

World  
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Research

# Saudi Arabia: Full Country Dossier

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**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2023

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	14.4	98	96	94	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.7	92	91	92	92	91
3	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	88	87	85	86
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.2	89	88	88	87	86
5	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.1	16.3	9.1	88	91	92	90	87
6	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.6	14.8	14.4	16.7	88	87	85	80	80
7	Pakistan	13.4	13.8	14.8	14.8	12.9	16.7	86	87	88	88	87
8	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.8	15.8	16.5	10.7	86	85	86	85	85
9	Afghanistan	15.4	15.7	15.4	16.1	16.6	4.6	84	98	94	93	94
10	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	9.4	83	79	79	85	87
11	India	12.3	13.1	13.0	14.8	13.3	15.7	82	82	83	83	83
12	Syria	13.2	14.1	13.6	14.1	14.1	11.3	80	78	81	82	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.9	15.8	16.7	2.4	80	81	78	79	77
14	Myanmar	12.5	11.6	13.9	13.9	12.9	15.4	80	79	74	73	71
15	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.8	16.0	16.4	0.2	77	77	77	78	78
16	China	12.9	10.0	12.7	14.5	15.6	11.1	77	76	74	70	65
17	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	10.3	15.1	15.0	76	70	67	66	68
18	Iraq	14.1	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	4.6	76	78	82	76	79
19	Algeria	14.1	14.1	11.5	13.7	15.1	4.8	73	71	70	73	70
20	Mauritania	14.5	14.2	13.3	14.1	14.2	1.3	72	70	71	68	67
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	13.9	12.7	15.6	1.5	71	71	71	73	74
22	Colombia	11.8	8.9	13.1	11.3	10.4	15.4	71	68	67	62	58
23	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.5	9.6	13.8	15.6	71	68	67	66	48
24	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	68	66	68	70
25	Vietnam	11.8	9.6	12.8	14.6	14.4	6.9	70	71	72	72	70
26	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	14.1	15.7	0.6	70	69	70	70	69
27	Cuba	13.1	8.3	13.1	13.2	14.9	7.0	70	66	62	52	49
28	Niger	9.4	9.5	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.4	70	68	62	60	52
29	Morocco	13.2	13.8	10.9	12.2	14.5	4.8	69	69	67	66	63
30	Bangladesh	12.6	10.7	12.8	11.3	10.6	10.7	69	68	67	63	58
31	Laos	11.7	10.2	13.3	14.2	14.0	5.0	68	69	71	72	71
32	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.6	68	65	63	43	43
33	Indonesia	11.3	12.0	11.6	11.1	9.2	12.8	68	68	63	60	65
34	Qatar	14.2	14.1	10.5	13.2	14.4	1.5	68	74	67	66	62
35	Egypt	12.7	13.5	11.6	12.1	10.8	7.0	68	71	75	76	76
36	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.4	12.0	13.5	6.5	67	66	67	64	63
37	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.6	67	66	64	56	55
38	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	11.0	10.5	13.9	67	65	64	60	61
39	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.4	12.1	10.6	66	66	65	63	65
40	Bhutan	13.2	12.3	11.6	13.9	14.2	1.1	66	67	64	61	64
41	Turkey	12.8	11.5	11.8	13.0	11.5	5.7	66	65	69	63	66
42	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.5	66	63	62	57	56
43	Malaysia	12.8	14.3	11.4	12.2	11.1	3.9	66	63	63	62	60
44	Tajikistan	13.8	12.2	12.3	12.8	13.4	1.1	66	65	66	65	65
45	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.9	65	65	64	60	54
46	Brunei	14.8	14.6	10.1	10.9	14.4	0.4	65	64	64	63	63
47	Oman	14.0	14.1	10.3	13.3	12.9	0.6	65	66	63	62	59
48	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.6	11.9	12.7	14.2	1.1	65	64	64	64	63
49	Jordan	13.0	14.0	10.5	12.3	12.7	2.0	65	66	64	64	65
50	Nicaragua	10.8	5.9	11.9	12.8	13.6	9.4	65	56	51	41	41

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	13.3	64	63	62	61	61
52	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	64	63	62	60
53	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	15.6	63	61	58	55	52
54	UAE	13.4	13.4	9.9	11.2	12.8	1.1	62	62	62	60	58
55	Nepal	12.0	9.8	9.4	13.0	12.6	4.4	61	64	66	64	64
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	0.6	60	59	56	56	56
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.3	9.7	10.3	12.0	2.0	60	59	58	60	57
58	Azerbaijan	13.2	10.0	9.5	12.0	13.6	0.6	59	60	56	57	57
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.2	11.0	10.4	12.0	2.0	59	58	58	57	56
60	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	7.6	58	55	53	56	48
61	Russian Federation	12.3	7.9	10.3	11.8	12.8	2.0	57	56	57	60	60
62	Sri Lanka	12.8	9.1	10.6	11.3	9.5	3.9	57	63	62	65	58
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	8.9	57	50	42	42	41
64	Venezuela	6.0	4.6	11.7	10.2	11.4	11.7	56	51	39	42	41
65	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	11.1	55	52	48	48	43
66	Bahrain	12.7	13.3	8.7	10.7	8.8	0.9	55	57	56	55	55
67	Honduras	7.1	5.0	11.9	7.6	9.8	11.9	53	48	46	39	38
68	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	51	46	43	42
69	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	9.2	14.8	51	48	47	48	47
70	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	5.4	49	44	43	41	42
71	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	3.0	48	43	47	45	46
72	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.0	46	43	43	44	44
73	El Salvador	7.7	4.2	10.6	7.4	9.1	6.7	46	45	42	38	30
74	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	42	42	42	43
75	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	1.1	44	44	43	43	43
76	Belarus	9.5	3.8	4.8	9.4	12.1	3.3	43	33	30	28	35

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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 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- 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 including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

# WWL 2023 Situation in brief / Saudi Arabia

## Brief country details

Saudi Arabia: Population (UN estimate for 2022)	Christians	Chr%
35,845,000	2,165,000	6.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

## Map of country



Saudi Arabia: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	80	13
WWL 2022	81	11
WWL 2021	78	14
WWL 2020	79	13
WWL 2019	77	15

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

## 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 are forcibly 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

- Hundreds of Christians were mentally or physically abused as a result of their faith.
- Dozens of Christians at the very least had to leave their homes and relocate in or outside of the country for faith related reasons.
- Hundreds of Christians at the very least faced sexual harassment or rape, especially house maids from low income countries.
- A convert went missing in a persecution context. For security reasons, no further details can be given.

### Specific examples of positive developments

According to USCIRF 2022:

- Conditions for religious freedom in Saudi Arabia remained poor in 2021, but there were a few improvements: "As in years prior, the government also removed from textbooks some intolerant content directed at religious minorities, but other intolerant passages remained, and the government continued to support intolerant messaging in other areas. At the same time, Saudi Arabia continued to violate religious freedom egregiously, targeting religious minorities in particular."

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2021):

- "[I]n a September review of Saudi textbooks used in the second semester of the 2020-21 and the first semester of the 2021-22 school years, IMPACT-SE reported that the trend of 'significant improvement' in content dealing with religions other than Islam had continued from its last review of the Saudi curricula in late 2020. According to IMPACT-SE, officials either removed or altered 22 anti-Christian and antisemitic lessons and five lessons about 'infidels' and polytheists. The NGO reported that this removal included an entire textbook unit on the possible need for violent jihad to spread Islam and protect Muslim lands and praising it as an act of piety. Specifically, IMPACT-SE stated that officials altered several lessons that explicitly blamed 'the Jews' as a collective for attacking Muslims and Muhammad, instead attributing responsibility to Arabian tribes and in some cases removing references altogether; in addition, they removed references to forbidding friendships with Jews and Christians, formerly referred to as 'infidels, as they are enemies of God'."



- "On January 27 [2021], the head of the General Presidency of the Two Holy Mosques inaugurated a Mediation and Moderation Academy in the Grand Mosque in Mecca, with the goals of fighting extremist thoughts and promoting mediation and moderation in all aspects of life, according to the Saudi Press Agency."
- "On March 16 [2021], the Ministry of Education announced the establishment of intellectual awareness units in all universities and education departments that were intended 'to promote loyalty to religion', 'to spread the values of moderation, tolerance and coexistence, and to prevent extremist thought and address its effects'."

## 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>

# WWL 2023: Keys to understanding / Saudi Arabia

## Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2021/22 country report – covering 154 countries	AI country report 2021/22 (pp.316-320)	<a href="https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf">https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf</a>	6 June 2022
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	<a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14702705">https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14702705</a>	6 June 2022
Bertelsmann Transformation Index country report 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI report 2022	<a href="https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/SAU">https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/SAU</a>	6 June 2022
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook	<a href="https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/saudi-arabia/">https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/saudi-arabia/</a>	6 June 2022
Crisis24 country report (Garda World) – covering 193 countries	Crisis24 country report	<a href="https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/country-reports/saudi-arabia">https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/country-reports/saudi-arabia</a>	6 June 2022
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2021 – covering 167 countries	EIU 2021 (p.16)	<a href="https://pages.eiu.com/frs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf">https://pages.eiu.com/frs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf</a>	6 June 2022
FFP's Fragile States Index 2022 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2022	<a href="https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/">https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/</a>	3 August 2022
Freedom House's 2022 Democracy index - covering 29 countries, Saudi Arabia not included	Democracy Index 2022	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores</a>	
Freedom House's 2022 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2022	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/saudi-arabia/freedom-world/2022">https://freedomhouse.org/country/saudi-arabia/freedom-world/2022</a>	6 June 2022
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2021 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2021	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/saudi-arabia/freedom-net/2021">https://freedomhouse.org/country/saudi-arabia/freedom-net/2021</a>	6 June 2022
Human Rights Watch World Report 2022 (country chapter) – covering 100+ countries	HRW 2022 country chapter	<a href="https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/saudi-arabia">https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/saudi-arabia</a>	6 June 2022
Internet World Stats 2022	IWS 2022	<a href="https://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#sa">https://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#sa</a>	6 June 2022
Middle East Concern – covering 24 countries	MEC country profile	<a href="https://meconcern.org/countries/saudi-arabia/">https://meconcern.org/countries/saudi-arabia/</a>	3 August 2022
OECD Social Institutions and Gender Index 2019	OECD 2019	<a href="https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/SA.pdf">https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/SA.pdf</a>	6 June 2022
RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2022	<a href="https://rsf.org/en/saudi-arabia">https://rsf.org/en/saudi-arabia</a>	6 June 2022
Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2021	<a href="https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/saudi-arabia">https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/saudi-arabia</a>	6 June 2022
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators (country profile) – covering 189 countries	HDI profile	<a href="https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#countries/SAU">https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#countries/SAU</a>	8 June 2022
US State Department's 2021 International Religious Freedom country reports	IRFR 2021	<a href="https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/saudi-arabia/">https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/saudi-arabia/</a>	6 June 2022
USCIRF 2022 country reports – covering 15 CPC / 12 SWL	USCIRF 2022	<a href="https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-04/2022%20Saudi%20Arabia.pdf">https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-04/2022%20Saudi%20Arabia.pdf</a>	6 June 2022
World Bank 2022 GCC overview	World Bank 2022 GCC overview	<a href="https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/gcc">https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/gcc</a>	6 June 2022

## 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 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 between Houthis 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, Saudi Arabia appears 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)

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 2021) 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 issues

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. 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 ([Wall Street Journal, 16 July 2021](#)) and can now join the armed forces ([Al-Jazeera, 22 February 2021](#)). Significant gender inequalities remain, however. Without permission from a male guardian, women remain unable to leave prison or obtain certain forms of healthcare (HRW 2022 country chapter). Also, although women can now travel without a male chaperone, 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 2022 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 ([OECD, 2019](#)).

## Religious landscape

Saudi Arabia: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	2,165,000	6.0
Muslim	32,381,000	90.3
Hindu	726,000	2.0
Buddhist	124,000	0.3
Ethno-religionist	67,900	0.2
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	7,100	0.0
Atheist	11,600	0.0
Agnostic	239,000	0.7
Other	124,100	0.3
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

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 over 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.

Religious hatred of followers of religions other than Sunni Islam still features in Saudi textbooks, despite promised reforms. Nonetheless, in recent years some progress has been made in this area. (See above: *Specific examples of positive developments*, citing IRFR 2021.)

Against this religious backdrop, daily life is challenging for both Christian men and women and many live out their faith in secret. 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's Human Development Report on Saudi Arabia (HDI profile):

- **Human Development Index (HDI):** Saudi Arabia ranks 40 out of 189 countries and territories with a HDI of 0.854 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:** 75.1 years
- **Expected years of schooling (2019):** Male - 16.2 years; Female -16.0 years
- **Gross national income (GNI) per capita:** \$47,495

Other information:

- **Unemployment rate:** 7.7% ([International Labour Organisation](#), 2020, accessed 16 June 2022)
- **Youth unemployment:** 28.2% ([Global Economy, 2020](#), accessed 16 June 2022)

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 7.7% unemployment figure is represented by people who do not have to work because their family supports them.

According to a [World Bank Press Release](#) published on 23 May 2022:

- "Growth is expected to accelerate to 7% in 2022, driven by stronger oil output following OPEC+ production cuts and continued growth in non-oil sectors, and supported by stronger consumption, increased tourism, and higher domestic capital spending."

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 mounting youth unemployment (28.6%, UNDP's HDI profile). 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 its annual forecast, the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU 2021) 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 privatisations, will shape policy. Economic recovery will benefit from higher activity in both oil and non-oil sectors." Indeed the [EIU Update](#) published on 30 August 2022 makes the following forecast:

- "Saudi Arabia will be the fastest growing of the world's largest economies in 2022. The kingdom will outpace the dynamic Asian giants of China, India, Indonesia, South Korea and Taiwan, grow much faster than the struggling major economies in western Europe and North America, and leave other large emerging economies in its wake. Real GDP growth is expected to reach 7.5% in 2022, which would be the kingdom's fastest rate of growth since 2011 and place it at the top of the economic growth chart for the world's 20 largest economies (measured in US dollars at purchasing power parity). Saudi Arabian real GDP growth will be close to a solid 5% in 2023 before slipping back to reasonably strong growth of about 3% in 2024-26."

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 ([OECD, 2019](#)). 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 23.3% in 2021, compared to 80.7% for men ([World Economic Forum, March 2021](#)). Even if in the workplace, women earn significantly less than men; according the World Economic Forum, women earn only 24% of an average man's salary. 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](#)).

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the CIA Factbook:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Arab 90%, Afro-Asian 10%
- **Main language:** Arabic (official)
- **Urban population:** 84.7% of total population (2022)
- **Literacy rate:** 97.6% (2020)

According to the UNDP's HDI profile:

- **Population and median age:** 34.3 million / 31.8 years
- **HDI score and ranking:** Saudi Arabia's HDI has steadily increased from 1990 onwards, reaching 0.854 in 2019, an increase of 22.5 percent which put the country in the very high human development category at rank 40.
- **Gender inequality Index (GII):** 0.252 (2019)
- **Women with account at financial institution or with mobile money-service provider (% of female population ages 15 and older):** 58.2
- **Share of seats in parliament (% held by women):** 19.9

The UNDP summarizes the main areas which improved as follows:

- "Between 1990 and 2019, Saudi Arabia's life expectancy at birth increased by 6.1 years, mean years of schooling increased by 4.6 years and expected years of schooling increased by 5.3 years."
- Saudi Arabia's GNI per capita increased by about 10.4 percent between 1990 and 2019.

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. Following the halt to international tourism due to the COVID-19 crisis, the Saudi Arabian government has lifted all COVID-related entry restrictions for tourist visa holders, according to the Saudi Tourism Authority.

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. 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. 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.

At the same time, there is still hardly any freedom of speech. According to Freedom House's Global Freedom Index 2022:

- "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.

Much like its legal system, Saudi Arabia's social and cultural norms are heavily patriarchal. Social expectations place women in the domestic sphere, whereas men are expected to assume the role of breadwinner and decision maker ([OECD, 2019](#)). As detailed above (in: *Political and legal landscape*), the actions and decisions of women are still heavily controlled by their male guardian.

## Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2022):

- **Internet usage:** 89.2% penetration – survey date: January 2022
- **Facebook usage:** 73.3% penetration – survey date: January 2022. According to [Napoleon Cat](#), as of November 2022 there were 66.4% male Facebook users compared to 33.6% of female users.

According to the World Bank profile:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 124 per hundred people (2020)

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, 2022, p.78](#)). 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, 2019](#)).

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (updated 25 March 2022):

- "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](#) (17 June 2022):

- "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 (65.3% versus 34.7%).

According to Freedom House's Freedom on the Net report 2021:

- Internet freedom remained highly restricted in Saudi Arabia, which is listed as 'not free' and scores 24 on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free).
- "The Saudi government increasingly seeks to expand high-quality internet access across the country; however, the restrictive absolute monarchy limits the range of information available online. Authorities operate extensive censorship and surveillance systems and lend their backing to online networks of bots and accounts that disseminate progovernment messaging and attack perceived dissenters. Activists, journalists, government employees, and other professionals cite a climate of fear in which many feel compelled to self-censor or engage in progovernment discourse online. Critics, activists, and others perceived to voice dissent online face severe punishment, including harassment and arrest. Despite this, several human rights activists were conditionally released or had their prison sentences and travel bans reduced during the coverage period. The 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. However, the attack on oil and gas installations in Abqaiq in September 2019, highlighted the vulnerability of the country. Iran was blamed for this attack which further increased tensions between the two countries, resulting in more Western nations sending in troops to defend oil supply routes.

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 15 June 2021), [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.

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 has led to an increase in domestic violence, as victims are forced to spend more time at home with their abusers ([Amnesty International, 8 March 2021](#)). According to Georgetown's more recent [2021/22 Index](#), 18% of women report intimate partner violence (p.78).

## 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 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>
- Recent history: Wall Street Journal - <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-moves-toward-eventual-ties-with-israel-11654517783>
- 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: performed better in the 2021/22 Index - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/WPS-Index-2021.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: Wall Street Journal, 16 July 2021 - <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-ends-male-guardian-requirement-for-women-attending-hajj-11626451201>
- Political and legal landscape: Al-Jazeera, 22 February 2021 - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/22/bb-saudi-women-can-join-military-in-latest-widening-of-rights>
- Political and legal landscape: CEDAW, 2006 - <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/309/97/PDF/N0630997.pdf?OpenElement>
- Political and legal landscape: UNFPA, 2019 - [https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Saudi%20Country%20Assessment%20-%20English\\_0.pdf](https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Saudi%20Country%20Assessment%20-%20English_0.pdf)
- Political and legal landscape: OECD, 2019 - <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/SA.pdf>
- Economic landscape: International Labour Organisation - <https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/unemployment-and-labour-underutilization/>
- Economic landscape: Global Economy, 2020 - [https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Yemen/youth\\_unemployment/](https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Yemen/youth_unemployment/)
- Economic landscape: World Bank Press Release - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/05/23/-gcc-economies-to-expand-by-5-9-in-2022>
- 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](https://epod.cid.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/2019-08/EPD_Report_Digital.pdf)
- Economic landscape: EIU Update - <https://www.eiu.com/n/saudi-arabia-set-to-be-the-worlds-fastest-growing-major-economy/>
- Economic landscape: OECD, 2019 - <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/SA.pdf>

- Economic landscape: World Economic Forum, March 2021 - [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2021.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf)
- Economic landscape: UBS Center Policy Brief, 2019 - [https://www.ubscenter.uzh.ch/static/25f476df77024547116114074b185282/UBSC\\_PB1901\\_TrappedByMisperceptions.pdf](https://www.ubscenter.uzh.ch/static/25f476df77024547116114074b185282/UBSC_PB1901_TrappedByMisperceptions.pdf)
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- Technological landscape: KSA social media statistics 2022 - <https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/saudi-arabia-social-media-statistics/>
- Security situation: IS does not seem to differentiate - [https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Memo193\\_e.pdf](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/>
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- Trends analysis: moderate - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/saudi-crown-prince-promises-return-moderate-islam-171024182102549.html>

## WWL 2023: 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. The dominant expatriate Christian denomination is by far the Roman Catholic Church.

## 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 background. 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/](https://www.arabnews.jp/en/middle-east/article_86008/)

# WWL 2023: Persecution Dynamics / Saudi Arabia

## Reporting period

1 October 2021 - 30 September 2022

## Position on the World Watch List

Saudi Arabia: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	80	13
WWL 2022	81	11
WWL 2021	78	14
WWL 2020	79	13
WWL 2019	77	15

*Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods*

In WWL 2023, Saudi Arabia scored one point less than in WWL 2022. This was mostly due to a slight decrease in the score for violent incidents. For example, in WWL 2023, unlike in WWL 2022, no arrests or sentencing of Christians were reported. However, Saudi Arabia still scores

high on physical violence against converts as well as on the number of converts forced to leave their homes. Pressure on Christians remains at an extreme level in the Arabian Peninsula. It 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**

<b>Saudi Arabia:</b>									
<b>Drivers of Persecution</b>	<b>IO</b>	<b>RN</b>	<b>ERH</b>	<b>CO</b>	<b>CDP</b>	<b>CPCO</b>	<b>SI</b>	<b>DPA</b>	<b>OCC</b>
	VERY STRONG			VERY STRONG				STRONG	
Government officials	Very strong			Strong				Very strong	
Ethnic group leaders	Very strong			Very strong					
Non-Christian religious leaders	Very strong			Strong					
Violent religious groups	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:
  - i) 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.
  - ii) 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 keep 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 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)

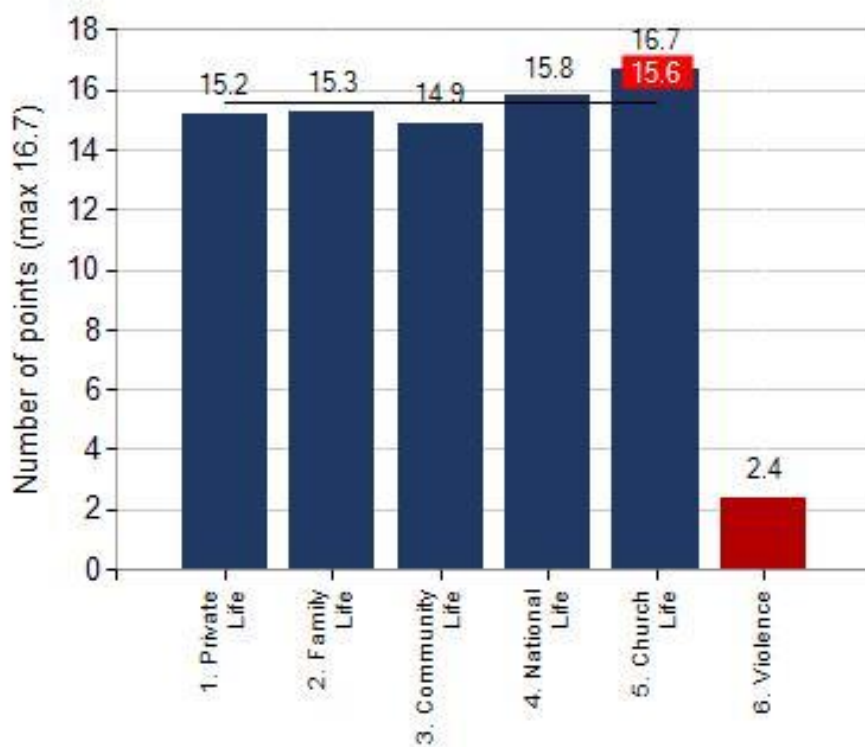
- **Government officials (Very strong):** The Saudi rulers, especially the king and crown prince, will do their utmost to maintain the status quo by asserting their own power and by carefully controlling any currents that may be considered dissident or likely to inflame social tensions. Especially Saudi 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 2023 Persecution pattern for Saudi Arabia shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at the extreme level of 15.6 points, 0.1 point higher than in WWL 2022.
- 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 fell to 2.4 points in WWL 2023, 0.7 points less than in WWL 2022.

## WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern for Saudi Arabia



### 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 2023 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 sym-

bols 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 con-

tent 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; arguably this is 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 wear 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 anyone 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 5 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. For further discussion** (with a focus on the complexity of assessing the numbers of Christians killed for their faith) please see World Watch Monitor’s article dated 13 November 2013 available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/number-of-christian-martyrs-continues-to-cause-debate/>.

**4. 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 WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.

**5. The symbol “x” in the table:** This denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security concerns.

Saudi Arabia: Violence Block question		WWL 2023	WWL 2022
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)?	x	x
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 of arrests and attacks in this document.

In the WWL 2023 reporting period, the score for violent incidents decreased slightly. For example, in WWL 2023, unlike in WWL 2022, no arrests or sentencing of Christians were reported. In addition, there were no reports of forced marriages of Christians nor of Christians houses or property being attacked. However, Saudi Arabia still scores high on physical violence against converts as well as on the number of converts forced to leave their homes. In general, Christians in the country are very careful how they act in order to avoid harsh consequences and this helps keep the violence score 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

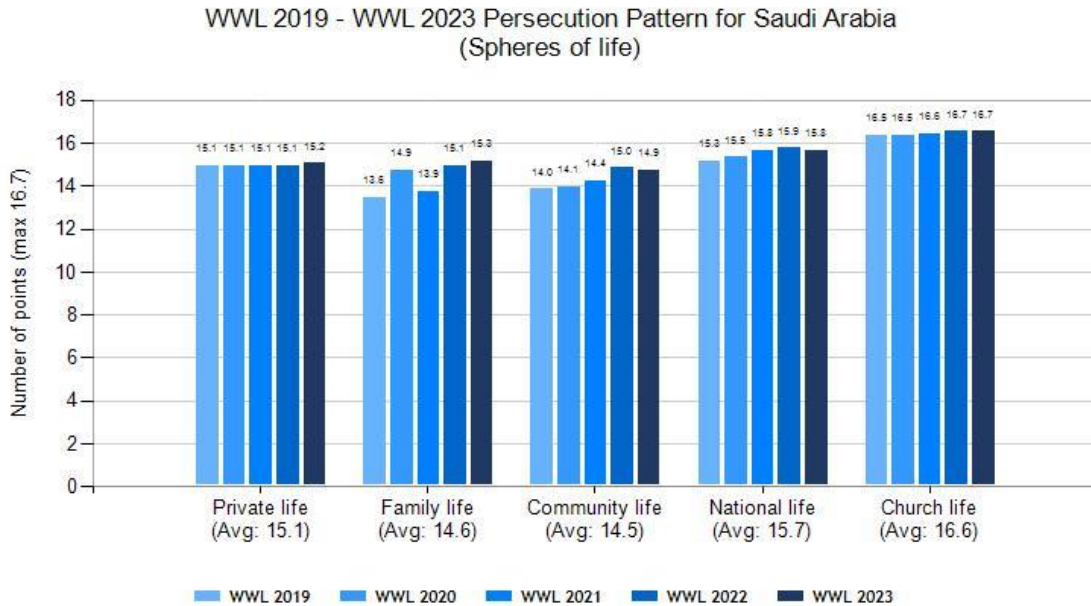
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

### 5 Year trends: Average pressure

Saudi Arabia: WWL 2019 - WWL 2023	
Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2023	15.6
2022	15.5
2021	15.2
2020	15.2
2019	14.9

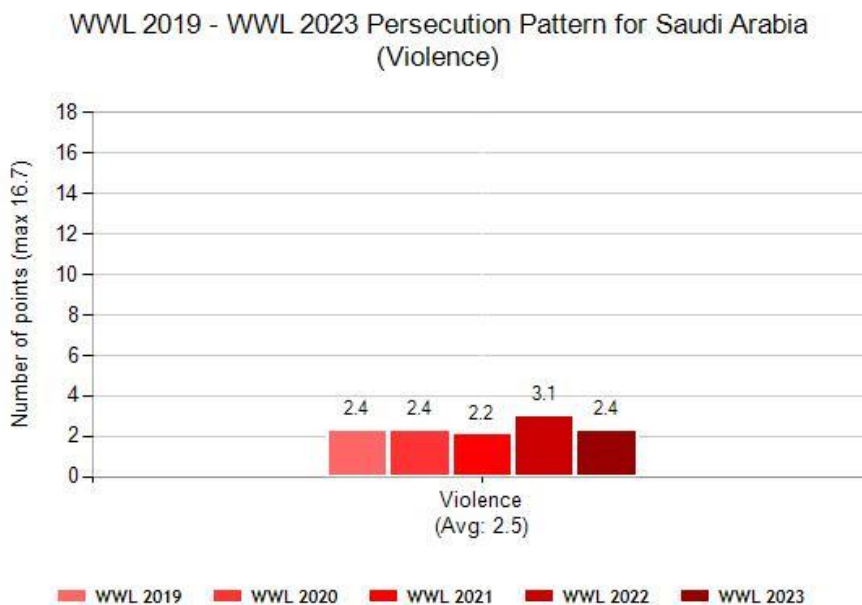
The average pressure over the five *spheres of life* has been slowly increasing over the past five reporting periods, with scores at an extremely high level ranging from 14.9 to 15.6 points. Over the years more data has become available - particularly on the situation of converts among foreign workers - thus contributing to the rise in points.

### 5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



Pressure in all *spheres of life* has been more or less stable at a very high and extreme level. The level of pressure in *Community, National* and *Church life*, which had shown a slightly increasing trend since WWL 2020, seems to be leveling off in WWL 2023.

### 5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



As with the pressure on Christians, the violence score is also quite stable. Only in WWL 2022 did the score exceed 3.0 points (caused in part by a methodological adjustment). 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 of religious police powers.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Forced divorce; Forced marriage
Security	Incarceration by family (house arrest); Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Denied access to social community/networks; Violence – psychological
Technological	-

Women and girls have an extremely limited voice in Saudi Arabia’s Islamic, patriarchal society, and are under constant monitoring by their family and local community. A country expert explained that this situation becomes "amplified" Saudi women who are known to have become Christians. "They are seen as even less valuable and not worth hearing."

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, verbal harassment, and being forcibly married to conservative Muslims as a ‘corrective’ measure (sometimes as a second wife). Whilst boys are more likely to be expelled from the home, girls are more likely to be kept under strict house-arrest, have their phones removed and be isolated from the outside world. Families may even search phones for Christian messages and contacts, and can withhold financial support such as allowance to purchase essential items. 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 losing custody of their children.

Outside the context of marriages, 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 (e.g. when working outside their home) which is strengthened by their nationality and religion (i.e. non-Saudi and non-Muslim).

Given such pressure - and the ultimate threat of honor killing - it comes as no surprise that many Saudi women choose to become secret believers. Fleeing is rarely an option, as despite [2019 legislation](#) allowing women to travel without a chaperone (HRW, 22 August 2019), the movement of women remains heavily controlled by male guardians who can easily withhold

her passport, money and possessions (HRW 2022 country chapter).

Women are largely dependent on their families for the support of their basic needs, including shelter, food and clothing. As a country expert explained: “Knowing that these basic needs could be taken away and harsh physical punishment applied to them, most Saudi female Christians live out their faith in silence and secrecy.”

## 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 can 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, imprisoned, 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. Men can be forced to divorce their wives and not permitted to see their children. Families might search phones and computers for proof of their suspicions of the man leaving Islam. Alternatively they might be taken to a Sheikh to put pressure on them to recant.

Compounding the psychological trauma, families commonly cover up why they are maltreating their male family member. A country expert explained that one Christian “was disowned by his family who then lied to others about why [he was disowned] which further shamed him. They even posted lies about him on social media.”

If converts are detained or imprisoned, their families will be affected by such absence on an economic level, since men are by and large the providers in Saudi families. In light of such pressure and the potentially crippling impact they could have on their families, most converts choose to live as secret believers. This extends as far as not even telling their own 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 opportunities, government posts and religious activities.

Shiites seek greater political participation and more religious tolerance.

According to USCIRF 2022:

- "In June [2021], the government executed Mostafa al-Darwish, a Shi'a Muslim participant in 2011 protests in the Eastern Province."
- "In August [2021], the government executed Ahmed bin Sa'eed Al Janabi for his participation in the same protests."
- "In March [2021], the government commuted the death sentences of Shi'a prisoners Ali al-Nimr, Dawood al-Marhoon, and Abdullah al-Zaher, arrested in relation to protest activity in 2011. All were minors at the time, and human rights organizations allege they were tortured into confessions. (...) The Saudi Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) resented the accused to 10 years in prison. However, Saudi Arabia released Ali al-Nimr in October 2021, Abdullah al-Zaher in November 2021, and Dawood al-Marhoon in February 2022. (...)"
- "In October [2021], a court sentenced Yemeni journalist Ali Abulohoom to 15 years in prison on apostasy charges for posts on his Twitter account."
- "It also delayed trials for several religious prisoners of conscience, including Hassan Farhan al-Maliki and Salman al-Ouda. Palestinian poet Ashraf Fayadh remains in prison on an eight-year sentence on charges of blasphemy and promoting atheist thought. Four members of the Bohra Shi'a community remained in prison in Riyadh on multiyear sentences following spurious charges of money laundering and violating charity collection regulations. Three are in their 60s and two have underlying medical issues, putting them at high risk."

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2021):

- "According to Shia community members, processions and gatherings continued due to decreased sectarian tensions and greater coordination between the Shia community and authorities, and Ashura commemorations were marked by improved relations between the Shia and other communities and public calls for mutual tolerance. Shia activists stated, however, that authorities continued to target members of the Shia community while carrying out security operations and legal proceedings against them specifically because of their religious beliefs."
- "As many as 41 individuals faced the possibility of execution, according to an October report by the Berlin-based European Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR), which stated that an undetermined number were Shia."
- "On October 12 [2021], London-based human rights organization ALQST and Prisoners of Conscience, which monitors and documents arrests in human rights cases in the country, reported that religious leader Musa al-Qarni, a former professor of Islamic jurisprudence, died in prison after his health deteriorated while serving a 20-year prison sentence of which he completed 15 years."



## 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 local Christians) 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 2023 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 2021) 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>
- 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 new Research & Reports page of the website [od.org](http://od.org). As in earlier years, they are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) using the following links:

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