which stands for “Jewish Singles in the Gulf,” launched in the Gulf. The aim of the website is to help unmarried Jews living in the country and its neighboring countries meet each other.

The global consulting firm PSB Insights conducted a June poll of youth between the ages of 17 and 24 in 17 Arab states and reported 35 percent of Saudi Arabian respondents said that their religion was the most important factor in their personal identity, consistent with 34 percent regionwide. Other choices offered by the poll as possible responses included family/tribe, nationality, Arabic heritage, political beliefs, language, and gender.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Charge d’Affaires, as well as embassy and consulate officials, engaged Saudi leaders and officials at all levels on religious freedom and tolerance issues. Embassy officers raised religious freedom principles and cases with the HRC, the National Society for Human Rights, members of the Shura Council, the National Committee for Interreligious and Multicultural Dialogue, the MFA, the MWL, the Ministry of Education, and other ministries and agencies during the year. Senior U.S. officials 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.

In meetings with government officials, senior embassy and consulate officials raised reports of abuses and restrictions 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 inquire about the legal status of detained or imprisoned individuals and discussed religious freedom concerns with members of religious minority communities, including Shia and citizens who no longer considered themselves Muslims, as well as with non-Muslim foreign residents. Embassy officials attended or sought access to a number of trials related to religious freedom. The embassy and Department of State officials also engaged Saudi officials regarding these detainees.

Embassy representatives also met with non-Islamic religious leaders to discuss their ability to gather and practice their faith. Embassy officials engaged regularly with like-minded partners and with religious leaders and participate in interfaith discussions and express support for the principles of tolerance and interfaith comity.

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. On November 15, 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.