

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

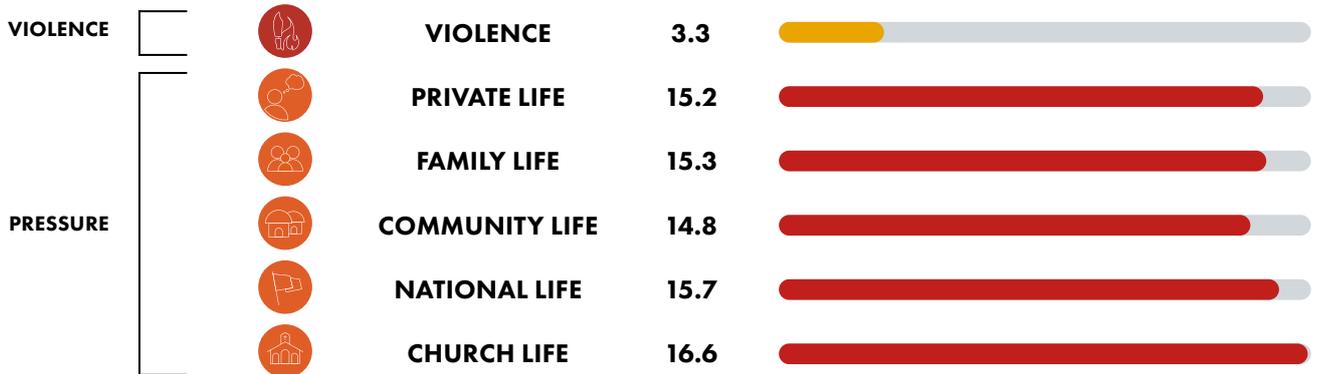
SAUDI ARABIA

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
13



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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).

Key findings

Most Christians in Saudi Arabia are expatriates from low and middle-income countries in Asia and Africa, and some from Western countries. Besides being exploited and poorly paid, they regularly face verbal and physical abuse because of their ethnicity and low status, and their Christian faith can add an extra layer of vulnerability. Expatriate Christians are severely restricted from talking about their faith with Muslims. Doing so carries the risk of detention and deportation. Expatriate Muslims converting to Christianity face violations similar to the levels they would have experienced in their home countries, since they tend to live in communities with others from their home nations. The few Saudi Christian converts from Muslim backgrounds face high levels of pressure, especially from their families, and they generally keep their faith secret. 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.

Quick facts

LEADER

Crown Prince and Prime Minister Muhammad Bin Salman bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud

POPULATION

36,329,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

2,194,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Absolute Monarchy



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	2,194,000	6.0
Muslims	32,812,000	90.3
Hindus	734,000	2.0
Agnostics	243,000	0.7

Source²

Extensive oil reserves have transformed Saudi Arabia into one of the richest and most modern nations in the region. The country is an authoritarian state and 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 and, 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 number 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.

There are close to 2.2 million Christians who are mostly expatriate Asians working temporarily in the country. WCD statistics show the dominant expatriate Christian denomination to be Roman Catholic (over 90%). By converting to Islam, Saudi Christians are punishable under the apostasy law, which carries the death penalty. However, courts have not officially carried out a death sentence for apostasy in recent years. Hatred against followers of religions other than Sunni Islam still features in school textbooks, in spite of promised reforms.

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 depending 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.

¹ Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

² Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

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 are permitted to share their faith with Muslims. Church buildings are not legally permitted, but major Christian worship services are reportedly 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, especially Arab and Asian migrants. These believers face similar violations as back in their home country, 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

The few 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 impacts 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 immediate or extended family of a convert.

Dictatorial paranoia

The Saudi monarchy is absolute, and the ruling family carefully controls any possible dissension. In particular, the king and crown prince will do their utmost to maintain the status quo. As Saudi converts to Christianity are seen as dishonoring the country’s proud reputation as custodian of

the two holy mosques, their existence is denied. State officials often act against Christians in response to requests from family or community members. Saudi rulers have also 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 constantly monitored. For female converts from Islam, pressure is mostly exerted by family and community. They risk physical violence, verbal harassment, house arrest and being forcibly married to conservative Muslims as a “corrective” measure. Already married converts 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 female domestic workers across the country who are Christian (or non-Islamic) face abuse on a regular basis.

Female typical pressure points

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Travel bans/restrictions on movement
- 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. Saudi Arabia’s strict Islamic society means that any deviation from standard behavior is quickly observed. 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, they risk

disownment, prison and even death. In light of these pressures, many choose to live as secret believers.

Male typical pressure points

- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- 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 rounded score out of 100
2024	13	81
2023	13	80
2022	11	81
2021	14	78
2020	13	79

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



Examples of violence in the reporting period

There are close to 2.2 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. Asian and African Christians, mainly housemaids working in Saudi homes, are very vulnerable and are often badly treated. Motives include negative attitudes towards race and faith. Verifiable statistics regarding incidents are scarce because of the social taboo and lack of legal protection/justice. Muslim-background believers risk being arrested and convicted if their beliefs become known. For security reasons, several had to leave their homes to find another residence, either within the country or abroad.

WWL Year	Christians forced to flee their countries	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted	Christians internally displaced	Christians physically or mentally abused
2024	10*	100*	10*	100*
2023	10*	100*	10*	100*

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. 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 especially 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 custody of the children on the 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, and 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 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 church 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 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 under 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 is severely restricted by their own families (CEDAW Art. 15)
- Female Christian converts are forcibly married to Muslim men to force them to 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)



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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, education, employment opportunities and government posts. Shiites seek greater political participation and more religious tolerance, but Shiite clerics and activists advocating for their rights risk arrest and even execution on charges of opposing the government.

According to USCIRF 2023 Saudi Arabia CPC: "In April [2022], the Saudi government made preparations to deport four Uyghur Muslims to China but delayed the deportation following international pressure." "During a sermon at the Grand Mosque in Mecca in July, Imam Saleh bin al-Humaid called for bringing "annihilation upon the plundering and occupying Jews."

Open Doors in Saudi Arabia

Open Doors raises prayer support for the believers and 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: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
