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**WORLD
WATCH
LIST
2024**

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I tjänst för världens förföljda **kristna**

World
Watch
Research

Saudi Arabia: Full Country Dossier

January 2024



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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

January 2024

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Introduction

World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	11	-	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

Copyright note

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Saudi Arabia

Brief country details

Saudi Arabia: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
36,329,000	2,194,000	6.0

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Map of country



Saudi Arabia: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	81	13
WWL 2023	80	13
WWL 2022	81	11
WWL 2021	78	14
WWL 2020	79	13

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Saudi Arabia:	
Main persecution engines	Main drivers
Islamic oppression	Government officials, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family, Violent religious groups
Clan oppression	One's own (extended) family, Government officials, Non-Christian religious leaders, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

Most Christians in Saudi Arabia are living and working temporarily in the country. The majority of expatriate Christians come from low and middle income countries, such as India, the Philippines and Africa, but there are also some from the Western world. Besides being exploited and poorly paid, Asian and African workers are regularly exposed to verbal and physical abuse because of their ethnicity and low status, but their Christian faith can also play a role in this. Expatriate Christians are severely restricted in sharing their Christian faith with Muslims and in gathering for worship, which especially for Christians from low and middle income countries entails the risk of detention and deportation.

The few Saudi Christians from a Muslim background face even more pressure, especially from their families. Expatriate Muslims converting to the Christian faith also face strong persecution, probably similar to the levels they would experience in their home countries. Due to the extremely high pressure, expatriate Christians tend to be silent about their faith and most expatriate and Saudi converts from Islam are forced to live their faith in secrecy or hiding. Nevertheless, the small number of Saudi Christians has been slowly increasing and they are also becoming bolder, sharing their Christian faith with others on the Internet and Christian satellite TV channels. Such public action has led to serious repercussions from Saudi families and authorities.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Saudi Arabia has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. [Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#) (CAT)
2. [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW)
3. [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC)

Saudi Arabia is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Female converts to Christianity face violence and severe deprivation of their fundamental rights due to the existence of the male guardianship system (CEDAW Arts. 2 and 5)
- If discovered, Female Christian converts are incarcerated in their home or their freedom of movement severely restricted by their own families (CEDAW Art. 15)
- Female Christian converts can be married to Muslim men to force them recant their new faith or if already married, they risk divorce and losing custody of their children (CEDAW Art. 16);
- Christian converts cannot raise their children according to their religious beliefs (CRC Art. 14).

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

It is estimated that:

- hundreds of Christians were mentally or physically abused as a result of their faith;
- at least dozens of Christians had to leave their homes and relocate in or outside of the country for faith related reasons;
- at least hundreds of Christians faced sexual harassment or rape, especially house maids from low income countries.
- dozens of Christians were locked away from family and community after their conversion was discovered.

In the WWL 2024 reporting period, a female convert went missing in a persecution context. For security reasons, no further details can be given.

Specific examples of positive developments

In its [annual review of Saudi textbooks](#) in May 2023, the NGO Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se), found that textbook reforms reflect a positive shift towards moderation and openness:

- "Problematic examples regarding Jews and Christians in Islamic Studies textbooks were removed."
- "The trend of removing problematic examples of jihad and martyrdom, as seen in previous reports, has continued. This year, almost all problematic issues have been removed."
- While negative descriptions of some religious groups persist, the importance of peace and tolerance is increasingly emphasized, and new content criticizes radical religious ideologies, including those of Hezbollah, the Islamic State group (IS), al-Qaeda, Houthi militias and the Muslim Brotherhood (which is referred to as a terrorist organization).

According to USCIRF 2023 Saudi Arabia CPC:

- "During the Muslim World League's Forum on Common Values among Religious Followers, held in May, non-Saudi leaders from the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities came to Saudi Arabia to discuss religious issues, though not issues related to religious freedom in Saudi Arabia itself."
- The government has shown growing acceptance towards practices rooted in non-Muslim religious traditions, such as Christmas decorations.

The US State Department (IRFR 2022 Saudi Arabia):

- "In May [2022], the MWL [Muslim World League] 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'."
- "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."
- "In December [2022], 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."
- "On December 24 [2022], 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."

External Links - Situation in brief

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Specific examples of positive developments: annual review of Saudi textbooks - <https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/Updated-Review-Saudi-Textbooks-2022-23.pdf>

WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Saudi Arabia

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2022/23 Saudi Arabia report	AI Saudi Arabia 2022	https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/saudi-arabia/report-saudi-arabia/	27 June 2023
BBC News Saudi Arabia profile - updated 24 February 2023	BBC Saudi Arabia profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14702705	27 June 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI Saudi Arabia Report 2022	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/SAU	27 June 2023
CIA World Factbook Syria - updated 19 June 2023	World Factbook Syria	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/saudi-arabia/	27 June 2023
Crisis24 Saudi Arabia report (Garda World)	Crisis24 Saudi Arabia report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/saudi-arabia	27 June 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit Saudi Arabia profile 2023	EIU Saudi Arabia profile 2023	http://country.eiu.com/saudi-arabia	27 June 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2023 Saudi Arabia	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	27 June 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index - covering 29 countries, Saudi Arabia not included	Democracy Index 2023	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom Index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 Saudi Arabia	https://freedomhouse.org/country/saudi-arabia/freedom-world/2023	27 June 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2022 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2022 Saudi Arabia	https://freedomhouse.org/country/saudi-arabia/freedom-net/2022	27 June 2023
Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries	GIWPS 2021 Saudi Arabia	https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/saudi-arabia/	27 June 2023
Girls Not Brides Saudi Arabia report	Girls not Brides Saudi Arabia	https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/saudi-arabia/	27 June 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 - Saudi Arabia country chapter	HRW 2023 Saudi Arabia country chapter	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/saudi-arabia	27 June 2023
Internet World Stats available in 2023	IWS 2023 Saudi Arabia	https://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#sa	27 June 2023
Middle East Concern – covering 24 countries	MEC Saudi Arabia profile	https://meconcern.org/countries/saudi-arabia/	27 June 2023
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 Saudi Arabia	https://rsf.org/en/saudi-arabia	27 June 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2022 Saudi Arabia	https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/saudi-arabia	27 June 2023
UNDP: Human Development Report Saudi Arabia	UNDP HDR Saudi Arabia	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#/countries/SAU	27 June 2023
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report Saudi Arabia	IRFR 2022 Saudi Arabia	https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/saudi-arabia/	27 June 2023
USCIRF 2023 Saudi Arabia report – covering 17 CPC / 11 SWL	USCIRF 2023 Saudi Arabia CPC	https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Saudi%20Arabia.pdf	27 June 2023
World Bank GCC overview - updated February 2023	World Bank GCC overview	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/gcc/overview	27 June 2023
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook Saudi Arabia - April 2023	Macro Poverty Outlook 2023 Saudi Arabia	https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/65cf93926fdb3ea23b72f277fc249a72-0500042021/related/mpo-sau.pdf	27 June 2023

Recent history

Founded in 1932, Saudi Arabia has been transformed from an under-developed tribal kingdom into one of the richest and most modern nations in the region thanks to the exploitation of its extensive oil reserves. The oil industry grew in the 1950s and drew large numbers of foreign workers to the country, including Christians.

The Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 had little effect in Saudi Arabia. There were some calls for political reform and some small-scale protests, particularly by the Shiite minority in the Eastern Province. The government banned all protests; raised public sector salaries and provided increased benefits for the religious authorities and for low-paid workers. A few minor reforms were promised and implemented, such as easing certain restrictions on women. The country's first elections for municipal councils were held in 2005 and 2011; women were allowed to vote and stand as candidates for the first time in December 2015. After the death of King Abdullah in January 2015, Salman bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud became king and, two months later, Saudi Arabia started a military campaign together with ten other countries to restore the government of Yemen which had been expelled by the Shiite Houthis. The ongoing war in Yemen has resulted in a high number of civilian casualties and a humanitarian crisis, leading to worldwide criticism.

The current king, Salman, is ageing just like the other rulers of the government and they have [reportedly](#) (The Economist, 14 November 2017) struggled with the task of running a modern state, where over 59% of the 34 million citizens are under 30 years of age. The king addressed this problem by appointing his favorite son (according to [analysts](#), The Economist, 14 November 2017), Mohammed bin Salman as Crown Prince in 2017. Prince Mohammed - also

known as MBS - casts himself as a youthful reformer but is transforming Saudi Arabia into a truly absolute monarchy. The crown prince's actions so far have been an anti-corruption sweep, a costly war in Yemen and the temporary blockade of neighboring Qatar. In January 2021 Saudi Arabia [signed a reconciliation deal](#) together with Egypt, Bahrain and UAE to end the Gulf dispute (BBC News, 5 January 2021). In addition, significant changes have been implemented, such as giving approval for women to drive, travel without a male escort (although many families still do not permit this), and being allowed to mix with men that are not relatives. Besides that, the religious police have virtually disappeared from the streets, and entertainment in the form of music and cinema is becoming more common. Tourist visas are also now available which contribute to a feeling of increased freedom. These changes have made MBS popular among Saudi youth; however, his involvement in the killing of Mohammed Khashoggi and Saudi Arabia's role in the war in Yemen have been met with widespread criticism from Western countries.

In 2021 and 2022, there were several cross-border attacks involving Houthi militia and the Saudi Arabia-led coalition. These attacks stopped after the April 2022 ceasefire, which was extended twice. The truce that was broken multiple times by both sides, came to an end in early October 2022 when the warring parties rejected a UN proposal to extend and expand the agreement. The Houthis also threatened to attack oil companies operating in Saudi Arabia.

In terms of international cooperation, in 2022 Saudi Arabia appeared to be having "serious talks with Israel to build business ties and create new security arrangements as the conservative Islamic kingdom senses a shift among its public in favor of establishing official ties with the majority of the Jewish state." ([Wall Street Journal](#), 6 June 2022) However, in November 2023, Saudi Arabia hosted a joint summit of the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) launching a humanitarian aid campaign for Gaza and condemning "Israeli aggression. Saudi Arabia refrained from voting for concrete measures and stated that the possibility of normalization with Israel depended on a peaceful resolution of the Palestinian question.

In September 2022, King Salman bin Abdulaziz promoted Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) from Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister to Prime Minister, further reinforcing the generational transfer of power from the aging king to his son. In a groundbreaking move, Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed to restore diplomatic relations after seven years in March 2023. In May 2023 it was announced that Saudi Arabia was also strengthening diplomatic ties with Syria. Diplomatic missions between the two countries are to reopen after 11 years of closure.

In general, there seems to be more openness in society to expressing and exploring new ideas, including ideas different to those within traditional Islam. One of the options being explored by some citizens is the Christian faith. There are also reports that many of the younger generation would not be against allowing the presence of churches in Saudi Arabia.

Political and legal landscape

The country is an authoritarian state and absolute monarchy. Its royal family – the House of Saud – includes approximately 15,000 members, of whom about 200 have political influence and have held key positions for many years. King Salman is both chief of state and head of government. Political parties are not allowed and there are no national democratic elections to choose political leaders. Every four years the king appoints a Council of Ministers that functions as a cabinet and includes many royal family members. The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index (EIU 2022) therefore classifies the government of Saudi Arabia as 'authoritarian'.

The relationship between the religious establishment and the House of Saud is uneasy and determined by conflicting and complying interests, but both power elements are important to successfully unite the traditionally tribal Saudi society. However, the religious authorities are losing credibility among the population. Whereas they had previously banned satellite TV, Internet, camera phones and travelling abroad, now they are using these technological advances themselves. On the one hand, they have gained in popularity by using these means (e.g. social media), on the other hand it has led to criticism of their being inconsistent. Additionally, the unpopular religious police were stripped of their power to arrest from 2016 onwards, possibly in an attempt to please citizens. The recent changes and reforms implemented by MBS are welcomed by the youth, but have caused dissatisfaction with the religious establishment. More changes are likely to come due to a combination of the authoritarian style of the king and MBS, the call for change by the younger generation and the need for reforms from an economic perspective. This is likely to further reduce the partnership between the religious authorities and the government.

Humanists International ranks Saudi Arabia's government and constitution (along with "Education and Children's Rights," "Society and Community," and "Expression and Advocacy of Humanist Values") in the category of "serious violations," making the Saudi kingdom one of the worst-scoring countries in the [Freedom of Thought Index 2021](#). By leaving Islam, Saudi Christians are punishable under the apostasy law, which carries the death penalty. However, courts have not carried out a death sentence for apostasy in recent years.

Gender perspective

Saudi Arabia was also one of the worst performing country on Georgetown's [Women, Peace and Security Index \(2019/20\)](#) in respect to legal discrimination against women. It performed better in the 2021/22 Index, driven in part by legal reforms that eased restrictions on women's employment (GIWPS 2021 Saudi Arabia). Other positive reforms in recent years include an [easing of travel restrictions for women](#) (BBC News, 2 August, 2019), as well as reports announcing that women can attend the Hajj without a male guardian ([Middle East Eye, 11 October 2022](#)) and can now take up [specific roles](#) within the military (Saudi Moments, 27 April 2023). Significant gender inequalities remain, however. Without [permission](#) from a male guardian, women remain unable to leave prison or obtain certain forms of healthcare (HRW 2023 Saudi Arabia country chapter). Also, although women can now travel without a male relative, many families do not consider this to be proper behavior for their daughters and would punish them if they went against the family's wishes. Within Saudi culture many would consider a female travelling alone to be a prostitute. Guardians can file cases against their female relative

for 'disobedience', which can lead to forced returns to the family home, or imprisonment. While an amendment to the Legal Pleadings System in June 2021 suggests that there is no longer enforcement power for court orders to return women to a male relative in such cases, it failed to prevent courts from penalizing women financially and has been insufficiently implemented (HRW 2023 Saudi Arabia country chapter).

Whilst Saudi Arabia ratified CEDAW in 2000, it made a general reservation, whereby precedence was given to the provisions of Sharia in any areas of conflict with the Convention ([CEDAW, 2006](#)). Family laws continue to discriminate against women, serving to trap women in marriages ([UNFPA, 2019](#)). For example, domestic violence legislation is insufficient and marital rape is not criminalized. By law, a man has the right to divorce his wife without giving a reason, whereas a woman must file for divorce through the courts, which is hard to achieve and will likely result in her losing custody of her children.

Religious landscape

Saudi Arabia: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	2,194,000	6.0
Muslim	32,812,000	90.3
Hindu	734,000	2.0
Buddhist	129,000	0.4
Ethno-religionist	70,300	0.2
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	7,400	0.0
Atheist	12,100	0.0
Agnostic	243,000	0.7
Other	127,600	0.4
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

The desert kingdom controls the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina (the traditional birth and burial place of Mohammed, the main prophet of Islam) and is defined by Wahhabism, a purist and strict interpretation of Islam. Other religions are not allowed to be practiced openly. A Shiite minority of approximately 10% exists and suffers discrimination. It is estimated that there are close to 2.2 million Christians in Saudi Arabia. However, these are not Saudi Arabian citizens but mostly expatriate Asians working temporarily in the country. There are also Christians from other parts of the world. No official churches are allowed in Saudi Arabia of any

Christian denomination. The small number of Saudi Arabian Christians meet in secret, but a larger number have no Christian community to participate in. For some this is due to fear, but for others it is because they do not know that there are other Christians besides expatriates (with whom it would not be wise to mix for reasons of security).

Saudi Arabia finances missionary efforts beyond its own borders through the Islamic missionary organization, "Muslim World League", based in Mecca. Islamic proselytizing literature and missionaries are sent abroad and the construction of Wahhabi mosques in various countries is being financed through oil dollars. Also, the country sponsors academic institutions on condition that centers for Islamic Studies are also built. Apart from numerous copies of the Quran, large amounts of literature promoting hatred against non-Muslims are also shipped abroad every year, for instance to countries in Africa, Southeast Asia and Western Europe.

Gender perspective

Against this religious backdrop, daily life is challenging for both Christian men and women and many live out their faith in secret, especially [converts](#) (US State Department IRFR 2022 Saudi Arabia). Conversion from Islam to Christianity is unacceptable under Islamic law. If discovered, men and boys are more likely to be forced out of the home, whereas women and girls are usually isolated and abused within the home. Both genders risk being killed to 'restore' the family honor.

Economic landscape

According to UNDP Human Development Report Saudi Arabia:

- **Human Development Index (HDI):** Saudi Arabia ranks 35 out of 191 countries and territories with a HDI of 0.875 and is thus in the category of countries with a very high human development (e.g. with good education, long life expectancy and high income per capita)
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 76.9 years
- **Expected years of schooling (2021):** 16.1
- **Gross national income (GNI) per capita:** \$46,130

Other information:

- **Unemployment rate:** 5.1% (Source: [General Authority for Statistics, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia](#) - GASTAT, Q1/2023, 29 June 2023)
- **Youth unemployment:** 16.3% (GASTAT, Q1/2023, 29 June 2023)

A country expert states that not every Saudi has the desire nor the necessity to work. It is very likely that a large part of the 5.1% unemployment figure is represented by people who do not have to work because their family supports them.

According to World Bank's Macro Poverty Outlook 2023 Saudi Arabia:

- "Following a GDP expansion of 8.7 percent in 2022, economic growth is expected to decelerate to 2.9 percent in 2023. Stagnant oil production – as Saudi Arabia abides by OPEC+ agreed production quota – will constrain oil sector growth to 0.8 percent. However, as far as oil prices remain high, governments will have plenty of room to keep fiscal policy loose. Furthermore, the backdrop of high oil prices will support credit growth and soften

the adverse impact of tighter monetary conditions on consumption."

Saudi Arabia ranks as the largest exporter of petroleum and plays a leading role in OPEC. It holds some 16% of the world's known petroleum reserves and the petroleum sector accounts for the majority of export earnings and budget revenues (roughly 90% and 87% respectively according to CIA Factbook) and roughly 42% of GDP. This success has created an economic interdependence with the West, which is where the main consumer demand is found. This has led to a strong political and military relationship, with a series of US military bases being allowed to continue operating in the country. A considerable [arms deal](#) was also signed in 2017 (CNN, 20 May 2017). Since 2015, Saudi Arabia has been leading military intervention in Yemen's civil war in an effort to stabilize the Yemeni government and avert any possibility of its southern neighbor becoming Shiite-controlled.

The majority of employed Saudi citizens work in the public sector, and a central Vision 2030 goal is to reduce this to 20% by 2030. Conversely, Saudis are underrepresented in most private-sector industries, with a few notable exceptions such as agriculture, mining, finance, real estate and utilities. Saudi employment in the private sector is hampered by high wage requirements and mismatched career expectations since private-sector employment usually provides lower wages and less job security than the public sector (Harvard Kennedy School, [The Labor Market in Saudi Arabia](#), 2019). The focus on public-sector employment is also a legacy of the previous rapid expansion of the civil service; job seekers were left with the impression that they could rely on the government for employment. Women are particularly underrepresented in the private sector.

The lack of economic diversity combined with sustained population growth and large number of foreign workers in the private sector has led to a high level of youth unemployment. Other factors are the inferior education system, weak professional networks for youth, lack of information on the availability of jobs and an underdeveloped work ethic due to generous financial allocations by the government. These factors have led to widespread social discontent and a growing gap between rich and poor which can drive young people towards radical Islamic influences. To combat this, the government has started measures to create more jobs for Saudis which involve job quotas for Saudi nationals and raising the salaries of Saudis. Also, companies that adhere to the quotas are granted benefits in applying for visas; others are limited in this respect, making it very expensive for them to hire workers from abroad. This is affecting the number of foreign workers entering the country – including the number of Christians.

Many expatriates left the country in 2019, including a large number of Asian Christians, due to the introduction of a new tax making it less attractive for expatriates to live and work in Saudi Arabia. As a result of COVID-19 and its impact on the economy, the number of expatriates in Saudi Arabia decreased further in 2020. On the other hand, the number of Saudi citizens employed in the labor market rose. In the first quarter of 2023, the unemployment rate in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia saw a decline for both Saudis and expatriates. This positive trend can be attributed to improved labor market indicators and the increasing participation of women in the workforce.

The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU Saudi Arabia profile 2023) expects that the Saudi government's efforts "to increase economic diversification and investment, demonstrated by a

new draft corporate law and a greater focus on privatizations, will shape policy. The country's economy will benefit from higher activity in the oil and non-oil sectors alike."

Gender perspective

Whilst Saudi Arabia is one of the richest countries in the world, women are often economically dependent on men, in part due to patrilineal inheritance practices. Although girls enjoy gender parity in relation to education, they are restricted from assuming jobs in certain fields, and can only begin a position with the consent of their male guardian, which is often denied. The female labor force participation rate was 27.8% in 2022, compared to 80% for men; an increase from 24.6% in 2019 for the former (World Bank data Saudi Arabia). The increase in female labor force participation can be linked, in part, to the [Vision 2030](#) female empowerment reforms which have brought about various legal amendments aimed at expanding women's rights in the workplace, including enhanced protection against employment discrimination. Labor market data from the first quarter of 2023 showed an increased participation rate of 36% for Saudi women (34% for non-Saudi women), and 68.3% for Saudi men (92.9% for non-Saudi men). Even if in the workplace, women earn significantly less than men; according to the World Economic Forum, women earn only 24% of an average man's salary (WEF, 2021, p. 26). Research indicates that Saudi men privately believe that women should be allowed the right to work, but underestimate the extent to which other men will share this viewpoint ([UBS Center Policy Brief, 2019](#)). Some authorities are offering incentives to employers to hire women, and the government has opened up new opportunities for women in the workplace. Highlighting the eagerness of women to work, a recent job application for female train drivers (a role previously denied to women) drew over 28,000 applicants ([CNN, 17 February 2022](#)). Female unemployment rate fell to its lowest in 20 years in March of 2022 ([Bloomberg, 29 September 2022](#)). The objective of the Vision 2030 reform plan, among others, is to create 1 million jobs for women, reduce the female unemployment rate to 7 percent by 2030, and increase the female labor force participation rate to over 30 percent ([World Trade Organization, 30 June 2021](#)).

Social and cultural landscape

According to the World Factbook Saudi Arabia:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Arab 90%, Afro-Asian 10%
- **Main language:** Arabic (official)
- **Urban population:** 85% of total population (2023)
- **Literacy rate:** 98.6%

According to UNDP HDR Saudi Arabia:

- **Population and median age:** 36 million / 32.4 years (2022, [Global Media Insight](#))
- **HDI score and ranking:** Saudi Arabia's HDI has steadily increased from 1990 onwards, reaching 0.875 in 2021, which puts the country in the very high human development category at rank 35 out of 191 countries and territories.
- **Gender inequality Index (GII):** 0.247 ranking it 59 out of 170 countries in 2021.
- Women with account at financial institution or with mobile money-service provider (% of female population ages 15 and older): 63.5

- Share of seats in parliament (% held by women): 20 (2022, World Bank Saudi Arabia data)

The UN Development Program summarizes the main areas which improved as follows: " Between 1990 and 2021, Saudi Arabia's life expectancy at birth changed by 8.0 years, mean years of schooling changed by 5.7 years and expected years of schooling changed by 6.6 years. Saudi Arabia's GNI per capita changed by about 7.2 percent between 1990 and 2021."

Saudi Arabia's social and cultural outlook is changing. The increased role of the Internet, social media and satellite TV has radically influenced Saudi youth culture. The majority of the population is under thirty and they (especially women) are longing for more freedom. Social reforms introduced by the young Crown Prince who was appointed in 2017, are a step forward in that respect. He has [allowed women drivers](#) and various forms of entertainment (Reuters, 27 September 2017). At the end of 2018, a series of concerts were organized alongside the Formula E race in Riyadh. For the first time, dancing was allowed with no gender segregation and about 1,000 foreign tourists were allowed into the country with a special visa to attend these events. Since September 2019, about 50 countries can obtain tourist visas.

But at the same time, there is still hardly any freedom of speech. According to Freedom House's Global Freedom Index 2023:

- "Saudis can engage in some degree of private discussion on political and other topics, including criticism of certain aspects of government performance, but the climate for free expression has deteriorated sharply since the 2018 assassination of Jamal Khashoggi and the arrests of many prominent writers and activists, which served as warnings to ordinary Saudis to avoid dissent. Self-censorship is virtually ubiquitous."

Social dissatisfaction has been in existence for at least twenty years and has been bought off with large sums of money, for example in the form of allocations for housing finance. However, plans to cut civil servant allowances and triple sales tax could stir popular discontent. Changes in the social and cultural landscape have also resulted in more open condemnation of conservative opinions on social media. However, criticism of the government and authorities still comes with high risk. Also, for former Muslims to talk openly about their conversion to Christianity is still not possible without facing the same levels of persecution as in previous years. But there is hope that over time even this will become more possible.

Gender perspective

Internet and social media are also impacting the situation of women in the Wahhabi kingdom. Never before have they stood up for their rights on this scale. Saudi women are starting to study and travel abroad and are sharing their experiences on social media, which is exceptional for a country where until August 2019, women needed the permission of a male family member to travel. In addition, [personal status laws changed](#) in March 2022, so that women no longer need approval to marry and it is more difficult to force them into marriage (The National News, 9 March 2022). Yet this is still a problem in many families, as the family often still determines the choice of the marriage partner and women prefer not to risk damaging their relationship with family. Also, according to USCIRF 2023 Saudi Arabia CPC, the March 2022 Saudi Personal Status Law" codifies systematic religious freedom restrictions affecting women, including the male

guardianship system and a legal prohibition on Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men." Due to the economic situation, women are also needed for joining the workforce. As a result, gender segregation is gradually disappearing. Time will tell how far women can go in this still very conservative Islamic society.

Much like its legal system, Saudi Arabia's social and cultural norms remain heavily patriarchal. Social expectations place women in the domestic sphere, whereas men are expected to assume the role of breadwinner and decision maker. As detailed above (in: *Political and legal landscape*), the actions and decisions of women are still heavily controlled by their male guardian.

Technological landscape

- **Internet usage:** 99% penetration rate – early 2023 ([Datareportal](#))
- **Facebook usage:** 72.7% penetration rate – survey date: April 2023. According to [Napoleon Cat](#), in July 2023 there were 63.1% male Facebook users compared to 36.9% of female users.

According to World Bank Saudi Arabia data:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 126 per hundred people (2021)

Data indicates that the gender gap in relation to technology is relatively small, with a similar proportion of men and women owning mobile phones (Georgetown, GIWPS 2021 Saudi Arabia). The rate of men and women utilizing smart phones to access the Internet is also level ([Statista, 2019](#)). Male guardians may, however, monitor women's cell phone usage and use mobile apps to control their movements. For example, the Saudi app Absher has been used to prevent a woman leaving the country without her guardian's permission ([Human Rights Watch, 6 May 2019](#)).

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (publication date: August 2023):

- "Saudi Arabia's telecom and ICT sectors continue to benefit from the range of programs aimed at diversifying the economy away from a dependence on oil, and establishing a wider digital transformation over the next decade. An essential element of this has been the widening reach of 5G networks, which by mid-2021 reached about half of the population and the majority of cities."
- "The ongoing pandemic has resulted in more people working and schooling from home during periods of restricted travel. This has stimulated growth in mobile data traffic, while the government has encouraged non-cash transactions and so helped develop the vast e-commerce market."
- "While Saudi Arabia's fixed broadband penetration remains relatively low, there has been a concentration of fibre infrastructure and the Kingdom has developed one of the fastest services in the region."

Global Media Insight reports in their [KSA social media statistics 2022](#) (6 March 2023):

- "Today, Saudi Arabia has the largest social media presence in the world."

- The average time a Saudi spends on social media via any device is 3 hours and 24 minutes daily.
- The social media advertising audience profile is made up of almost twice as many men as women (65.8% versus 34.2%).

According to Freedom House (Freedom on the Net report 2023 Saudi Arabia):

- Internet freedom remained highly restricted in Saudi Arabia, which is listed as 'not free' and scores 25 on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free).
- "Internet users in Saudi Arabia face extensive censorship and surveillance, which limits their ability to access diverse content or speak freely online. While internet access is widespread and most social media and communications platforms are available, authorities routinely block websites, remove content, and deliberately manipulate online information to positively portray the government and its policies. Criticism of the government is not tolerated and the threat of harassment or prosecution under broadly worded laws forces many Saudi social media users to self-censor. During the coverage period, local courts handed down multiple multidecade prison sentences for peaceful online expression or activism."
- "Saudi Arabia's absolute monarchy restricts almost all political rights and civil liberties. No officials at the national level are elected. The regime relies on extensive surveillance, the criminalization of dissent, appeals to sectarianism and ethnicity, and public spending supported by oil revenues to maintain power. Women and religious minorities face extensive discrimination in law and in practice. Working conditions for the large expatriate labor force are often exploitative."

Security situation

Travel in the regions bordering Yemen and Iraq has serious security risks. Ever since Saudi Arabia initiated the coalition military action in Yemen, Saudi national infrastructure, in particular aviation interests, have been targeted from Yemen by missiles, drones and water borne IEDs. Saudi air-defense systems intercepted and destroyed most of these.

The Saudi government is combating Islamic militancy on a national level because it is considered a threat to the reign of the royal family. However, private Saudi funds do support Islamic militant groups outside the country and are hence one of the main sources of Sunni-armed conflict in the world, e.g. in Syria and elsewhere. Threats to national security come mostly from Islamic militant groups, such as al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Saudi branch of the Islamic State group (IS). All of these groups oppose the Saudi Islamic monarchy for being insufficiently Islamic, aim to overthrow it and want to eradicate all Western influence in the kingdom. Only IS maintains a recruitment presence in Saudi Arabia and has bombed Shia mosques including other Shia targets and carried out deadly strikes against Saudi security personnel. The primary target for groups affiliated with al-Qaeda are government and military positions. [IS does not seem to differentiate](#) between targets and has also encouraged attacks against Shiite, Sufi and Christian civilians as well as their places of worship (Institute for National Security Studies, Memorandum 193, July 2019).

Finally, according to UK Government Travel Advice (accessed 23 May 2023), [posts](#) on jihadist websites and social media have encouraged attacks against "British, Western and other interests, including teachers, schools, oil workers, residential compounds, military, transport and aviation interests, as well as crowded places, including restaurants, hotels, shopping centres and mosques." As there are no visible churches in Saudi Arabia and Christians mostly gather in private residences in compounds, Christian church services are less likely to be targeted by radical Islamic activity. Nevertheless, Western compounds in general could become targets.

In the past, Saudi religious police have raided Christian meetings and arrested Christians who attended them. With the curbing of the influence of the religious police, these raids have occurred less often during the past few years.

Gender perspective

In terms of criminality, Saudi Arabia is a relatively safe country. Violations of law carry harsh punishments according to strict Sharia law, resulting in a very low crime rate. An example of this is the cutting-off of hands in cases of theft. Also, Saudi law allows for capital punishment for many crimes, such as murder, drug trafficking and possession, adultery, apostasy, homosexuality, rape and in some cases burglary, robbery and arson. However, Georgetown's 2019/20 [Women, Peace and Security Index](#) noted a decrease in community safety in Saudi Arabia over the past years, due to an increase of organized violence. Within the home, too, the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in domestic violence, as victims were forced to spend more time at home with their abusers ([Amnesty International, 8 March 2021](#)). According to Georgetown's more recent 2021/22 Index (GIWPS 2021 Saudi Arabia), 18% of women report intimate partner violence. With the third largest migrant population [globally](#), foreign nationals, especially female domestic workers, are vulnerable to a range of discriminatory practices at the hands of their employers, including trafficking and slave labor (Monitor, 20 December 2022).

Trends analysis

1) Saudi Arabia is trying to diversify its economy

In only a matter of decades, Saudi Arabia developed into one of largest exporters of petroleum worldwide. The Saudi kingdom is very much dependent on the petroleum industry and is trying to diversify its economy and create more jobs for Saudis, as set out in its ambitious plan of socio-economic reforms entitled 'Saudi Vision 2030'. This strategy document also clearly underlines the Saudi kingdom's proud Islamic identity and its claim to a leading role in the Muslim world. In general the country is trying to re-shape its global image and is aiming to stimulate tourism.

2) There is less public enforcement of Islam

In tandem with the above-mentioned trend, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman has expressed his desire to return the kingdom to a more "[moderate](#)" form of Islam (Al-Jazeera, 25 October 2017), introducing reforms such as allowing women to drive and permitting certain forms of entertainment. With the curbing of the religious police's powers, there is less public enforcement of Islam as compared to previous years which has led to relatively more freedom for both expatriates and Saudi citizens. According to observers in Saudi Arabia, these freedoms

have made people feel more free to explore other ideas, ideologies and faiths. While atheism and esoteric philosophies are in vogue, this development has not yet led to much greater openness towards Christian faith. On the other hand, in certain parts of the country some converts from Islam have been able to speak of their new faith to their families without major repercussions. However, the influence of the values and beliefs of tribe and community remains undiminished.

3) Saudi Arabia is going through considerable and rapid social change

The Internet is playing an important role in the rapid social change currently underway. This also leads to increased opportunities for online Christian ministry. Internet speed has increased, leading to high levels of social media usage. Because of this, more Saudis are searching online for faith-related material. However, these increased freedoms can also provide another context for pressure, as individual 'vigilantes' can respond to them on social media, and the government can also monitor them. The country is aiming to both stimulate tourism and maintain its influence on worldwide Islam. Although there have been some positive steps, it is too early to assume that this will lead to a broader acceptance of different religions.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: reportedly - <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2017/11/14/the-rise-of-muhammad-bin-salman>
- Recent history: analysts - <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2017/11/14/the-rise-of-muhammad-bin-salman>
- Recent history: signed a reconciliation deal - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-55538792>
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- Political and legal landscape: Freedom of Thought Index 2021 - <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/asia-western-asia/saudi-arabia/>
- Political and legal landscape: Women, Peace and Security Index (2019/20) - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>
- Political and legal landscape: easing of travel restrictions for women - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-49201019>
- Political and legal landscape: Middle East Eye, 11 October 2022 - <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-hajj-umrah-women-no-male-guardian-required>
- Political and legal landscape: specific roles - <https://www.saudimoments.com/saudi-arabian-women-can-join-the-military-in-these-positions-580443.html>
- Political and legal landscape: permission - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/saudi-arabia#d91ede~:text=Despite%20some%20reforms,higher%20education%20abroad.>
- Political and legal landscape: CEDAW, 2006 - <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/309/97/PDF/N0630997.pdf?OpenElement>
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- Economic landscape: arms deal - <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/19/politics/jared-kushner-saudi-arms-deal-lockheed-martin/index.html>
- Economic landscape: The Labor Market in Saudi Arabia - https://epod.cid.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/2019-08/EPD_Report_Digital.pdf
- Economic landscape: Vision 2030 - <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/v2030/creating-a-vision-for-all/#>

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- Economic landscape: CNN, 17 February 2022 - <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/saudi-women-job-ad-scli-intl/index.html>
- Economic landscape: Bloomberg, 29 September 2022 - <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-29/saudi-female-unemployment-falls-to-the-lowest-level-on-record>
- Economic landscape: World Trade Organization, 30 June 2021 - https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/womenandtrade_e/230621_saudi_arabia.pdf
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- Social and cultural landscape: allowed women drivers - <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-women-driving/rain-begins-with-a-single-drop-saudi-women-rejoice-at-end-of-driving-ban-idUSKCN1C217F>
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- Technological landscape: Napoleon Cat - https://napoleoncat.com/stats/social-media-users-in-saudi_arabia/2023/#section-facebook
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- Security situation: IS does not seem to differentiate - https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Memo193_e.pdf
- Security situation: posts - <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/saudi-arabia/terrorism>
- Security situation: Women, Peace and Security Index - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>
- Security situation: Amnesty International, 8 March 2021 - <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/03/mena-gender-based-violence-continues-to-devastate-lives-of-women-across-region/>
- Security situation: globally - <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/how-ugandan-maids-are-sold-to-wealthy-saudis-on-black-market-4070460>
- Trends analysis: moderate - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/saudi-crown-prince-promises-return-moderate-islam-171024182102549.html>

WWL 2024: Church information / Saudi Arabia

Christian origins

There are various traditions about how Christianity came to the Arabian Peninsula. According to one tradition, a merchant from Najran (on the southern tip of Saudi Arabia) converted to Christianity during one of his trips to modern day Iraq and formed a house-church at the beginning of the 5th century. Another tradition concerns an envoy of the Roman emperor, Constantius, who preached to the Himyarite king of South Arabia, who as a result converted to Christianity. Both traditions indicate that churches were built in South Arabia centuries long before the advent of Islam. After the arrival of Nestorianism, Christianity continued to grow in the 4th century and even flourished in the 5th century.

By the end of the 6th and 7th century, Saudi Arabia had considerable numbers of Jews and synagogues, Christians (probably mostly Nestorians) and church buildings. They were mostly living in what is today the Western Province around the cities of Medina, Khaybar and Tayma. Even today, there are [ruins of a church near Jubail](#) in Eastern Province. It dates from the 4th century and is one of the oldest church sites in the world (Arab News, 13 December 2022).

For hundreds of years, Christian merchants and tribes were living in and travelling through the vast plains of the Arabian Peninsula. This changed with the arrival of Islam (7th - 10th centuries), when Jews and Christians converted to Islam either voluntarily or under duress, with many others being killed or driven from their homes.

In the course of the next few centuries, the Arabian Peninsula became overwhelmingly Islamic and Christianity lost significance. The historical role of Christianity in the region was forgotten for almost 13 centuries. This changed in the 19th century after Britain concluded protection treaties in the eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula; Christian expatriate workers started to enter Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE. Along with them came church buildings in the Gulf states - with the exception of Saudi Arabia, where still no church buildings are allowed.

Church spectrum today

No accurate breakdown of church groups can be published. WCD statistics show the dominant expatriate Christian denomination to be Roman Catholic (over 90%).

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

The level of persecution in Saudi Arabia is generally the same all over the country, although social control is likely to be higher in rural areas. A possible exception are Western expatriate compounds where there is less control and pressure to adhere to strict Islamic norms.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians

Most Christians in Saudi Arabia are expatriates who temporarily live and work in the country. These are Christians both from the Western world, the Middle East and from low and middle-income regions such as India, the Philippines and Africa. Westerners are afforded the most protection, East African and Southeast Asians the least protection. Besides being exploited and poorly paid, Asian and African workers are regularly exposed to verbal and physical abuse because of their ethnicity and low status, as well as facing constant pressure to convert to Islam. Most expatriate Christians are Roman Catholic.

Travel for Catholic and Orthodox priests is limited, which is problematic for Catholic and Orthodox Christians because their religious traditions require the regular reception of sacraments from a priest. Expatriate Christians are severely limited as far as sharing their Christian faith with Muslims and meeting for worship is concerned. Church buildings are not legally permitted, but some Christian worship services are reportedly being held regularly without substantial interference from government officials or the religious police. The category 'Christian migrants' also includes converts, mainly from Islam, who often have an Arab back-

ground. In many cases, conversion arose through disappointment with the radicalization of Islamic society. If these expatriate converts were previously known as Muslims and are part of micro home-country communities, they usually face the same (or more severe) levels of persecution that they would in their home country. Therefore, most live as secret Christians in order to avoid job loss and physical and mental abuse.

Historical Christian communities

Indigenous historical Christian communities do not exist in Saudi Arabia.

Converts to Christianity

There are relatively few Saudi converts in the country and they generally live out their Christian faith in deepest secrecy. Many of them responded to Christian programs via satellite TV or became Christians through visions or dreams, sometimes experienced during the *hajj* - the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca. The Internet also plays a role as this allows access to Christian materials. This is limited, however, since the use of the Internet is strictly regulated by the authorities. Nevertheless, the small number of Saudi converts has been increasing and they are also becoming bolder and some have been talking about Christian faith on the Internet and Christian satellite TV channels. However, such publicity has often led to serious repercussions either from their families or the authorities.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Indigenous non-traditional Christian communities do not exist in Saudi Arabia.

External Links - Church information

- Christian origins: ruins of a church near Jubail - https://www.arabnews.jp/en/middle-east/article_86008/

WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Saudi Arabia

Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

Position on the World Watch List

Saudi Arabia: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	81	13
WWL 2023	80	13
WWL 2022	81	11
WWL 2021	78	14
WWL 2020	79	13

The one-point rise in overall score in WWL 2024 was due to an increase in the violence score of almost 1 point, caused by a higher score for arrests than in WWL 2023. Saudi Arabia also scored high on physical violence against converts as well as on the number of converts forced to leave their homes. The pressure scores for the 5 spheres of life remained very similar to WWL 2023, although some decreased minimally due to the slightly more relaxed atmosphere in society. However, they all remained at an extremely high level. As in preceding years, the highest pressure was in the *Church and National spheres of life*. Saudi Arabia is one of the few countries in the world in which church buildings are still forbidden.

Persecution engines

Saudi Arabia: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Very strong
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Islamic oppression (Very strong)

The desert kingdom is defined by Wahhabism and controls the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The Quran and Sunna (literally "Traditions") are declared to be the Constitution of Saudi Arabia, interpreted according to the strict Hanbali school by religious elders. Saudi Arabia's legal system is based on Islamic law (Sharia). On this basis, only the officially recognized Wahhabi Islam is permitted to be practiced publicly and it is forbidden to openly practice any other religion. All Saudi citizens are assumed to be Muslim and expatriates of other faiths can only practice their faith privately. The death penalty for apostasy from Islam is in force, though there have been no known examples of judicial executions for apostasy in recent years.

Clan oppression (Very strong - blended with Islamic oppression)

Even though Saudi Arabia claims to be a modern nation, very strong *Clan oppression* remains throughout the country. The age-old norms and values from their traditional belief system continue to be enforced influencing the people living within the country. There are strong tribal and clan prejudices that affect marriages, employment, where you can rent or buy a home, and various other social situations. Clans can be identified by their last surname so if a person's

surname reflects a lower tribe or clan, they could be denied employment or given a less desirable position. For those Saudis who do not have a tribal affiliation, there is disdain for them from those who uphold a traditional tribal mentality. *Clan oppression* is clearly mixed with Islam and particularly affects Christians with a Muslim background. Those in more traditional tribes have a harder time breaking out of those norms. For Saudi Christians who are disowned by their family, they will be disowned by the tribe and their community as well.

Dictatorial paranoia (Strong - blended with Islamic oppression)

The Saudi monarchy has supreme power and absolute authority. As such, the monarch can implement any law he desires as long as this complies with Sharia and the Quran. In an unexpected move, King Salman promoted his son to the position of Crown Prince in June 2017. According to observers it was a move to preserve the monarchical ascendancy of the family rather than a focused vision for the country. A key objective of the rulers (especially the king and crown prince) is to maintain the status quo by asserting their own power and by carefully controlling any currents that may be considered dissident or likely to inflame social tensions. Especially Saudi converts to Christianity dishonor the country's proud reputation as the custodian of the two holy mosques and their existence is denied. State officials often act against Christians in reaction to requests by family or community members. The top two authorities of the land have implemented many changes that have affected mostly Saudis but also expatriates in general, including Christians (although Christians are not thereby being specifically targeted). An example of this is the increase in visa fees for all dependents of expatriates resulting in more expatriate Christians leaving for economic reasons, thus decreasing the Christian presence and potential opportunities for being a Christian witness.

Drivers of persecution

Saudi Arabia: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG	-	-	VERY STRONG	-	-	-	STRONG	-
Government officials	Very strong	-	-	Strong	-	-	-	Very strong	-
Ethnic group leaders	Very strong	-	-	Very weak	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Very strong	-	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

(continued below)

Saudi Arabia: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG	-	-	VERY STRONG	-	-	-	STRONG	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Very strong	-	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-
One's own (extended) family	Very strong	-	-	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Islamic oppression

- Government officials (Very strong):** Saudi Arabia likes to be seen as the defender of Islam with a one hundred percent Muslim citizenship. Persecution will be applied to anyone who harms this image. The maintenance and implementation of highly oppressive laws restricting religious freedom by the state authorities are strong sources of persecution. However, the state often plays an otherwise passive role, content to rely upon the strong societal pressures to ensure that Christians and other religious minorities remain in check. This applies to:
 - expatriate Christians (for the many groups that gather regularly for private worship, the key threat comes from neighbors and wider communities - state agencies would typically only intervene in response to community demands);
 - converts to Christianity (especially Saudi nationals), the authorities can and do take severe action, but often in practice this is at the instigation or request of family or community members.

The religious police used to have the role of enforcing religious rules. They would punish those who did not dress appropriately (for instance, men in shorts or women with hair not well-covered) and put pressure on those who remained outside of the mosque at prayer times. The power of this religious police has diminished notably during the past few years.

- Non-Christian religious leaders (Very strong):** Often these are prominent leaders (e.g. imams, university professors, medical doctors or others in high standing in the community), who would take it as their task to protect their community from bad influences. To some extent, this functions like a tribal system in a community where actual tribal influence is low (for example in the cities). The fear of hostile pronouncements or actions by Islamic leaders contributes to the very high degree of caution Christians feel compelled to exercise. The high degree of hostility (especially towards converts) and the significant levels of authority and influence mean that religious leaders contribute significantly to the pressure felt by Christians. For example, these leaders keep calling for radical observance of Wahhabi rules, including the call to put pressure on anyone disobeying the teachings of this strict form of Islam.

- **Ordinary citizens (Very strong):** Generally speaking, there is a pronounced anti-Christian (and anti anything regarded as non-Islamic) attitude in society. Although broader society does not constitute a major direct threat, it can often be a trigger for state or family intervention. For example, if neighbors complain about expatriate Christians meeting for fellowship causing excessive noise or inconsiderate parking, the authorities may feel compelled to take action. Similarly, if work colleagues or neighbors became suspicious of a possible conversion to Christianity, it is likely that they would inform the convert's family who might then take severe action. This threat from broader society applies equally within the context of the Internet and social media.
- **Family (Very strong):** It is felt as a great dishonor if a Saudi family member becomes a Christian; the shame needs to be eradicated from the family. Honor killings are still allowed in Saudi Arabia and a family member can be killed to protect or restore the honor of the family. Family hostility (and the fear of provoking violent reactions from immediate or extended family) is the main pressure faced by Saudi Christians. (This mostly affects Saudi converts since most expatriate converts will not have their families with them. However, the level of persecution the latter face from society in general is comparable to that experienced by Saudi Christians.) A history of documented persecution of Saudi Christians from family members has included (but is not limited to) death, attempted electrocution, imprisonment, beatings, arrests, house arrest, locked in their room, verbal beratement, freezing of bank accounts, confiscation of passports, forced divorce, forced marriage, loss of parental rights, burning of cars, and threats aimed at family members.
- **Ethnic group leaders (Very strong):** Tribal leaders enforce Islam as part of their tribe's age-old values. Tribe and family leaders are a source of persecution for Christians as these leaders use whatever means necessary to maintain the honor of their tribe. Each tribe has its own way of dealing with disturbances. When the conversion of one of their members becomes public, they are usually willing to go to great lengths to bring him or her back to the ancestral faith of the tribe (Islam). This includes forcing a convert's dismissal from work, divorce, return from abroad, forced marriages, etc. Certain tribes contribute to the constitution of the "Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice" (CPVPV - or simply 'Islamic religious police'). These tribes pride themselves in notifying chief CPVPV officials or the local imams about people who deviate from Islamic practices, especially reporting anyone suspected of converting to Christianity. Although the CPVPV has lost much of its authority publicly, it continues to report issues to the police, local Imams, and families of the suspected persons, but in a more quiet manner than in earlier years. Saudis generally fear any such reporting. The threat of reporting others is also used to put people under pressure.
- **Violent religious groups (Strong):** These are independent groups with no respect for tribes or government, which are trying to radicalize society, such as the Islamic State group (IS). Al-Qaeda is active in Yemen and it is assumed that they also pose a threat in Saudi Arabia. These mostly Sunni groups have a strong group culture; they try to convert Shia Muslims and expatriates and are active in influencing the communities around them. If local groups hear of converts to Christianity, they will go to any lengths to persecute them. Saudi Christians, in particular, know that if these groups were to take action against an 'apostate', they could probably do so with impunity. Generally, the government is effective in keeping violent religious groups in check that would pose a threat to the rulers and as such to

national stability. There is therefore no constant threat from violent religious groups. However, there are uncertainties and ambiguities in Saudi relations with some religious groups that have perpetrated violence acts in the wider region. Although the activity of such groups is likely to be limited, the high degree of hostility such groups have towards converts (in particular) and expatriate Christians means that they are still a threat to Christian life.

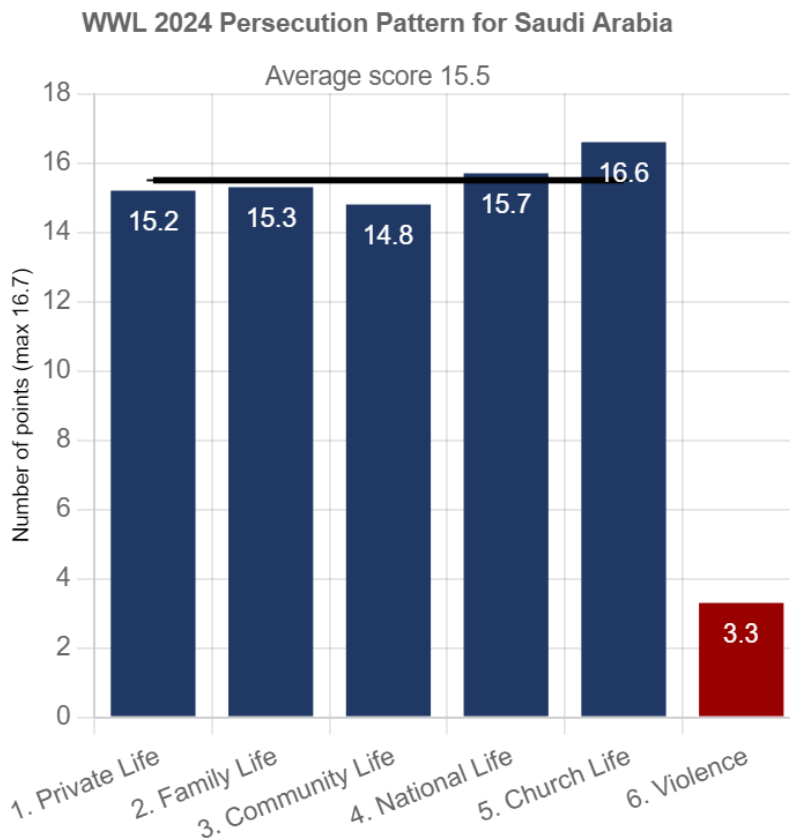
Drivers of Clan oppression (blended with Islamic oppression)

- ***Ethnic group leaders (Very strong)***: Each tribe has their own way of dealing with disturbances. When a tribal member's Christian faith becomes public, other members usually resort to any means to force a return to Islam.
- ***Family (Very strong)***: Leaving Islam is a great violation of family and tribal honor and is likely to lead to violent reactions from direct or extended family of a convert.
- ***Government officials (Strong)***: Government authorities usually prefer not to interfere in matters of faith, but will do so if tribal leaders give their consent. Also, they are not likely to intervene if tribal leaders react violently against one of their members who has converted to Christianity.
- ***Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong)***: Religious or community leaders take it as their responsibility to keep their community free from Christian and other undesirable influences. This resembles a tribal system and operates particularly in places (for example in cities) where actual tribes are not so influential.
- ***Ordinary citizens (Strong)***: In tribal society it is dangerous to go against traditional opinions and ways of life. There is the constant threat from the broader community that they will inform an 'apostate's' family if they find out about his/her conversion to Christianity.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia (blended with Islamic oppression)

- ***Government officials (Very strong)***: The Saudi rulers, especially the king and crown prince, will do their utmost to maintain the status quo by asserting their own power and by carefully controlling any currents that may be considered dissident or likely to inflame social tensions. Especially Saudi converts to Christianity dishonor the country's proud reputation of being the custodian of the two holiest mosques and their existence is denied. State officials often act against Christians in reaction to requests by family or community members.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for Saudi Arabia shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at the extreme level of 15.5 points, 0.1 point lower than in WWL 2023. This very slight improvement is a result of a slightly more relaxed atmosphere in society and of (among other things) the publication of very favorable articles on Christianity and Judaism by some local newspapers. However, it is important to add that this is aimed at building a facade of tolerance.
- The scores for pressure in all *spheres of life* are at extreme levels. Pressure is most extreme in the *Church* and *National spheres of life* which is typical for a situation in which *Islamic oppression* is the main Persecution engine combined with *Dictatorial paranoia*.
- Pressure resulting from the Persecution engine *Islamic oppression* blended with *Clan oppression* is present mostly in the *Private, Family and Community spheres* and is exerted especially on Christians with a Muslim background by the social environment.
- The score for violence rose to 3.3 points in WWL 2024, 0.9 points more than in WWL 2023 due to a slightly higher number of reported violent incidents as well as the WWL decision to include house arrest by family as a form of abduction, as many converts are locked away from family and community if their faith is discovered.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2024 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (4.00 points)

It can be risky for all categories of Christians to write about their faith on social media, as this would be perceived as an attempt at evangelizing nationals, which is prohibited for non-Sunni Islamic faiths. For expatriate Christians this could have consequences for their employment situation. The repercussions are likely to be especially severe for Christian converts from Islam, as this would provide evidence of their apostasy.

Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (4.00 points)

It would be a provocation to use Christian images or symbols publicly. Western expatriate Christians avoid doing this as it can lead to anger from the local community and possible expulsion. For Saudi or other Christians from a Muslim background, the display of Christian symbols would be tantamount to admitting apostasy, and so could trigger severe reactions from state, community and family.

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (4.00 points)

Since the main source of pressure for Christian converts from Islam is from family and community, most exercise extreme caution in discussing issues of faith with others, including wider family and community members. It is pressure from extended family that leads to violent acts by someone within the family. The only exception is when friends are Christians, but even then they would hold such conversations in a secret place. Expatriates need to be careful not to be perceived as evangelizing Muslims.

Block 1.10: Christians have been isolated from other family members or other like-minded Christians (e.g. house arrest). (3.50 points)

For Saudi converts, this is a significant threat if their faith becomes known. Ostracism or isolation from family members would be routine (and would constitute a comparatively mild response given the acceptability of more violent measures). Isolation from other Christians is often effectively self-imposed because of a hesitancy regarding their trustworthiness and a fear of repercussions if wider circles come to know of a convert's new faith. Christian house-maids and foreign workers living in what are locally known as "labor camps" are also often isolated from meeting other Christians due to working conditions.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.3: Christians have been hindered in celebrating a Christian wedding for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)

There is no scope for formalizing a non-Islamic marriage in Saudi Arabia, and no public non-Islamic religious practice is permitted. Any Christian wedding ceremony inside Saudi Arabia would therefore have to be undertaken in private and could not be officially registered with the Saudi authorities. Christians with a Muslim background must marry according to Islamic rites and Christians marrying Muslims cannot do so without converting to Islam.

Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (4.00 points)

Saudi Christians or other Christians from a Muslim background cannot be baptized openly. If a baptism becomes known to the authorities or within the community, repercussions are likely to be severe as the baptism is clear evidence of apostasy. The public baptism of an expatriate Christian would be deemed to contravene the prohibition on public practice of non-Islamic religion and could be expected to lead to the swift deportation of the expatriates involved.

Block 2.5: Burials of Christians have been hindered or coercively performed with non-Christian rites. (4.00 points)

In general, there is no scope for non-Islamic burial, as this would involve non-Islamic religious practice which is prohibited in the Wahhabi kingdom. Any Saudi or other Muslim-background Christian would be considered Muslim upon death and would be buried according to Islamic rites. For expatriate Christians, bodies are usually repatriated to their home country following death. For exceptional cases and emergency use, there is an unofficial non-Muslim burial facility hidden to the public.

Block 2.12: Christian spouses of non-Christians have been excluded from the right or opportunity to claim custody of the children in divorce cases. (4.00 points)

In Saudi Arabia, custody of the children belongs to the extended family and tribe, not their parents. A Saudi Christian (if known as a Christian by the family or tribe) would be excluded from the lives of the children. In the case of a divorce, a Saudi Christian would not be granted custody of the children. Migrant female Christians who marry Saudis (Christian men are not allowed to marry Saudi women) do not have the right by Saudi law to the custody of the children on grounds of ensuring that the children receive a Muslim upbringing.

Block 2: Additional information

Saudi Christian parents must hide their faith from their children (until they are old enough to keep it a secret) or risk exposure. As a result, their children grow up as Muslims. It is dangerous to tell a child about their parents' beliefs, because the child is likely to unwittingly expose the parents' faith at school or to family members. This means that the child has to learn all about Islamic life, which is taught from the earliest pre-school education onwards. According to a country expert, this is a major challenge for Saudi Christian parents.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (4.00 points)

Monitoring by the government, local communities and private groups is common practice in Saudi Arabia for all citizens and residents. Phone calls, e-mails and social media are all monitored. The primary focus of such surveillance is to identify anti-government or anti-Islamic sentiments. For Saudi Christians, once their beliefs are known to others, they will be more closely monitored by officials and family members. Their personal belongings such as computers and phones will be searched, their social media accounts monitored, and their movements will be tracked closely by family members or concerned community members. One Saudi convert was called in for questioning because his sister was known to be a convert through posts on social media. For expatriate Christians residing in the country, monitoring will increase and will often lead to deportation should they be suspected of speaking about Christian faith with Saudis or of distributing Christian literature.

The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV, commonly known outside the country as the “religious police”) monitors social behavior to encourage obedience to laws and regulations protecting “public morals.” While the CPVPV has lost much of its authority publicly, it still continues to quietly report issues to the police, local Imams, and families of the suspected persons. The larger Christian fellowships, often located on compounds, also have their sermons monitored at random times, to make sure there is no anti-Islamic content or any focus on evangelizing Muslims. However, the smaller fellowships do not report monitoring of services or sermons. They remain untouched by the authorities unless they are being 'bad neighbors' and their meetings interfere with the neighborhood by crowded parking or disturbing noise. Employers and others in the same ethnic/nationality groups monitor migrants supposedly as part of ensuring communal harmony and mutual support for living within Saudi culture.

Block 3.6: Christians have been hindered in participating in communal institutions, forums, etc., for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)

There is no room for any openly Christian (or other non-Muslim) form of social representation. There are no non-Islamic communal institutions in Saudi Arabia. In principle this pressure could also apply to a Christian from a Muslim background, though in practice a convert would be highly unlikely to seek to be actively involved in communal institutions if their faith was known, as this would be asking for trouble. As such, Saudi Christians are hindered from participating in communal institutions, forums, etc., for faith-related reasons. Once a Saudi is known to be a Christian, he will no longer be welcome in the community and his opinions will not be considered valuable. Expatriate Christians are hindered from expressing their beliefs at work and in public. Because they are not Muslim, they are not invited or accepted into communal institutions or activities.

Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)

In Saudi society, employment in both the public and private sectors is largely based on family/tribe relationships and social standing. For Saudi Christians whose faith becomes known their standing within the tribe and society would be damaged resulting in denial of or dismissal from employment. For expatriate Christians and migrant Christian workers, they are discriminated against in both the public and private sectors. Their faith needs to be recorded as a part of their application process and any mention of Christian faith may result in them not being hired. All non-Muslims have less rights than Muslims. For example, during Ramadan they must work longer hours than Muslims and the Muslim employees receive one month of extra salary during Ramadan. Christians who are active in living out their faith in a way that affects others may lose their jobs.

Block 3.1: Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (e.g. for not meeting majority religion or traditional dress codes, beard codes etc.). (3.75 points)

Christian converts from Islam are threatened if their faith is known. Daily life is dominated by Islam and this leads to several restrictions and limitations. Women are expected to wear an *abaya* and a head-covering. This is no longer required by law, but it is still normal practice, depending upon a woman's family and the area where they live. Women can now choose a variety of colors for their *abaya*. Many Christians and all other expatriates follow this dress code as required by Islam in order to avoid harassment or obstruction, although there is an increasing number of expatriate women who no longer wear the *abaya*. Shopping malls that in 2020 still refused entry to women (both expatriates and Saudis) who were not wearing the *abaya*, have been allowing them to shop from 2021 onwards. While this sounds promising, the majority of the population will still have to adhere to the conservative dress code. Male Saudi dress-code is also enforced at Saudi schools and places of prayer. Most men still grow beards, although not necessarily long beards.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (4.00 points)

Freedom of religion is neither protected nor provided for under Saudi law. The Basic System of the Consultative Council enshrines Islam as the state religion and Sharia as the basis for legislation. The Quran and Sunna (Traditions) are declared to be the Constitution of Saudi Arabia. Only Wahhabi Islam may be practiced publicly. Shia mosques are permitted but are greatly restricted. All Saudi citizens are declared by the state to be Muslims.

Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (4.00 points)

Blasphemy, defamation of religions and non-Islamic proselytizing are prohibited, as is any public expression of non-Islamic worship. Expressing critical opinions publicly is hardly possible for any-

one and expatriate Christians doing this run the risk of losing their labor contract or being expelled from the country. Most Christians (both Saudi and foreign) take great care to avoid provocation; they exercise precautionary self-censorship, avoiding in particular any direct preaching or criticism of Islam.

Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (4.00 points)

There are no political parties in Saudi Arabia. Christians (and in particular those with a Muslim background) would be very unlikely to apply for establishing an NGO or party with an overtly Christian identity, since they know that any such organization would be bound to be hindered.

Block 4.12: Christians, churches or Christian organizations have been hindered in publicly displaying religious symbols. (4.00 points)

Saudi Arabia permits no public display of non-Islamic religion, such as Christian symbols. Businesses do not allow Christmas celebrations and Christmas decorations are confiscated at the border. Logos of companies are also checked for any non-Muslim religious imagery.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (4.00 points)

The ban on any form of public expression of non-Islamic worship constitutes a permanent obstruction for churches. Of the thousands of informal fellowships for expatriates that meet in private places, there is evidence of routine monitoring by the authorities, even though most act discreetly to avoid drawing attention to their activities. Christian services are seriously restricted by the strict gender segregation, which prohibits men and women from different families from worshipping in the same room. As the law is not formally codified, the legal status of private religious practice remains vague and is based mainly on official announcements in the media. Any regular gatherings of Saudi Christians are not possible due to the fear of monitoring.

Block 5.3: Christian communities have been hindered in building or renovating church buildings or in claiming historical religious premises and places of worship which had been taken from them earlier. (4.00 points)

The ban on any form of public expression of non-Islamic worship means that no church building can be constructed or rented for use as a church.

Block 5.13: Churches have been hindered in importing Christian materials from abroad. (4.00 points)

The importation of non-Islamic religious materials in Arabic into Saudi Arabia is prohibited. However, expatriate Christians can bring a personal copy of the Bible in their own language.

Block 5.16: Churches, Christian organizations, institutions or groups have been prevented from using mass media to present their faith (e.g. via local or national radio, TV, Internet, social media, cell phones). (4.00 points)

Public expression of any other religion than Islam is prohibited. No Christian organizations are allowed. Media, including the Internet, are routinely screened for political, pornographic and religious material deemed offensive or against Islam.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced

Possible reasons for this may be:

- Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons

- Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).*
- In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.*
- Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.*

3. The use of symbolic numbers

In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWL chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.*

4. The symbol “x” in the table: *This denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security concerns. (In some cases this number may be “0”.)*

Saudi Arabia: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	x	x
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	x	x
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	x	x
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	x	x
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	10 *	1
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	100 *	100 *
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	x	x
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	100 *	100 *
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	x	x
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	x	x
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	10 *	10 *
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	10 *	10 *

Due to security concerns, it was decided not to publish all available details in this document. In the WWL 2024 reporting period, the score for violent incidents increased slightly. For example, in WWL 2024, there was a somewhat higher score for Christians arrested. The minor increase in score for violence was also the result of the decision to include house arrest by family as a form of abduction, as many converts are locked away from family and community if their faith is discovered. In general, Christians in the country are very careful how they act in order to avoid harsh consequences and this contributes to the violence score remaining relatively low.

- **Christians attacked:** There are more than 2 million foreign Christians living in Saudi Arabia of whom large numbers are employed as domestic staff. As in previous WWL reporting periods, rape and sexual harassment remain a huge problem in Saudi Arabia and it is estimated that this has happened to at least hundreds of foreign Christian domestic

workers - as well as physical abuse. Asian and African Christians, mainly housemaids working in Saudi homes, are very vulnerable and are often badly treated with motives including negative attitudes towards race and faith. Verifiable statistics are scarce because of the social taboo and lack of legal protection/justice. The table above shows a conservative estimate.

5 Year trends

The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

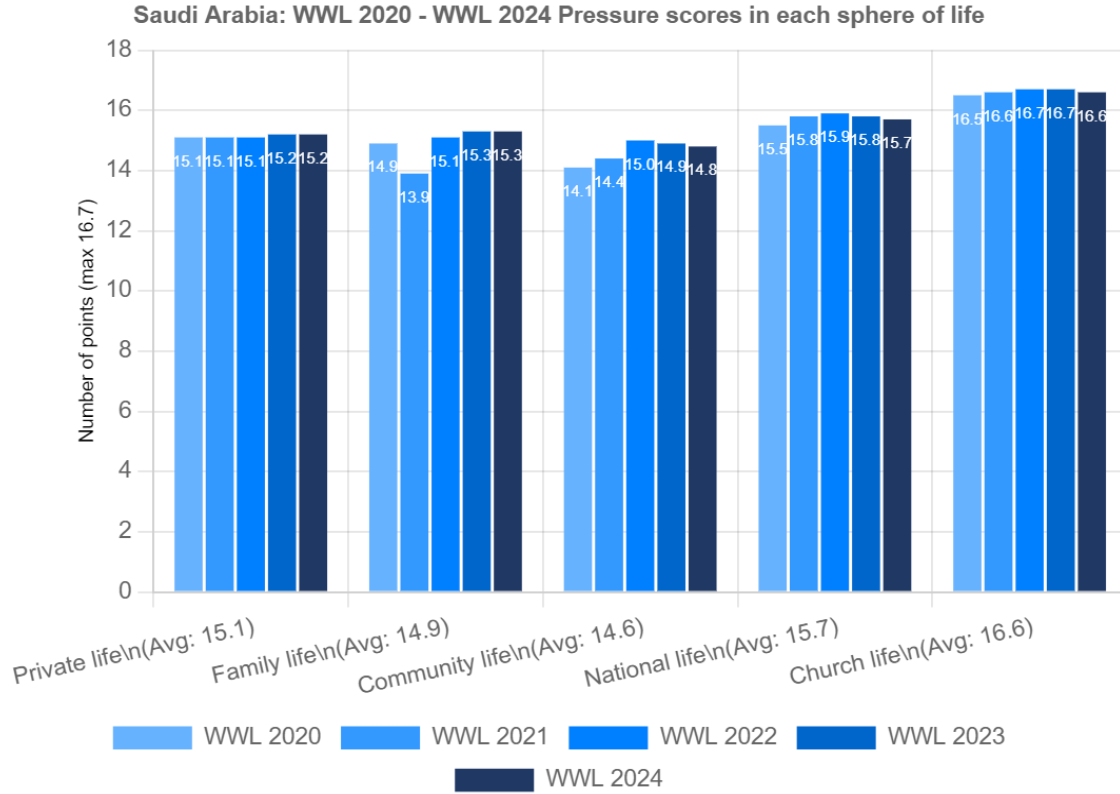
5 Year trends: Average pressure

Saudi Arabia: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	15.5
2023	15.6
2022	15.5
2021	15.2
2020	15.2

The average pressure over the five *spheres of life* has been extremely high over the past five reporting periods, with scores levelling off at 15.5/15.6 points since WWL 2022. Over the years more data has become available - particularly on the situation of converts among foreign workers - thus contributing to the rise in points after WWL 2021. In WWL 2024 the average pressure decreased very slightly reflecting a somewhat more relaxed atmosphere in society.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

As can be seen in the chart below: Pressure in all *spheres of life* has been more or less stable at an extreme level. The level of pressure in *Community, National and Church life*, which had shown a slightly increasing trend since WWL 2020, has leveled off since WWL 2023 and even shows a further slight decrease from WWL 2024 as a result of a somewhat more relaxed social atmosphere.



5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



The score for violence shows a fluctuating picture over the past five years. As in WWL 2022, the score in WWL 2024 was above 3.0 points (3.1 and 3.3 points respectively), which was partly caused by an adjustment in the scoring: Apart from a slightly higher score of reported violent incidents, house arrest by a convert's family is now counted as a form of abduction. In general, Christians in the country are very careful how they act in order to avoid harsh consequences which helps keep the violence score relatively low. There has also been less enforcement of Islamic practice in recent years due to the reduction in religious police powers.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites; Denied access to social community/networks; Denied custody of children; Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse; Forced divorce; Forced marriage; Travel bans/restrictions on movement
Security	Incarceration by family (house arrest); Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological
Technological	-

Women and girls have an extremely limited voice in Saudi Arabia's Islamic, male-controlled society, and are under constant monitoring and surveillance by their family and local community. As such, they can struggle to access Christian materials and teachings, such as Bible apps and Christian music, as their mobile phones may be taken away by family members and searched. A country expert explained that, in addition, "women are at higher risk for being persecuted while conducting Christian acts of worship by themselves, because women tend to be surrounded by family and not afforded privacy". This lack of privacy is an important reason as to why women either hide their faith or do not convert.

Leaving Islam is one of the biggest sins a Muslim can commit; for Saudi female converts from Islam, pressure primarily comes from the *Family* and *Community spheres*. Upon discovery of their conversion, they risk physical violence, harassment, and can be married to conservative Muslims as a 'corrective' measure (sometimes as a second wife). A country expert explained that "if women are abused physically, it often occurs in places on their bodies that are less noticeable". Whilst boys are more likely to be expelled from the home, girls are more likely to be locked in under strict house arrest, have their phones removed and be isolated from the outside world. Exemplifying these dangers, in 2021 a female convert was beaten, locked in her room and forced to marry a Muslim because her family found Christian text messages on her phone.

Converts who are already married risk being divorced and are especially vulnerable to their children being taken away. An expert mentioned the “intense fear” that female converts face regarding losing custody of their children, demonstrating “both a high [likelihood] that this will occur if their faith is revealed and the high intensity of their impact it will make on their lives”.

Outside the context of marriage, sources report that instances of rape and sexual assault are commonplace across Saudi Arabia for the thousands of non-Saudi (especially Asian and African) house maids across the country who are Christian (or non-Islamic), a position in which they are commonly abused and virtually treated as slaves. This reflects the subordinate position of women in Saudi society and their unprotected status when on their own (for example, if working outside their home) a vulnerability which is compounded by their nationality and religion (i.e. non-Saudi and non-Muslim).

Given these pressures – and the ultimate threat of honor killings – it comes as no surprise that many women choose to become secret believers. Fleeing is rarely an option, as despite [2019 legislation](#) allowing women to travel without a chaperone, the movement of women remains heavily controlled by male guardians who can still file cases against female family members for “disobedience” ([HRW 2022, Saudi Arabia country chapter](#)). This applies to Muslim women as well, but Christian women are especially vulnerable here, with their movement remaining heavily controlled. Women are largely dependent on their families for the support of their basic needs, including shelter, food and clothing. As a country expert summarized: “Women typically have more to lose because culturally they have less freedom.”

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Political and Legal	-
Security	Forced out of home – expulsion; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological
Technological	-

The male-dominated nature of public society in Saudi means that Saudi Christian men pay a considerable price if their faith becomes known. Saudi Arabia’s strict Islamic society means that any deviation from standard behavior is quickly observed.

In a shame and honor culture, to bring shame on the family is the worst thing a son or father could do. Whereas female converts are often punished secretly or behind closed doors, male converts are punished publicly or openly within the family. They risk being publicly shamed, beaten, thrown out of their home, emotionally abused and threatened. They may be denied financial support, then offered material incentives to return to Islam and revoke the shame brought upon the family. Alternatively, they might be taken to a Sheikh who would put

them under pressure to recant. Compounding the psychological trauma, families commonly cover up why they are maltreating their male family member.

Commenting on the economic pressures facing men, a country expert noted: “Men are more likely to lose their job.” There are reports of men who are known to be Christians being denied promotions, excluded from receiving the annual company raise, being pressured to work longer hours, and harassed to renounce Christ. In light of these pressures and the potentially crippling economic repercussions they could have on their families, most converts choose to live as secret believers. This extends as far as not even telling their own spouse or children about their faith, for fear that extended family members or school staff could discover that they have left Islam.

Persecution of other religious minorities

A major religious minority facing discrimination and persecution in Saudi Arabia are Shiite Muslims. They are located mostly in the Eastern Province. Regarded as heretics by Saudi rulers for most of Saudi history up until today, Shiites are discriminated against in the justice system, education, public-sector employment and housing opportunities, government posts and religious activities. Shiites seek greater political participation and more religious tolerance.

According to USCIRF 2023 Saudi Arabia CPC:

- "In March [2022], Saudi Arabia carried out its largest known mass execution, killing 81 people, including 41 Shi'a Muslims who participated in the 2011 protests."
- "Beginning in the summer of 2022, Saudi courts began issuing egregiously long prison sentences against dissidents—including religious dissidents—who peacefully expressed their beliefs. Several detained prisoners of conscience had their sentences extended arbitrarily and for excessively long lengths of time."
- "In April [2022], the Saudi government made preparations to deport four Uyghur Muslims to China but delayed the deportation following international pressure."
- "During a sermon at the Grand Mosque in Mecca in July, Imam Saleh bin al-Humaid called for bringing “annihilation upon the plundering and occupying Jews.”"

Also in 2023 several Saudi Shia men were executed, often on charges of joining a foreign terror group and confrontations with national security forces.

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Islamic oppression, blended with Clan oppression

"Vision 2030" plans have been influenced i) by the demands made by the younger generation; ii) by the need to move away from dependency on the oil industry; and iii) by the shifts in regional and global political alliances. The plans are not new, but if the crown prince is given the ability to execute them, significant changes could take place in society, leading to more openness and a move to a more moderate form of Islam. Social and economic reforms are likely to have continuing impact, particularly if they are driven by the large youth demographic and technological advancement, since Saudis are among the world's most prolific social media users. As such, the overall expectation is that some parts of Saudi society may begin to feel more

freedom to show tolerance towards non-Muslims.

Nevertheless, ultra-conservative Islam is still very much alive and active in Saudi Arabia and will not allow any changes in society to be too comprehensive. Reforms could in fact cause polarization in society leading to an increase in the targeting and persecution of minorities (including Christian converts) by ultra-conservative elements, such as Islamic leaders and tribal leaders. Also, observers warn that as the number of Saudi Christians is growing and openness towards Christianity is increasing, this could cause an increase in the number of incidents of persecution against converts in the not too distant future. This is reinforced by the fact that there has been an increase in Saudi Christians who choose not to remain silent about their faith: they share their faith with relatives and friends. As this increases, so will the persecution of Saudi converts.

In conclusion, the severe religious restrictions which typically result from the Persecution engine *Islamic oppression* blended with *Clan oppression* are likely to continue to lead to severe pressure on religious minorities (including Christians) in 2024 and beyond.

Dictatorial paranoia

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has loosened social restrictions affecting the youth. As such, cinemas were opened for the first time in 35 years and women were allowed to drive as of June 2018. This apparent shift towards younger, more tolerant leadership and away from traditional roots is possibly an effort to take the large number of Saudi youth seriously who long for more freedom. Also, the powers of the religious police were reduced and it is especially this entity that was previously active in raiding foreign Christian house-church fellowships. In practice, this means that people feel less obliged to go to the mosque or perform rituals such as prayer. There is also reportedly less control over clothing.

Moreover, the crown prince [stated](#) in October 2017 that the kingdom needed to "return" to a "moderate Islam that is open to all religions and to the world" (Al-Jazeera, 25 October 2017). He has hosted and visited representatives of the Vatican, Coptic, Anglican and Evangelical churches, which indicates a new openness to direct inter-faith engagement. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU 2023) reports that the crown prince is strengthening his position and is expected to take over power officially before long.

Although foreign Christians working in Saudi Arabia are hopeful that the developments mentioned above will ultimately lead to more tolerance towards other religions, the inter-religious discussions have not yet led to any substantive improvement in the treatment of expatriate Christians and have not indicated any intent to increase the religious freedom of Saudi Christians. Commentators warn that these reforms are mostly 'cosmetic', and it is also the same crown prince who started the war against Yemen which has led to one of the world's most serious humanitarian crises at the current time (and also to an increased persecution of Christians in Yemen). Furthermore, the breaking of diplomatic relations with Canada in August 2018 after Canada raised human rights concerns, shows how the Saudi regime is determined to continue its agenda without outside interference.

Finally, the 'Saudization' of the work force may also lead to a fall in the number of Christian workers entering the country from abroad.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: 2019 legislation - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/08/22/saudi-arabia-travel-restrictions-saudi-women-lifted>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: HRW 2022, Saudi Arabia country chapter - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/saudi-arabia#49dda6>
- Future outlook: stated - <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/saudi-crown-prince-promises-return-moderate-islam-171024182102549.html>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Saudi%20Arabia>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.