

# SAUDI ARABIA 2022 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.

On March 12, the government executed 81 men, including 41 Saudi Shia, seven Yemenis and one Syrian, in the largest known mass execution carried out in the kingdom's history. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concern that some of the trials did not meet fair trial and due process guarantees, and that the crimes of which the men were convicted did not meet the "most serious crimes" threshold for capital punishment in international law. NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) said its analysis of the court rulings in the cases of 5 of the Shia defendants also noted due process deficiencies, including allegations of torture and forced confessions. On March 14, Shia news website *Shia Waves* said the government refused to hand over the bodies of the 41 men to their families and banned their funerals. The government also sought the death penalty against other Shia defendants whose trials, on charges ranging from terrorism to participating in demonstrations, had not started or which were ongoing. The government continued to imprison or detain Shia clerics, other Shia, and Sunni clerics on a variety of charges. The government continued to prohibit the public practice of any non-Islamic religion. In practice, there was increased but still limited tolerance of private, non-Islamic religious gatherings and public displays of non-Islamic religious symbols, and religious practitioners at variance with the government-promoted form of Sunni Islam remained vulnerable to detention, harassment, and, for noncitizens, deportation. Authorities continued to permit public commemorations of Ashura and other Shia holidays in Qatif,

home to the country's largest Shia population. According to Shia community members, the government allowed processions and gatherings to continue with 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. Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPC) agents spent much of their time developing Islamic awareness campaigns, rather than their historic role of patrolling the streets and enforcing compliance with strict Islamic observance. Former CPVPC officers said that the committee, effectively, "no longer exists" and that it had been "deprived of all its prerogatives" and "no longer has a clear role." In its annual review of content in Saudi textbooks in June, the NGO Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se) stated that antisemitic content was largely eliminated, and the government had "continue[d] to remove extremist content and proceed in a positive direction."

Users on some social media platforms posted 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 government 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. The U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom visited the country in May and participated in the Forum on Promoting Common Values among the Followers of Religion, organized by the Saudi-sponsored Muslim World League, where he spoke about the urgent need to protect religious freedom worldwide and urged countries to repeal and cease enforcement of blasphemy and apostasy laws. In June, the U.S. State Department's Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism visited Saudi Arabia and met with officials, including the Minister of Islamic Affairs, the

HRC president, the deputy foreign minister, deputy education minister, King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue and the MWL. U.S. Embassy officials engaged regularly with like-minded partners and 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 30, 2022, 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 35.4 million (midyear 2022). 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 67,000 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. Certain non-Muslim foreigners 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, 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, 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 is tasked to follow 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. Judicial officials have stated, however, 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.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Call and Guidance (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 CPVPV is a government agency charged with monitoring social behavior and reporting violations of moral standards to law enforcement authorities. It 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 did not patrol in public during the year and do not wear uniforms, but are required to wear identification badges.

The law criminalizes the publication or downloading of offensive sites, and authorities routinely blocked sites containing material perceived as harmful, illegal, offensive, or anti-Islamic. 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 government approved a new Evidence Law in late 2021. In the past, judges could favor the testimony of Muslims over non-Muslims. The new Evidence Law eliminates this distinction between religions.

The press law requires all online newspapers and bloggers to obtain a license from the ministry. The law 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.”

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, advocates, and Shia activists said authorities continued to commit a range of abuses against members of Shia communities. While NGOs, advocates, and Shia activists stated that the prosecution of Shia was often based on religious affiliation, observers said that members of other religious groups, including Sunni Muslims, faced arrest and trial for similar offenses and faced many of the same due process deficiencies as Shia defendants.

On March 12, the government executed 81 men, including 41 Saudi Shia, seven Yemenis, and one Syrian, in the largest known mass execution carried out in the kingdom’s history. On March 14, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said that some of their trials did not meet fair trial and due process guarantees, and that the crimes of which they were accused and convicted did not appear to meet the “most serious crimes” threshold for capital punishment, as required under international law. Bachelet voiced her concern over the extremely broad definition of “terrorism” in local law, which includes non-violent acts that supposedly “endanger national unity” or “undermine the State’s reputation.” The government convicted 37 of the Shia men in a single case for allegedly attempting to assassinate security officers and targeting police stations and convoys.



On March 15, Human Rights Watch (HRW) echoed Bachelet's concerns after analyzing court rulings for five of the Shia men who were executed: Aqeel al-Faraj, Mortada al-Musa, Yasin al-Brahim, Mohammed al-Shakhouri, and Asad al-Shibr. HRW alleged that their trials were marred with due process violations, including that all five had told the court they were tortured and suffered other ill-treatment during interrogations, and that their supposed confessions had been forcibly extracted through torture. In its analysis of the death sentences and the announcement of executions by the MOI, the HRW stated, "Only three of the 41 Shia men had been convicted on murder charges. The [MOI] statement said the others were convicted of charges that include attempted murder of police officers ..., 'monitoring and shooting at security patrols,' obstructing the arrest of other wanted individuals, and carrying out a number of other crimes including ... 'inciting strife and spreading chaos ...'" HRW stated that it had analyzed multiple trial judgments of members of the Shia community over the past decade and has found similar due process violations in all of them.

Prosecutors sought the death penalty for all five under the legal principle of *hudood*, but judges sentenced them on the basis of *ta'zir*, which allows for wide discretion in sentencing decisions. HRW reported that one of the Shia men executed was Muhammad al-Shakhouri, who received a *ta'zir* death sentence in 2021 after being arrested in 2017. On August 15, the *Washington Post* reported that, in addition to al-Shakhouri, Asaad Makki Shubbar, another Shia, was among those executed. In a 2021 letter to the government, seven UN officials sent a letter to the government regarding al-Shakhouri and Shubbar, both of whom had been sentenced to death. The letter said the trials of the two men "did not meet due process guarantees and [were] for crimes which do not appear to meet the 'most serious crimes' threshold as required under international law."

On March 14, the Shia news website *Shia Waves* said the government refused to hand over the bodies of the 41 Shia men to their families and banned their funerals. The NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that the government did not notify the families in advance or offer an opportunity to say goodbye.

On May 15, the government executed Shia men Hussein al-Abu Abdullah and Muhammad al-Awami from Qatif for terrorism charges. The state-run press

agency (SPA) said the two collaborated with terrorist groups, fomented unrest and insecurity in the country, and attempted to disrupt national security.

In October, the SCC issued death sentences against Shia men Saud al-Faraj, Abdulmajeed al-Nimr, and Jawad Qureiris. According to ESOHR, Qureiris, the brother of Murtaja Qureiris, was charged with crimes committed as a minor. ESOHR reported that during his imprisonment, authorities subjected Jawad Qureiris to torture and denied him access to his family and an attorney and also kept him in solitary confinement for 270 days.

On October 16, the SCC issued death sentences against five Shia men: Ali al-Mabiouq, Muhammad al-Labbad, Ahmed al-Adagham, Muhammad al-Faraj, and Yousef al-Manasif, according to ESOHR.

On October 18, ESOHR reported that the SCC sentenced Shia minor Hassan Zaki al-Faraj to death for crimes allegedly committed when he was 14, according to ESOHR. His alleged crimes included joining groups online via mobile telephone, possessing banned pictures, possessing weapons, joining a terrorist organization, harboring wanted individuals, and assisting wounded persons. The ESOHR report added that the SCC handed down a 34-year prison sentence against Sajjad al-Yassin, a Shia minor arrested at the age of 17. Authorities charged Al-Yassin with participating in demonstrations, chanting slogans, shooting security officers, planning to target the government, and establishing relations with wanted persons. Among the charges were participating in protests in 2013 and 2014, when he was 16 years old.

On November 24, ESOHR reported that the SCC issued a death sentence against Shia Ali al-Safwani over the charge of harboring his brother Fadel and Jawad Qureiris, both sentenced to death.

On August 19, ESOHR said at least six individuals accused of crimes committed as minors remained on death row, including Shia Jalal Hassan al-Labbad, the brother of Muhammad Hassan al-Labbad, who was among the group of Shia men sentenced to death on October 16. ESOHR reported that the SCC Court of Appeals upheld the death sentence issued against al-Labbad. Authorities sought the *hudoob* penalty against al-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. On August 9, the SCC Court of Appeals upheld the death sentence of Abdullah al-Derazi, arrested in 2014 and charged with terrorism-related crimes, some of which were committed while he was a minor. On October 10, Amnesty International said at least three young men, including al-Labbad and al-Derazi, were at risk of execution after an appeal court confirmed their sentences between June and October this year. The trial of two others before the SCC continued as the prosecution demanded the death penalty. All five individuals were minors between the ages of 14 and 18 at the time of their alleged crimes and four of them were from the Shia minority, according to Amnesty International.

As many as 27 Shia individuals, including two Bahraini citizens, faced the possibility of execution, according to an August report by ESOHR. The report added that trials of 27 individuals, most of them Shia, on charges carrying potential death sentences were ongoing, with six 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.

Amnesty International reported that the two Shia Bahraini men (the same individuals mentioned by ESOHR) facing the death penalty, Jaafar Muhammad Sultan and Sadeq Majeed Thamer, were sentenced after what the NGO described as “a deeply flawed trial based on torture-tainted confessions.” Authorities arrested the two men in 2015, and the SCC sentenced them to death in late 2021. In a June 3 letter, following up on a similar communication in January, the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, the special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, and the vice-chair of the working group on arbitrary detention said the government should halt “any possible steps towards the execution” of Sultan and Thamer. The letter called on the government “to annul the death sentence imposed on them [Sultan and Thamer]; to investigate fully the allegations of torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or

punishment that they may have suffered and to ensure that they are re-tried in conformity with international law and standards.”

In March, the website Together for Justice (TAJ) reported that the government asked the SCC to impose the death penalty against Ali Al-Omari, who holds a doctorate in Islamic jurisprudence and who was one of the founders of the Islamic channel 4 Shabab. The NGO ALQST stated that there are unconfirmed reports that the court has sentenced Al-Omari to death. TAJ stated that the government charged him with more than 30 crimes, including forming a youth organization to use as a secret terrorist group. According to TAJ, Al-Omari was suffering from kidney failure and severely deteriorating health due to the lack of medical care in prison.

On February 2 and June 24, authorities released Shia youths Dawoud al-Marhoon and Murtaja Qureiris following completion of their 10- and 8-year prison sentences, respectively. According to a February 2020 tweet by Prisoners of Conscience, an NGO that monitors and documents the arrest of Saudi preachers and religious scholars, authorities imposed an eight-year travel ban on Qureiris following his release. Authorities arrested Al-Marhoun and Qureiris in 2012 and 2014, respectively, as minors for participating in political protests in 2011, according to ESOHR. In 2019, prosecutors sought the death penalty for Qureiris, but the court instead sentenced him to 12 years in prison. In 2021, the government commuted al-Marhoon's death sentence as part of the implementation of a royal decree announced in 2020 abolishing *ta'zir* death sentences for crimes committed as minors.

On October 11, ESOHR reported that the SCC Court of Appeals increased the prison sentence issued against Shia cleric Abdullatif al-Nasser under the country's counterterrorism law from eight years to 13 years. Details of the charges, however, were not made public. Authorities arrested Al-Nasser in 2019 while on his way to Bahrain with his family and sentenced him to eight years in prison on January 26, according to *Mirat al-Jazeera* website.

On December 24, ESOHR reported that the Criminal Court in Medina sentenced Shia cleric Kadhem al-Omari, who was arrested on November 14, to four years in prison. Al-Omari was previously arrested in January and released in April.

According to *Shia Waves*, authorities have detained al-Omari's two sons, Muhammad and Raja'i, since April.

On February 12, SANAD reported that authorities released Shia internet activist Naimah al-Matrood, 48, at the end of her six-year prison sentence. Authorities arrested al-Matrood in 2016 after she participated in antigovernment protests and posted comments on social media calling for the release of detainees. A court sentenced al-Matrood in 2017 to six years in prison followed by a six-year travel ban over charges including participating in antistate demonstrations and rallies, using social media to "incite against the government" and violating public order.

On February 18, the Committee for Human Rights in the Arabian Peninsula reported that authorities released Shia cleric Muhammad Ali al-Abbad, who was arrested in 2018 and sentenced to two years and six months in prison reportedly for demanding the release of Shia cleric Hussein al-Radi.

On July 25, according to ESOHR, the SCC postponed the trial of eight Shia detainees, including five individuals accused of crimes committed as minors (Ahmed Abdul Wahid al-Faraj, Ali Hassan al-Faraj, Muhammad Issam al-Faraj, Ali Muhammad al-Bati, and Muhammad Hussein al-Nimr). The remaining defendants were Haidar al-Saffar, Hussein Saeed al-Subaiti, and Mujtaba Abu Kabus. According to ESOHR, in 2021, 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, on September 26, the SCC sentenced Mohamed Essam al-Faraj to 10 years in prison.

On February 17, Twitter account Prisoners of Conscience, an NGO that monitors and documents the arrest of Saudi preachers and religious scholars, said a court of appeals retried Khalid al-Rashed and increased his prison sentence by eight years to 23 years total. Al-Rashed completed his 15-year prison sentence in 2020, according to Prisoners of Conscience. He was arrested in 2006 allegedly for publicly criticizing the royal family and its international policies, according to Alkarama rights group.

On August 1, SANAD Rights Foundation, a London-based human rights NGO, and Prisoners of Conscience reported that the SCC sentenced Shia cleric Mohamed Reda al-Salman to two and a half years in prison.

On August 22, the Supreme Court sentenced former Imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Sheikh Saleh al-Talib, to 10 years in prison after overturning a previous acquittal. He was arrested in 2018, but no official explanation was issued for his arrest. At the time of his arrest, Prisoners of Conscience said Al-Talib had been arrested after he delivered a sermon on the Islamic duty to speak out against evil in public. A news website said authorities arrested him after he criticized the General Entertainment Authority, a government body which regulates the entertainment industry, including the hosting of concerts and other public performances.

On October 19, the *Mirat al-Jazeera* website reported that the SCC increased the prison sentences of five Shia women from Qatif from seven years to 12 years. According to the website, Sakina al-Dakhil, Afrah al-Mokahal, Amina al-Marzouq, Kifaya al-Tarouti, and Zeinab al-Sheikh were initially sentenced to seven years in prison early in the year on charges of following the Houthi *al-Masira* television channel on Telegram, possessing a religious book authored by Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, possessing photos of executed Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr and Hassan Nasrallah of Hezbollah, and joining a religious group on WhatsApp.

On November 23, ESOHR tweeted that the SCC handed down a 25-year prison sentence to 65-year-old Shia cleric Hashem al-Shakhs. Authorities arrested Al-Shakhs in 2020 in al-Ahsa, Eastern Province. At year's end, no further details were available about his case.

In December, the Nashet Qatifi Twitter account and the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in the Arabian Peninsula said the SCC sentenced four Shia people from Qatif to death after seven years in pre-trial detention: Muhammad Ali al-Shaqaq, Mansour Samir al-Hayek, Raad Muhammad al-Fadl, and Marzouq Muhammad al-Fadl.

In August, almost eight months after the completion of his eight-year sentence, authorities released Saudi-born Palestinian poet and artist Ashraf Fayadh from prison. He was accused in 2014 of spreading atheism through his poetry and was

charged under the anti-cybercrime law for taking pictures with women and storing them on his mobile phone. Fayadh was convicted in 2014 and sentenced to four years in prison and 800 lashes. In 2015, the General Court in the Abha region issued him a death sentence for apostasy, which it later overturned on appeal in 2016, reverting to the original sentence.

On August 23, the UN special rapporteur on human rights defenders said she was very concerned by news that the health deterioration of Shia cleric Muhammad Hassan al-Habib, who was serving a 12-year prison sentence for denouncing religious hatred. He was closely associated with Nimr al-Nimr, a senior Shia cleric, who the government 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 2020, his son tweeted that the public prosecutor had sought the death penalty for al-Maliki on 14 charges, including questioning 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 by religious scholars and followers of Islam). 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. According to the NGO International Service for Human Rights, on October 16, the SCC again postponed the initial hearing for al-Maliki, with no new date set. The NGO Prisoners of Conscience tweeted on September 30 that the hearing had been previously postponed to October 11 and reported that the court's October decision was the 16th postponement of al-Maliki's trial.

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 and Awad al-Qarni, who were arrested in 2017. According to Saudi and international rights groups, the public prosecutor sought the death penalty against them.

On April 4, ESOHR said the SCC postponed several sessions of the trials of cleric Salman al-Odah for unknown reasons. Authorities arrested al-Odah in 2017 and charged him with crimes connected to his alleged ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Qatari government, as well as his public support for imprisoned dissidents. In March, the *Atlantic* reported that al-Odah faces execution by beheading. As of October 5, the court had postponed four out of 14 trial sessions for al-Odah. Al-Odah's son, Abdullah, tweeted in February that his father's physical and mental condition had declined during four and a half years of solitary confinement and that he had partially lost his sight and hearing due to medical negligence. In September, Abdullah said that authorities had denied al-Odah access to family telephone calls for almost three years. According to Amnesty International, authorities barred 19 members of al-Odah's family from traveling abroad since his arrest. In a report released in May, Abdullah told Amnesty International no legal process or court was involved in the bans against his family, and no reason was given by any authority: "Travel bans are an obvious way to blackmail activists' family members, especially those living abroad like myself, in order to silence and intimidate us."

On February 24, the Together for Justice website said the health condition of detained cleric Awad al-Qarni was deteriorating amid deliberate health negligence by prison authorities. In October, his son Nasser, who fled the country to claim asylum in the UK, said his father had been held in solitary confinement since 2017. He said he fled after state security officials warned him that the government would imprison or execute him if he criticized the treatment of his father.

On September 6, SANAD and Prisoners of Conscience reported that the SCC sentenced academics Muhammad al-Hazmi and Ali al-Alma'i to 23 years in prison. On September 10, Prisoners of Conscience reported that the SCC sentenced academics Kadwan al-Alma'i and Rasheed al-Alma'i to 20 years and eight years in prison, respectively. According to SANAD, authorities arrested the four in a series of raids in 2020 in Abha targeting a number of academics after they were seen in a video attending a gathering hosted by detained cleric Awad al-Qarni. Al-Hazmi is a brother-in-law of late cleric Mousa al-Qarni, who died in detention in October 2021.



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 between 2017 and 2021 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, Abdulaziz al-Abdullatif, Abdulrahman al-Mahmoud, Muhmmad bin Ali al-Hazmi (brother-in-law to Musa al-Qarni), Ibrahim al-Duwaish, Ali al-Almai, Rasheed al-Almai, and Muhammad Kadwan al-Almai. According to Prisoners of Conscience, the SCC sentenced them to between eight and 30 years in prison.

On August 27, Prisoners of Conscience reported that the SCC Court of Appeals overturned a decision to release academic Abdulaziz Al-Abdulatif after the expiration of his prison sentence and sentenced him to 20 years in prison. In 2018, the SCC sentenced al-Abdullatif, detained since 2017, to five years in prison for terrorist financing and sympathizing with the Muslim Brotherhood.

On September 10, Prisoners of Conscience reported that the SCC issued a 25-year prison sentence to former professor of Islamic Faith at Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, Abdulrahman Al-Mahmoud. Al-Mahmoud was arrested on September 14, 2021, reportedly for an old video in which he warns against spreading vice in the society.

On September 10, Prisoners of Conscience reported that the SCC sentenced cleric and academic Dr. Ibrahim bin Abdullah al-Dowaish to 15 years in prison. In March 2020, the *New Arab* English-language news website reported that al-Dowaish was believed to be one of four people arrested for claiming that the COVID-19 pandemic was a punishment from God.

In April, SANAD reported that the government had released Saad Matar al-Otaibi in late 2021. Authorities arrested al-Otaibi, a scholar in Islamic politics and public policy and a popular television preacher, in 2017, and following his release, banned him from overseas travel.

On January 12, SANAD and Prisoners of Conscience reported that authorities released the former secretary general of the Mecca-based International Organization of Muslim Scholars, Dr. Saad al-Shahrani, after almost three years in detention without charge. The government detained Al-Shahrani in 2019. On

February 4, Prisoners of Conscience tweeted that authorities released Dr. Fahd al-Sunaidi, whom authorities arrested in 2017, almost one year after the expiration of his four-year prison term.

On February 7, the Court of Appeals upheld a two-year prison sentence against Abdulrahman al-Dowaish, son of forcibly disappeared cleric Sulaiman al-Dowaish, for inquiring about the fate of his father, according to ALQST. Abdulrahman was released on August 29, according to DAWN. 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 that he delivered in Mecca that warned about the dangers of individuals providing their sons with great privileges and responsibilities without proper oversight and accountability. In March 2021, 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 2018, and that nothing has been heard of him since then.

On July 5, Prisoners of Conscience reported that authorities had arrested Malik al-Dowaish, Sulaiman’s son and older brother of Abdulrahman, as part of what the NGO TAJ described as the government’s collective punishment of the families of its political opponents. On August 24, DAWN published an article written by Malik al-Dowaish before his arrest in which he stated authorities had abducted, tortured and forcibly disappeared his father since 2016. On September 2, authorities released Malik, but then rearrested him on September 29, according to Prisoners of Conscience and SANAD. ALQST also reported that the government continues to imprison Abdul Wahhab al-Dowaish, a brother to Malik and Abdulrahman and son of Sulaiman, after authorities sentenced him in 2021 to a three-and-a-half-year sentence for “supporting the Islamic State and holding extremist ideas.”

On February 20, the *Mirat al-Jazeera* website reported that authorities arrested Ali and Jaafar Hassan al-Nimr from al-Awamiya in the Eastern Province to serve the remainder of their prison terms. The two brothers were released on July 7. In March, authorities arrested and released Shia cleric Abduljalil al-Mukrani in al-Ahsa for unknown reasons, according to SANAD and Prisoners of Conscience.

In May, police reportedly arrested approximately 30 Nigerians for violating Islamic traditions by displaying campaign posters of a Nigerian politician in the Holy Mosque of Mecca while performing Umrah.

On June 25, the *Shia Waves* news website and ESOHR reported that authorities arrested five Shia individuals from Qatif and al-Ahsa, including cleric Abdulmajeed al-Ahmed and social media activist Musa al-Khunaizi. On August 12, ESOHR reported that authorities released al-Khunaizi after more than 50 days in detention. NGOs described the men as “activists” and one tweet stated that al-Khunaizi had advocated on behalf of the Shia community.

On June 28 SANAD reported that authorities arrested Syrian cleric Abdulalim Abdullah, member of the board of trustees of the Syrian Islamic Council, and a companion at the Grand Mosque in Mecca for “raising their voices while praying.” Abdullah appeared in a video circumambulating the Ka’aba while praying for the Syrian people and the release of detainees.

On September 3, ESOHR stated that from 2016 through the end of 2021, officials failed to return to families the bodies for burial of at least 132 persons, including nine minors, who were executed or killed in Saudi security raids. Observers believed that most, if not all, of these individuals were members of the Shia community and that the government’s decision not to return their remains was intended to foreclose the possibility of any antigovernment demonstrations.

On September 10, Prisoners of Conscience tweeted that the SCC Court of Appeals sentenced cleric and academic Essam al-Owayed to 27 years in prison after the end of his four-year prison sentence. Al-Owayed was arrested in February 2017 and sentenced in December 2019 to four years in prison for “terrorist financing.” No reasons were given for his new sentence.

On September 12, authorities reportedly arrested a Yemeni resident who published a video clip of himself on social media at the Grand Mosque in Mecca announcing that he performed an Umrah pilgrimage on behalf of Queen Elizabeth II. In the clip, the man reportedly held up a banner saying, “Umrah for the soul of Queen Elizabeth II. We ask God to accept her in heaven and among the righteous.” Security authorities announced the man’s arrest for “violating the

regulations and instructions” of the holy site. Security forces referred him to the public prosecutor to face charges.

On September 23, the *Middle East Eye* (MEE) digital news organization reported that authorities arrested and handed over to Egyptian authorities dissident Ayman Shohoum, 61, after an Egyptian court sentenced him to life imprisonment in absentia and issued an Interpol arrest notice. According to his son, authorities deported Shohoum, an Egyptian citizen and member of the Muslim Brotherhood, to Cairo on September 20, after nearly four months in prison in Saudi Arabia. He told MEE he knew of another four families whose members were deported from Saudi Arabia to Egypt for their political views.

On October 5, ALQST accused authorities of detaining prisoners of conscience after the expiry of their prison sentences, including president of the Islamic Press Association Ahmad al-Suwayan, who completed a three-year sentence in 2020.

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.

In October, the SCC sentenced Mojtaba al-Nimr, a family member of Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr who was executed in 2016, to 12 years in prison. Authorities arrested Mojtaba al-Nimr in 2016 after he returned from a trip to the Shia holy city of Qom in Iran.

On October 12, according to Prisoners of Conscience and SANAD, the SCC issued a 12-year prison sentence to Quran reciter 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, for leading prayers on the grounds of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul in 2014. Authorities arrested him in 2020. *Middle East Eye* stated that the exact reasons for Basfar’s arrest and imprisonment remained unclear but noted that Saudi-Turkish relations at the time of the incident were “extremely strained” and that the incident occurred prior to the reversion of the Hagia Sophia into a mosque.

On November 27, Prisoners of Conscience reported that the public prosecution summoned a teacher at the Two Holy Mosques Saleh bin Abdullah al-Osaimi for

investigation, adding that he was suspended from teaching at the Prophet's Mosque in Medina.

On April 27, Prisoners of Conscience and SANAD both reported that the SCC had increased the prison sentence of 86-year-old Saud al-Fanisan, the former head of the Faculty of Sharia at Imam Muhammed ibn Saud Islamic University, from two years to seven years and suspended three-and-a-half years. The government arrested him in 2020.

According to a June 22 tweet by Prisoners of Conscience, the government increased prison sentences of three sons of prominent religious scholar Safar al-Hawali from four years in prison to six and seven years. 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 a June 22 post, Prisoners of Conscience stated that one of the three brothers, Abdullah, had serious medical concerns, due in part to having only one kidney and to harsh 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 two of his relatives to six-year terms in prison.

The SCC increased the prison sentence of well-known preacher Nasser al-Omar from 10 to 30 years and suspended four years. Authorities arrested al-Omar in 2018. He worked as 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.

On July 23, authorities released Shia human rights defender and writer Nadhir al-Majed, who had been detained since 2017 on charges related to his exercise of freedom of expression, according to ALQST and the Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor. He remained subject to a travel ban for seven years following his release.

On November 24, security service officers arrested the wife and daughter of imprisoned Shia dissident Abdulkarim bin Hussein bin Abdullah al-Nimr, who has

been in detention without trial since 1999 in relation to the Khobar Towers bombing, according to ESOHR and *Shia Waves* website. Officials released the daughter two days later and released the wife on December 7.

On December 20, SANAD and Prisoners of Conscience reported that the SCC sentenced cleric and academic Khalid al-Ajimi to 23 years in prison. Al-Ajimi was arrested in September 2017 and sentenced to three years and eight months in prison in September 2020 for financing terrorist organizations, among other charges. He was released in August 2021 for health reasons but was rearrested three months later.

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.

On March 11, authorities released blogger Raif Badawi from prison after 10 years behind bars but banned him from traveling abroad and from using any social media for another 10 years, according to a Ministry of Interior official. Officials had originally sentenced Badawi to seven years in prison and 600 lashes in 2013 for violating Islamic values, violating sharia, committing blasphemy, and mocking religious symbols. A court later 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. After the Supreme Court abolished flogging in 2020, the government did not carry out the remaining 950 lashes.

According to media reports, authorities arrested Ahmad al-Shammari and sentenced him to death for apostasy in 2017 after he posted videos on 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.

On January 4, the Gulf Center for Human Rights reported that the Court of Appeals in Najran upheld the initial 15-year prison sentence handed down by the criminal court against Yemeni journalist Ali Mohsen Ahmed Aboluhom. He was convicted over tweets that, according to Saudi authorities, promoted apostasy, atheism, and blasphemy.

On July 21, local media reported that police in Dhahran Al Janub, Assir Province, arrested a Saudi man for insulting God in a video posted on Twitter. Authorities said that they “took legal action” against the man, who reportedly suffers psychological disorders, and “referred him to the competent authority.”

On July 25, Prisoners of Conscience reported that the Supreme Court overturned a decision to release Muhammed al-Munajjed and ordered his retrial. The government arrested al-Munajjed in 2017 and he appeared before the SCC a year later over charges of protecting members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Saudi Arabia and propagating fighting in conflict zones in Syria and Iraq, among other charges.

Local human rights advocates, international human rights organizations, and the UN special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism criticized the counterterrorism law for its overly broad and vague definitions of terrorism and criticized the government for using it to prosecute peaceful expression and dissent.

On August 22, the Specialized Criminal Court of Appeals reversed a February 2022 acquittal and sentenced Saleh al-Taleb, the former imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, to 10 years in prison. There was no official explanation for his detention and sentencing. Human rights groups reported that authorities arrested al-Taleb, widely considered a strong supporter of the royal family, after he delivered a sermon at the Grand Mosque criticizing those who “propagate indecent westernized activities in mixed events.”

On October 10, Prisoners of Conscience reported that authorities arrested Mohamed Rumaizan al-Farana, professor of Islamic Faith at al-Taif University, a year after he was relieved of his position as the imam of al-Selm Mosque.

On October 10, Prisoners of Conscience said authorities arrested al-Humaidi al-Farana, former imam of al-Jedr Mosque in Ranyah Governorate, Mecca Province, six months earlier for not showing up to deliver a Friday sermon denouncing the Muslim Brotherhood and warning against its ideology as instructed by the MOIA.

On October 12, ESOHR said the Saudi government hasn't yet opened an investigation into the death of religious leader Musa al-Qarni, a former professor

of Islamic jurisprudence. In October 2021, al-Qarni died in prison after his health deteriorated while serving a 20-year prison sentence of which he had completed 15 years.

On October 13, ESOHR, SANAD and Prisoners of Conscience reported that the court of appeals increased the prison sentence issued against Shia human rights activist Israa al-Ghomgham from eight years to 13 years. The government arrested al-Ghomgham, who was the first Saudi woman facing beheading for nonviolent activism, with her husband, Mousa al-Hashim, in 2015 and sentenced her in February 2021 to eight years in prison followed by an eight-year travel ban. In 2021, the SCC sentenced al-Hashim and four other Shia arrested with the couple in 2015 to prison sentences ranging from eight to 17 years.

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.

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.

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.

On June 16, SANAD accused Saudi authorities of using the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimage permissions as a means to repress dissidents, either by preventing



them from entering Saudi Arabia, or by luring them into the country, only to have them arrested and deported to other countries where they are at risk.

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 February 23, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah announced that it canceled the Umrah host visa, which enabled Saudi citizens and residents to bring in and host three to five foreign pilgrims to perform Umrah, describing the cancellation as part of its COVID-19 control strategy. Tourists and visitors were allowed to perform Umrah without a special visa. The government also announced that Muslims attending the World Cup in Qatar would be allowed to perform Umrah without paying for a visa.

Official data released in March showed an 11.6 percent increase in the number of Umrah performers in 2021, reaching 6.5 million.

On March 23, the MOIA banned the live broadcast of prayers from mosques during Ramadan, according to state-run press agency SPA. The ministry banned the use of cameras at mosques to film imams and worshippers during prayers and prohibited the livestreaming of prayers via all kinds of media. Minister of Islamic Affairs Abdullatif al-Sheikh said the ban aimed to avoid any inadvertent mistakes that might negatively affect Muslims, according to *Alekhbariya* news channel.

On April 9, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah announced that it would limit the 2022 Hajj to one million vaccinated Muslims below 65 years of age from both inside and outside the kingdom. The Ministry tweeted that pilgrims from outside the kingdom must submit a negative PCR test result within 72 hours of their departure for Saudi Arabia. Press reports stated that pre-pandemic, about two million persons normally made the pilgrimage.

On April 15, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah allowed women to obtain a visa to perform the Umrah pilgrimage without a male guardian or being part of a group. The previous year, the Ministry 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, while some companies reportedly charged women more than men.

On June 6, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah ruled that Muslims from Europe, the United States, and Australia intending to perform Hajj must apply through the government's Motawif website, abolishing the role of travel agencies in the process. Saudi officials said the change was designed to limit Hajj fraud, where fake travel agencies sell bogus travel packages and run away with the funds. Following that new process, selected pilgrims received their place through an "automated lottery" system, after which they booked and purchased their transport and accommodation directly from the Saudi government. However, the MEE and the *New York Times* reported numerous technical glitches and other failures in the Motawif portal that precluded many from booking travel. Many complained that their applications had been approved, but while payment was pending, their selected travel dates changed and then prices doubled. Moreover, many visas were not issued, nor flights booked, all just days before Hajj began. On June 29, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah said it was working to secure alternative flights, additional seats, and immediate issuance of visas for pilgrims from the UK, the United States, and European countries.

On June 13, Saudi Arabia announced the lifting of all precautionary and preventive measures related to COVID-19. Mask-wearing was no longer required in most enclosed spaces, although they continued to be mandatory in the Two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina. On June 29, Public Security announced that it would impose a 10,000 riyal (\$2,700) fine against pilgrims attempting to perform the Hajj without a permit. On August 2, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah said pilgrims from abroad who wish to perform Umrah are not required to have a negative PCR test result or rapid antigen test result for their entry to Saudi Arabia, but they must have insurance to cover the treatment costs in the event of getting infected with COVID-19.

On July 6, Attorney General Saud al-Mu'jab emphasized the government forbids individuals from raising sectarian and political slogans during Hajj, saying, "such acts would warrant strict criminal accountability."

On October 2, authorities released Iranian pilgrim Khalil Dardmand who was arrested in mid-July during the Hajj pilgrimage following mediation by Iraq and Oman, the Anadolu Agency reported. Dardmand was allegedly arrested for tweeting an image of slain Iranian military commander Qassem Soleimani near the Kaaba on June 30.

On July 7, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah fired and referred for investigation a chief executive and a top official at "one of the Hajj companies" operating services for the 2022 pilgrimage for the failure to provide adequate services to pilgrims.

On August 11, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah allowed holders of tourist and commercial visas to perform Umrah during their stay in Saudi Arabia. It added that citizens of 49 countries and holders of U.S., UK, and Schengen visas would be able to do so by securing their visas online at [VisitSaudiArabia.com](http://VisitSaudiArabia.com) or immediately on arrival at airports.

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, the government allowed processions and gatherings to continue, with greater coordination between the Shia community and authorities. They stated that the Shia Ashura commemoration was marked by improved sectarian relations between the Shia and other communities and public calls for mutual tolerance. The Nashet Qatifi Twitter account tweeted on July 30 and August 8 that authorities banned the unified mourning procession while security officers patrolled Qatif villages to ban mourning banners on the streets and lower the volume of loudspeakers. On July 27, the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in the Arabian Peninsula said the Endowments and Inheritance Department imposed some restrictions on Ashura commemorations in the Eastern Province, including requiring preachers to register with the department, banning mourning banners and flags in public squares and on the streets, and banning mourners from blocking streets. On August 9, local media reported that Shia in Qatif successfully and safely commemorated Ashura thanks to cooperation

between the population and authorities. In Qatif, authorities eased restrictions imposed after civil unrest in 2011-12 and took steps to encourage development and tourism to improve conditions for the town's predominantly Shia residents.

In December, the government sponsored the visit of Archbishop Antonius Morcos of Shobra El-Kheima of the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church, who celebrated Mass for Coptic Christians. Saudi authorities granted the Coptic leader permission to perform services and all Christian rituals for Christians in the Kingdom. The Archbishop entered the country carrying the necessary holy objects and vessels to conduct multiple ceremonies. He was attired in religious garb throughout his visit.

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 may direct imams to dedicate Friday sermons to certain topics, such as denouncing groups associated with political Islam. Imams must choose from a list of Friday sermons on the MOIA website. The ministry restricted content in those sermons considered sectarian, political, or extremist, promoting hatred or racism, or including commentary on foreign policy. During the year, 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. MOIA supervisors sometimes 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. Shia clerics, however, continued to exercise significant self-censorship.

On June 26, Minister of Islamic Affairs al-Sheikh instructed all imams of Riyadh mosques recite the Quran in the classic "Najdi" style of the central Najd region of the country, in order to preserve the linguistic style. He added that the government would transfer noncompliant imams to mosques outside Riyadh. According to the Cairo-based news website, *Arabi21*, "al-Sheikh's statement sparked widespread outrage against him, with tweeters saying that the threat of transferring an imam to another city simply for not adhering to one of the ways of reading the Quran was unacceptable."

On September 19, local media reported that MOIA Minister al-Sheikh directed mosque preachers to dedicate the Friday sermon to discuss God's graces bestowed upon the kingdom under the Saudi leadership and to promote the values of belonging and national cohesion.

On December 26, *Okaz* and the *Saudi Gazette* newspapers reported that the MOIA fired a number of Friday preachers for deputizing others to deliver Friday sermons without notifying the ministry. Both reports stated that the deputized imams chose sermon topics other than those specified in MOIA circulars.

There were 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.

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 August 24, local media reported that King Salman issued an order prohibiting publication of any fatwa, scientific research, or study before verifying preset controls. The controls include not violating the provisions of Islamic sharia, or the state's directions, policies, plans or initiatives, and not to publish anything that calls for division or a breach of state security.

On February 15, the CPVPV branch in Riyadh launched an awareness campaign in shopping malls and using its official vehicles to remind Muslims to obey the rulers and to refrain from joining political parties as an integral part of Salafist Islam (that tradition within Sunni Islam that defines Islam as anything that the Prophet Muhammad said or did and that was upheld by the first three generations of his followers). In January, the French press agency *AFP* reported that the CPVPC agents spend much of their time developing such awareness campaigns, rather than carrying out CPVPC's historic role of patrolling the streets enforcing

compliance with strict Islamic observances. One former CPVPV officer said that the committee, effectively, “no longer exists.” Another said that the CPVPV has been “deprived of all its prerogatives” and that it “no longer has a clear role.”

Mosques continued to be the only legally permissible public places of worship, although *husseiniyas* (Shia prayer halls) 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.

Customs officials reportedly routinely opened mail and shipments to search for contraband. Informants allegedly reported “seditious ideas,” “antigovernment activity,” or “behavior contrary to Islam” in their neighborhoods.

The government continued to enforce Islamic norms, such as prohibiting eating, drinking, or smoking in public during Ramadan. Government policy guidance instructs journalists in the country to uphold Islam, oppose atheism, promote Arab interests, and preserve cultural heritage.

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.

According to a July report in the *Saudi Gazette*, the government asked YouTube to remove ads the government called “inappropriate” because they were said to

“contradict Islamic values and principles and violate media content regulations in the Kingdom.” There was no action taken as of November.

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.

On September 6, the government joined representatives of the other five Gulf Cooperation Council countries in issuing a statement that demanded the streaming service Netflix remove “offensive content,” citing unspecified material that “violates Islamic and societal values and principles.” *Al-Jazeera* stated the move appeared to be in response to “Netflix airing content that includes LGBTQ characters, as well as other material deemed ‘immoral’.”

According to media reports, the government prohibited parents from giving their children any of 50 listed names deemed blasphemous, non-Arabic, or non-Islamic.

According to government policy, non-Muslims are generally not allowed to be buried in the country. There were, however, public non-Islamic cemeteries in Jeddah and Riyadh that, according to officials, they 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.

At the 2022 Riyadh International Book Fair, organized by the Ministry of Culture, booksellers exhibited and sold books about atheism and Judaism. Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* was available in Arabic translation at a few local grocery stores in Riyadh.

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.

In its annual review of content in Saudi textbooks in June, the NGO Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se) stated that antisemitic text was largely eliminated from Saudi textbooks, and the government had “continue[d] to remove extremist content and proceed in a positive direction.” The report found that content teaching antisemitic tropes such as Jewish wealth were removed from the Saudi curricula. The NGO reported that officials had removed Quranic verses describing Jews being turned into monkeys, as well as the antisemitic myth that one of the goals of Zionism is a “global Jewish government.” In addition, the lessons no longer contained Quranic verses prohibiting friendships with Jews and Christians in the past three years. The review found publishers had removed or altered 22 anti-Christian and anti-Semitic lessons and five lessons about infidels and polytheists had either been removed or altered since 2021. However, problematic content remained in all areas examined. The report stated that “there is still enmity toward others in religious studies instead of more focus on the greatness of Islam” and “Jews are still presented as infidels, Jews and Christians in pre-Islamic times are presented as wrongdoers and plotters while adopting Islam” with the intent of tricking Muslims. Textbooks still omitted Israel from maps and still described Zionism as “racist.” According to the 2022 Freedom of Thought report, the school curriculum and messaging from Wahhabi imams preach that so-called “infidels” lack a moral compass, philosophical knowledge, or any alternative positive worldview. The curriculum also promoted highly conservative attitudes toward women and LGBTQI+ persons and the endorsement of religious intolerance, emphasis on jihad and praise of martyrdom remained strong.

On August 23, the Ministry of Education announced the decision to merge study of the Holy Quran and Islamic studies into one subject in elementary and intermediate public schools and that the hours devoted to these subjects would be reduced. The press also reported that more hours will be devoted to the subjects of mathematics, science, English, and Arabic.

Members of the Shia community reported 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.

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 Ahmadiyya Muslims hid their faith to avoid scrutiny, arrest, or deportation.

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 no Shia ministers after the only Shia minister Muhammad bin Faisal Abu Saq was relieved of his position as Minister of State for Shura Affairs on January 13. 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 community members 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.

In November, *Shia Waves* and *Mirat al-Jazeera* websites reported that authorities demolished the Shia al-Harif Mosque in Qatif in order to widen roads and develop the area.

On December 17, *Mirat al-Jazeera* tweeted that since 2017, authorities demolished 16 mosques, 15 husseiniyas, and 1,200 residential and commercial buildings in 21 neighborhoods in Qatif. It added that authorities also demolished 28 archaeological sites in villages and towns in the Qatif region.

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.

The discounting of testimony because of gender or religion was outlawed under the evidence law, which was approved in 2021 and came into effect on July 8. Previously, judges could discount 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 court considered testimony of a woman equal to half that of a man.

The government approved a new personal status law on March 8 and the civil transactions law was also approved in March after the crown prince announced in 2021 that there would be forthcoming legal reforms to laws affecting personal status, civil transactions, evidence, and discretionary sentencing. The government said the changes were intended to increase the legal system's predictability and transparency while also expanding protection for women. The reforms involving discretionary sentencing remained pending at year's end.

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.

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.

Despite the government's 2021 decision to replace the "Muslims only" phrase with "Haram area" on traffic signs leading to the Holy Mosque in Medina, the ban on non-Muslims entering the Mecca and Medina area nonetheless remained in place.

On March 18, following the March 12 execution of 81 individuals, Sheikh Saleh bin Humaid, a member of the CSS, delivered a Friday sermon at the Grand Mosque in Mecca praising the government's decision to execute those who "violated sharia by attacking their own country, killing their compatriots, undertaking terrorist crimes". He described those executed as "traitors who broke their vows of allegiance, betrayed their leadership, their country and their religion, and threatened the security of this country and its holy sites".

On March 18, June 10, and July 29, Saleh bin Humaid, a member of the CSS, delivered Friday sermons at the Grand Mosque in Mecca calling on God to "destroy the usurping occupiers Jews."

On June 5, the government and those of other Gulf states condemned the statements of the spokesperson of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) insulting the Prophet Muhammad. According to press reports, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it condemned and denounced such statements and "reaffirm[ed] its permanent rejection of prejudice against the symbols of the Islamic religion and refuses to prejudice all religious figures and symbols."

On April 8, Secretary General Dr. Muhammad al-Issa of the government-sponsored Muslim World League (MWL) referred to his trip to Auschwitz in 2020 to remember the atrocious crimes committed against the Jewish population during World War Two, saying of his trip that he knew "this obligation .... would establish a new precedent and make tangible progress in relations between Muslim and Jewish religious leaders."

In May, the MWL convened the first-ever "Forum on Common Values among Religious Followers" in Riyadh, which was attended by 90 Christian, Jewish, Hindu,

Buddhist, and Muslim international leaders. The forum's concluding declaration stated that the meeting's purpose was "to enhance cooperation and trust between [sic] global spiritual leaders, ... promote values of moderation and harmony, effectively support efforts to advance tolerance and peace, and ... immunize against the dangers of extremist ideology and behavior." Also in May, a visiting rabbi established the first pop-up kosher kitchen in Saudi Arabia, at the MWL's request, in order to provide kosher meals during a conference of world religious leaders.

Throughout the year, on a bi-monthly basis, the English-language newspaper *Arab News*, owned by a member of the royal family, ran an op-ed by a New York-based rabbi.

On July 8, CSS member and Secretary General of the MWL Muhammad al-Issa, delivered the sermon and led prayer at the Namirah Mosque on the Day of Arafat. In his sermon, al-Issa urged Muslims to treat others well, including those of other beliefs, and to distance themselves from actions that can cause disharmony, hatred, and division. Religious conservatives and critics in other countries denounced the government's decision to have al-Issa deliver the sermon, criticizing al-Issa for his past support of religious dialogue with Jews and Christians.

On July 23, Mecca police said they arrested and referred to the public prosecution a Saudi man who helped an Israeli-Jewish reporter sneak into Mecca "in an explicit violation of the laws that prohibit entry to Mecca for non-Muslims." On July 18, Israel's *Channel 13 News* aired a 10-minute report in which journalist Gil Tamary drove past the Grand Mosque in Mecca and climbed the Mount of Mercy. This triggered an online backlash, with Muslims and Saudis expressing their anger over his deception and apparent disregard for the sanctity of the site. In response, President of the General Presidency for the Affairs of the Two Holy Mosques Abdulrahman al-Sudais stressed the need to respect the sanctity of the kingdom's holy sites, which was a line that could not be crossed for the kingdom. He warned that any violation would not be tolerated, regardless of the nationality of those involved and the nature of their work.

On August 22, the MWL Secretary General al-Issa called the attack on author Salman Rushdie in New York “a crime that Islam does not accept” in an interview with Saudi newspaper *Arab News*.

On December 26, *Arab News* quoted the MWL Secretary General al-Issa as saying that there was no text in Sharia law that prohibited Muslims from extending Christmas greetings to Christians. He was quoted as saying that congratulating non-Muslims on their holidays “is an apparent interest that serves the reputation of Islam. The purpose of these greetings is to promote coexistence and harmony in a world that is in dire need of that.”

On January 27, the King issued a royal decree designating February 22 as a national holiday, “Founding Day,” commemorating the founding of the monarchy in the eighteenth century. According to a February analysis published by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), “in choosing 1727 as the start of the first Saudi state, King Salman and his son and crown prince, Muhammad bin Salman, are diminishing the historical role of the Wahhabi clerical establishment” since the royal family’s close ties to the clerical establishment date to 1745. The WINEP article stated that this announcement reflects the reality that, since Muhammad bin Salman was named Crown Prince in 2017, “the underlying theme of political change in Saudi Arabia has been more nationalism and less religion.” Another scholar from the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), described this decree as “the deliberate departure from [the state’s previous] foundational narrative. The official erasure of Wahabism is an ongoing process and it is not restricted to national holidays and official narratives.” He added, “The event has substantial political significance as it signifies a radical break with the Wahhabi political influence that had legitimized the Saudi political projects since 1744.” The analyst cited revised history textbooks downplaying the religious establishment’s historical role; the government’s recent circumscribing of the CPCPV and enactment of the more secular Public Decency Law as well as other ongoing or planned reforms in cabinet ministries and the legal code as also being part of this process.

In a March interview with the *Atlantic*, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman said, “In Islamic law, the head of the Islamic establishment is *wali al-amr*, the ruler.” According to the article, the country’s rulers typically have sought opinions from clerics, occasionally leaning on them to justify a policy that has been selected in

advance. However, according to the article, bin Salman “does not subcontract his religion out at all.”

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Observers reported citizens discussed current events and religious issues on social media, but local residents said self-censorship was common, given the risk of government 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.

On January 3, during a televised interview with the Rotana television channel, Saudi anthropologist Dr. Saad al-Suwayan called for a policy encouraging intermarriage between Shia and Sunnis; urbanites and Bedouins; and tribal and nontribal people to better integrate society.

An Orthodox Jewish-American rabbi based in Jerusalem made several personal 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. On July 17, the rabbi met in Jeddah with former chief of the CPVPV branch in Mecca Ahmed al-Ghamdi. On August 23, he tweeted a video of himself sounding the *shofar* in Al Ula desert, northwestern Saudi Arabia, marking Elul, the final month in the Jewish calendar.

On August 16, writer Turki al-Hamad tweeted that Christianity and Shia Islam would both have remained small political subsets of Judaism and Islam respectively if not for the “tragic deaths” of Jesus and Hussein bin Ali.

In 2019, the government launched “Riyadh Season,” an annual months-long entertainment and sports festival. The 2022 festival began in October and was scheduled to continue to March 2023. Through November, more than five million people attended its various events; in the 2021-22 festival that ended on March 31, more than 15 million spectators visited numerous events and venues. Social media reactions were largely positive, while some said “Riyadh Season” was contradictory to the country’s religious heritage and conservative customs and would lead to the collapse of Islamic values in the kingdom. On October 27 and 28, the festival hosted “Scary Weekend,” which the *New York Times* stated conveniently coincided with the weekend before Halloween. Participants dressed in Halloween-style costumes. According to press reports, some Muslim social media users criticized the festival’s celebration of once-banned non-Islamic festivals. Others accused the government and religious establishment of having double standards by continuing the country’s nonobservance of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday.

In the November 4 edition of the daily *Okaz*, columnist Abdullah bin Bakhit wrote that Halloween parties in the country reflect the younger generation’s rejection of the many Islamic prohibitions imposed on them for decades and the culture of repression and death that dominated their upbringing. Bin Bakhit said that religious conservatives had failed in their efforts to characterize Halloween observances as rooted in paganism and devil-worship.

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.

In a column in the Saudi-owned, London-based newspaper *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, journalist Hussein Shobokshi decried what he said was the distinction in the Muslim world between the “worldly sciences,” which he described as “a belittling and disparaging” characterization, and the “divine sciences, namely the ideas of clerics.” He wrote that the “complex and uneasy relationship [between science and religion has] made possible the spreading of fairy tales and the adoption of myths instead of science as a source of knowledge.”



In a May 20 interview on the *Al-Arabiya* television network, Marzouq bin Tinbak, identified as an academic and researcher, said that the Islamic world currently does not contribute anything to civilization and progress because it has rejected modernity. He said that traditional Islamic thought was appropriate for past eras, but that today's modern world requires new fatwas and new *ijtihad* (the independent or original interpretation of problems not precisely covered by the Quran, other Islamic texts, or traditional teaching).

On December 24, the English-language newspaper *Arab News* published a special Christmas edition, the first Saudi newspaper to do so. Headlines on the front page read "Saudis feel Xmas spirit like never before," and "Merry Christmas from Arab News." Christmas products such as decorations, artificial trees, and advent calendars were available across local malls in Riyadh.

#### **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 individual cases with the HRC, the National Society for Human Rights, members of the Shura Council, 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 June, the U.S. State Department's Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism visited the kingdom and met with officials, including the Minister of Islamic Affairs, the HRC president, the deputy foreign minister, the International Islamic Fiqh Academy, the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue, and the MWL. The U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom visited the country in May and was among the international visitors who participated in the Forum on Promoting Common Values among the Followers of Religion, organized by the Saudi-sponsored Muslim World League, where he spoke about the urgent need to protect religious freedom worldwide and urged countries to repeal and cease enforcement of blasphemy and apostasy laws.

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.

On October 3, the embassy hosted Muhammad Shafiq, the executive director of the Hickey Center for Interfaith Studies and Dialogue of Nazareth College in Rochester, New York, who engaged with Saudi academics and government officials about the importance of religious tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and strategies to incorporate best practices in Saudi Arabia. On October 5, U.S. Consulate General Dhahran, in the Eastern Province, hosted a dinner for Dr. Shafiq, where he spoke with Sunni and Shi'a academics and scholars on the status of national and global interfaith efforts. Dr. Shafiq also took part in an October 10 interfaith dialogue at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Jeddah. He met with western region sheikhs during a dinner hosted by U.S. Consulate Jeddah on October 11 and spoke with the leadership of the International Islamic Fiqh Academy, an OIC-sub-organ, earlier the same day, a conversation focused on interfaith and civilizational dialogue.

Embassy representatives also met with non-Islamic religious leaders and actors to discuss their ability to gather and practice their faith. Embassy officials engaged regularly with like-minded partners and with religious leaders and actors and participate in interfaith discussions and expressed 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 30, the Secretary of State

redesignated Saudi Arabia as a CPC and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompany designation pursuant to section 407 of the act as required in the important national interest of the United States.