

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

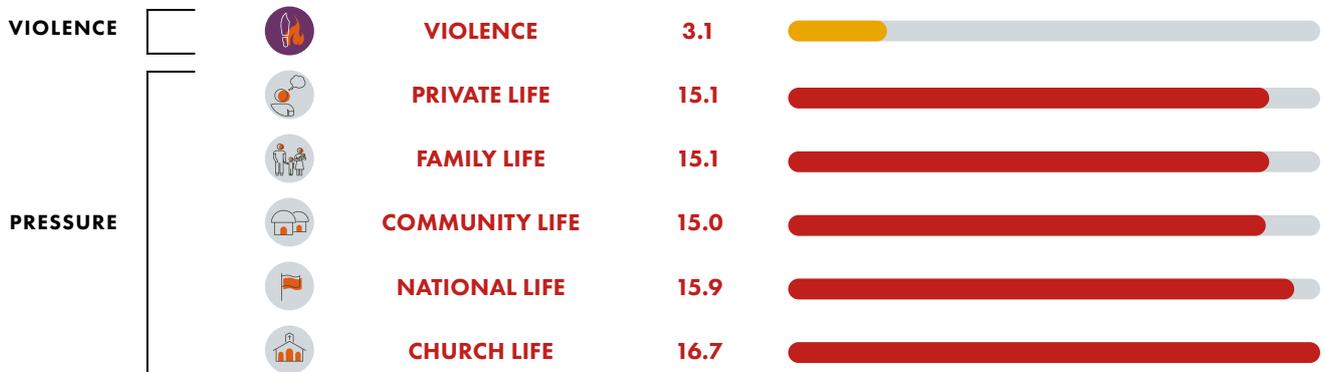
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**11**

## Saudi Arabia



### LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).<sup>1</sup> Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

## Key findings

Most Christians in Saudi Arabia are expatriates who come from low and middle income countries in Asia and Africa, with some also from Western countries. Besides being exploited and poorly paid, expatriates belonging to low and middle income countries regularly face verbal and physical abuse because of their ethnicity and low status. Their Christian faith can add an extra layer of vulnerability.

<sup>1</sup>World Watch Research measures pressure across all spheres of life as well as violence (full methodology [here](#) – password: freedom).

Expatriate Christians are severely restricted in talking about their faith with Muslims. Doing so carries the risk of detention and deportation.

The few Saudi Christian converts from a Muslim background face high levels of pressure, especially from their families, and they generally keep their faith secret. Expatriate Muslims converting to Christianity face violations similar to the levels they would have experienced in their home countries, as they tend to live in a community with others from their home nations.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

King Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud

### POPULATION

35,263,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

1,200,000 (OD estimate)

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Absolute Monarchy



## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	1,200,000	3.4
Muslims	32,762,035	92.9
Hindus	721,274	2.0
Agnostics	235,979	0.7

Source<sup>2</sup>

Extensive oil reserves have transformed Saudi Arabia into one of the richest and most modern nations in the region. The country is an absolute monarchy; political parties are not allowed and there are no national democratic elections. Salman bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud became king in 2015. Two months later, Saudi Arabia started a military campaign with 10 other countries to restore the government of Yemen which had been expelled by the Shiite Houthis. The

ongoing war in Yemen has resulted in thousands of civilian casualties and a humanitarian crisis, leading to worldwide criticism. Some reforms in Saudi Arabia in recent years have included giving women approval to drive and travel without a male escort, as well as significantly reducing the numbers of religious police on the streets.

Saudi Arabia contains the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina (the traditional birth and burial places of Mohammed) and subscribes to Wahhabism, a strict interpretation of Islam. Other religions are not allowed to be practiced openly. A Shiite minority of 10% exists and suffers discrimination. More than 1.2 million Christians are mostly expatriate Asians, working temporarily in the country.

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. Hatred against followers of religions other than Sunni Islam still features in school textbooks, despite promised reforms.

<sup>2</sup>Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021) (Adapted according to OD-estimate)

## How the situation varies by region

As most Christians in Saudi Arabia are expatriate workers, they live and work in all parts of the country dependent on where they are employed. The pressure Christians face is generally the same all over the country, although social control is likely to be higher in rural areas. This particularly affects Christian converts from a Muslim background.

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriate Christians (mostly Roman Catholic) come from Africa, Asia and the West, and come to Saudi Arabia for employment. Migrants from low-income countries face abuse on account of their ethnicity and low status, as well as constant pressure to convert to Islam.

No Christian expatriates may share their faith with Muslims. Church buildings are not legally permitted, but large Christian worship services are reportedly being held regularly without substantial interference from government officials or the religious police.

The community of expatriate Christians also includes Christian converts from a Muslim background. They are found among Arab, as well as Asian migrants, and face similar violations as those in their home countries, as they are normally part of micro home-country communities.

### Historical Christian communities

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

### Converts to Christianity

Saudi Christian converts from a Muslim background keep their faith secret. They learn about Christianity through TV programs or the internet, although this is strictly regulated by the authorities.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Islamic oppression:

Saudi Arabia is defined by Wahhabism. The Quran and Sunna (literally 'Traditions') are declared to be the Constitution and the legal system is based on Sharia law. Only Wahhabi Islam may be practiced publicly, and all Saudi citizens are assumed to be Muslim. The death penalty for apostasy is in force, though there have been no known examples of judicial executions for apostasy in recent years.

### Clan oppression:

Tribe and clan affects Arab society e.g. in marriages, employment and in renting or buying property. Clans can be identified by their surname, which reflects their tribal status. There is general disdain for those who do not have a tribal affiliation, especially non-Muslim expatriates. Clan oppression is clearly connected to Islam and particularly affects Christians with a Muslim background. 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.

### Dictatorial paranoia:

The Saudi monarchy is absolute, and the ruling family carefully control any possible dissension. The king and crown prince will do their utmost to maintain the status quo. Saudi converts to Christianity are seen as dishonoring the country's proud reputation as custodian of the two holy mosques, therefore their existence is denied. State officials often act against Christians in response to requests by family or community members. Saudi rulers have implemented changes that have affected expatriates, such as increasing visa fees for their dependents.



## How are men and women differently affected?

### WOMEN

Saudi women are subordinate to men, and are under constant monitoring. For female converts from Islam, pressure is most exerted by family and community. They risk physical violence, verbal harassment, and being forcibly married to conservative Muslims as a 'corrective' measure. While boys are more likely to be expelled from the home, girls face house arrest and isolation. Converts who are already married risk being divorced and losing custody of their children. Given these pressures, and the ultimate threat of honor killings, many women choose to become secret believers.

Furthermore, sources report that thousands of non-Saudi (especially Asian and African) female domestic workers across the country who are Christian (or non-Islamic) face abuse on a regular basis. Instances of rape and sexual assault are commonplace, and women are often treated like virtual slaves.

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Travel bans/restrictions on movement
- Violence - death
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological
- Violence - sexual
- Violence - verbal

### MEN

The male-dominated nature of public society means that men pay a considerable price if their faith becomes known. According to an expert, "They will lose everything; life, family, reputation, position as a son, job, and financial support." Converts risk being publicly shamed, beaten, imprisoned, thrown out of their home and emotionally abused. Alternatively, they might be taken to a Sheikh to be 're-educated'. If it becomes clear that a convert will not change, the threat of death is all too tangible. Therefore, many live as secret believers.

- Denied access to social community/network
- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence - death
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological
- Violence - verbal

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution score out of 100
2022	11	80.89
2021	14	78.00
2020	13	78.54
2019	15	76.91
2018	12	78.75

*The Saudi Arabia score increased by three points, compared to WWL 2021, because of a rise in both non-violent pressure and incidents involving violence. The first is explained by the availability of more information about migrant converts and the pressure they experience. The increased score for violent incidents does not, in fact, indicate a worsening of the situation but rather a better reflection of the current situation using 'symbolic 10s' which corrects the previously reported under-estimation.*



# Examples of violence in the reporting period

For security reasons no details can be provided here.

WWL Year	Christians detained	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians internally displaced
2022	x	100	100	10
2021	x	1000	100	0

*This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - see [here](#) for full results. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.*

## Private life

Saudi Arabia’s anti-proselytism laws restrict Christians from sharing their beliefs. For Saudi converts from a Muslim background this often means they cannot talk about their faith, not even with their relatives. For expatriate Christians this could have consequences for their employment situation. The repercussions are likely to be severe for Christian converts from Islam, as apostasy can be punished by imprisonment or the death penalty.

## Family life

Non-Islamic religious practice is not allowed, so Christians may not meet for worship or carry out baptisms and weddings. Christian marriages cannot be officially registered with the state. If Saudi parents are discovered to be Christian converts, they may lose custody of their children.

Under Saudi law, migrant female Christians who marry Saudi men (Christian men are not allowed to marry Saudi women) do not have the right to the custody of the children on grounds of ensuring that the children receive a Muslim upbringing.

## Community life

Christian converts from a Muslim background are threatened if their faith becomes known. They are very likely to lose their jobs. The monitoring of known converts is very common and is carried out by the local community. For expatriates, religion is recorded as a part of their application process and any mention of Christianity may result in them not being hired. This mainly concerns migrants from low-income countries, and for that reason some of them register as Muslims.

## National life

Blasphemy, defamation of religions and non-

Islamic proselytizing are prohibited, as is any public expression of non-Islamic worship. Most Christians (both Saudi and foreign) take great care to avoid provocation. They exercise precautionary ‘self-censorship’, avoiding any direct preaching or criticism of Islam. 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.

## Church life

The ban on any form of non-Islamic worship means that no building can be constructed or rented for use as a church. Of the thousands of informal fellowships for expatriates that meet in private places, there is evidence of routine monitoring by the authorities. Christian services are also restricted by the strict gender segregation, which prohibits men and women from different families from worshiping in the same room. The importation of non-Islamic religious materials in Arabic into Saudi Arabia is prohibited. Media, including the Internet, are routinely screened for political, pornographic and religious material deemed offensive or against Islam.



## International obligations & rights violated

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)

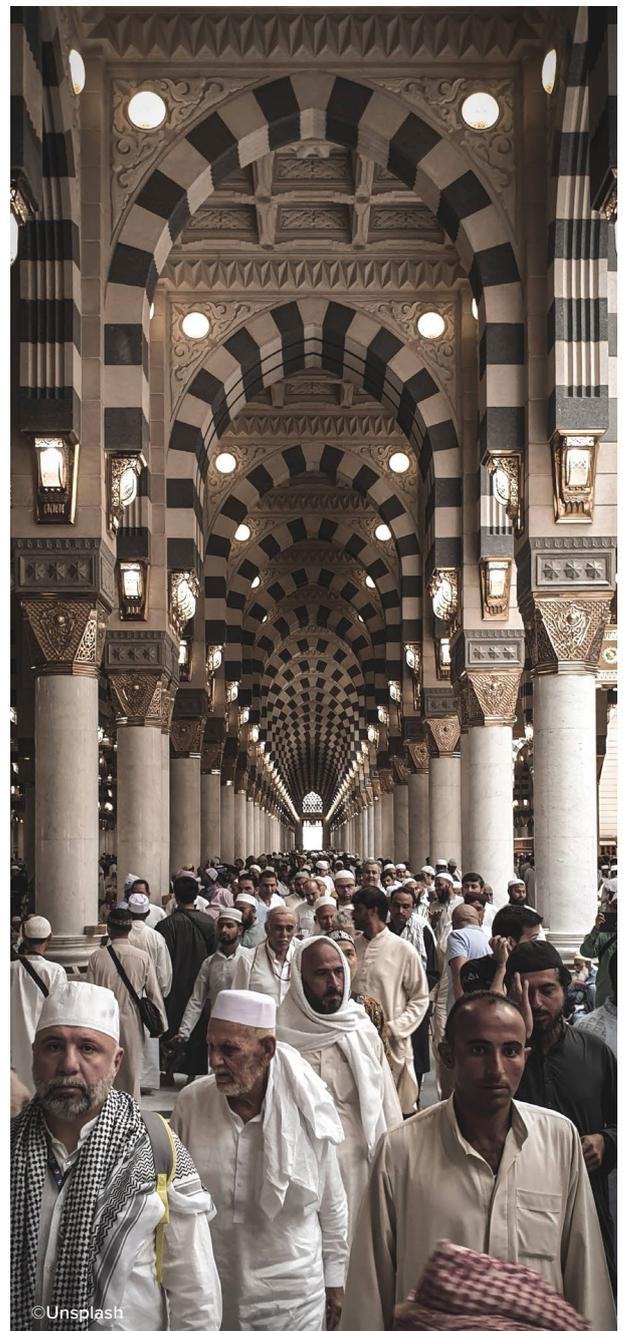
Saudi Arabia is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- 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)



## Situation of other religious minorities

Shiite Muslims, located mainly in the Eastern Province, face discrimination and persecution. Regarded as heretics by Saudi rulers, Shiites are discriminated against in the justice system, in education, employment opportunities and government posts. Shiites seek greater political participation and more religious tolerance. However, Shiite clerics and activists advocating for their rights risk arrest and even execution on charges of opposing the government.



# Open Doors in Saudi Arabia

Open Doors raises prayer support for the believers/church in the Arabian Peninsula.



#### About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2021 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- The full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology, as well as the complete WWL 2022 ranking and reports, can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

*All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

---