

SAUDI ARABIA

USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia remained poor despite some improvements. Challenges to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) included the constitutional prohibition on non-Muslim worship, egregious punishments for religious dissidents, criminalization of blasphemy, and a religiously based male guardianship system.

Although the government's treatment of Shi'a Muslims was less severe than in previous years, that community continued to face [de facto discrimination](#) in housing, employment, the judiciary, and access to senior government positions. In January, authorities detained 12 supporters of Al Safa Football Club for performing a Shi'a religious chant, later posted online, that commemorated the birth of Imam Ali. The detainees faced charges under Article 6 of the Anti-Cybercrime Law, which prohibits the online dissemination of "material impinging on public order, religious values, public morals and privacy." Judges issued and carried out over 200 [death sentences](#) during the year, including against Shi'a Muslims for protesting religious discrimination. In August, authorities executed Abdulmajeed Al Nimr for "destabilizing the social fabric and national unity," "glorifying [executed Shi'a cleric] Nimr al-Nimr," and "inciting Shi'a employees" to join anti-discrimination protests.

Saudi Arabia continued imposing excessively long prison sentences and travel bans for those expressing dissenting religious views. In March, judicial authorities opened a new trial against Malik al-Dowaiish, son of Sunni cleric [Sulaiman al-Dowaiish](#), whom a court previously sentenced to 27 years in prison after he posted a video about his father's mistreatment. Human rights lawyer and religious freedom advocate [Waleed Abu al-Khair](#) remained in Dhahban Prison, serving a 15-year sentence since 2015; prison authorities have reportedly denied him medical care. Al-Khair was legal counsel to [Raif Badawi](#), whom a court jailed in 2012 for "insulting Islam" and violating the cybercrime law. Although Badawi was [released](#) in

2022, he remains under a media and travel ban that prevents him from joining his family abroad.

Despite some reforms to the [Saudi guardianship system](#), the government continued penalizing opponents of the system, which restricts women's ability to travel, attend university, marry, or obtain medical care without the permission of a male guardian under a unique interpretation of the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam. In January, after more than a year in detention, the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) sentenced social media influencer [Manahel al-Otaibi](#) to 11 years in prison for violating social media, counterterrorism, and male guardianship laws by not wearing "decent" clothing and protesting male guardianship. She reported in April that authorities held her in solitary confinement and broke her leg. In September, the SCC opened new hearings for [Salma al-Shehab](#) and [Nourah al-Qahtani](#), whom courts had previously sentenced to 27 years and 45 years, respectively, for criticizing the guardianship system.

Amid these concerns, the government maintained some initiatives to promote religious inclusivity. Despite the constitutional ban on non-Muslim worship, authorities allowed Christians to gather privately—under strict conditions—and permitted stores to display Christmas and Easter holiday decorations. In May, the state-funded Muslim World League (MWL) organized a global conference to promote interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance, representing a potentially useful step toward creating space for FoRB.

During a March visit to Saudi Arabia, USCIRF observed a higher level of government integration of international FoRB standards than in years past, and conditions for the Shi'a Muslim minority also reflected improvement. In certain urban areas, USCIRF observed less rigid enforcement of religiously based restrictions on women in public life, including a relaxation of strict dress standards, heightened visibility in public spaces, and greater workforce participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Saudi Arabia as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
 - Lift the existing waiver, or do not issue a waiver, releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the CPC designation;
 - Request updates from the Ministry of Justice about reconciling and standardizing religiously grounded sentences and punishments through a draft penal code; and
 - Develop benchmarks, through cooperation between the U.S. Department of State's Office of Global Women's Issues and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), for reforming Saudi Arabia's religiously grounded male guardianship laws, in accordance with an October 2024 [memorandum of understanding](#) on women's rights.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Hold hearings, aligned with bilateral U.S.-Saudi strategic dialogues, to raise religious freedom conditions, including prolonged detention of FoRB prisoners, discrimination against Shi'a Muslims, the male guardianship system, and transnational repression; and
 - Conduct bipartisan congressional and staff delegations to Saudi Arabia in 2025 to raise religious freedom concerns and the importance of protecting FoRB as a contributing factor to the success of Saudi Vision 2030.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Assessing Religious Freedom in Saudi Arabia in the Context of Vision 2030](#)
- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Leaves Saudi Arabia after Government Official Insisted Chair to Remove Kippah](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)**

Background

Of [36.5 million Saudi nationals](#), 85–90 percent are Sunni Muslim and 10–12 percent are Shi’a Muslim. Nearly half of the population is composed of expatriates, including at least two million Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, practitioners of folk religions, and unaffiliated individuals. Saudi law identifies the Qur’an and Sunna (traditions of the Prophet) as the constitution, while the judicial system enforces an official interpretation of Shari’a according to its version of Hanbali jurisprudence.

Systematic Enforcement of Official Interpretation of Religion

In 2024, the Saudi government continued to codify aspects of its religiously grounded penal code, making these punishments more standardized and transparent. However, the draft code reportedly does not amend provisions in existing laws that authorities have often used to repress religious dissenters. These statutes include the 2007 Anti-Cybercrime Law and the 2017 Counterterrorism Law, both of which equate peaceful religious expression with “terrorism” and “impinging on public order” if it falls outside the government’s strict limitations on religion or belief. Throughout the year, the government systematically wielded both laws to stifle individuals promoting ideas that deviated from the state’s interpretation of Shari’a.

The male guardianship system, which is explicitly [rooted](#) in Islamic legal principles, relegates women to the status of legal minors for life. Through this system, women—including U.S. citizens—face government-imposed restrictions on marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Guardianship laws designate the father as a child’s primary legal guardian on religious grounds without due consideration of the child’s best interest. Authorities detain women for expressing on social media their religious concerns with the male guardianship system. [Loujain al-Hathloul](#), an activist who previously faced prolonged detention and criminal charges for protesting male guardianship, remains unable to leave Saudi Arabia despite the expiration of her travel ban in 2023 and government permission in October for her to challenge the ban in court.

The government also restricts intermarriage between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims according to its official interpretation of Shari’a, requiring government approval and allowing a judge to annul any such marriage. Apostasy and blasphemy are capital crimes for which the government invokes an explicit religious justification.

Intolerant Religious Content in Textbooks

Saudi government-issued textbooks persist in contributing to an atmosphere of religious intolerance toward those not adhering to the government’s mandated interpretation of Islam, despite commitments to [reform](#) that the government made to the United States in 2006. Over the last two decades, it has [removed](#) some intolerant content on religious subjects. However, official textbooks [continue](#) to compare members of non-Muslim religions to maimed animals and contend

that atheism results from “psychological disorders.” Some textbooks also contain content deriding Shi’a and Sufi Muslims as polytheists or idolators, while others justify the imposition of restrictions on women’s dress in public on religious grounds. The truncation of USCIRF’s March 2024 [visit](#) precluded its anticipated meeting with the Ministry of Education to discuss reforms in this area.

Transnational Repression

Saudi Arabia continues to pursue religious dissidents abroad and imposes punishments, including travel and media bans, on family members in the country. In 2024, Saudi authorities continued to detain [Assad](#) and [Mohammed al-Ghamdi](#), the brothers of UK-based religious scholar Saed al-Ghamdi. In June, the SCC sentenced Assad al-Ghamdi to 20 years in prison on charges including “insulting religion.” Authorities have reportedly subjected him to torture and medical neglect in Dhahban and Al-Hayer prisons. In September, the SCC formally overturned the death sentence against Mohammed al-Ghamdi and instead sentenced him to 30 years in prison.

Saudi authorities continued to detain four Uyghurs—including a minor—in a Jeddah prison, where they remain at risk of forcible repatriation to China. Police arrested Aimidoula Waili and Nuermaimaiti Ruze in 2020 after they had arrived on tourist visas to perform *umrah*, a Muslim religious pilgrimage. Chinese authorities had previously subjected Waili to torture in Xinjiang, China, where the government has perpetrated [genocide](#) and crimes against humanity against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims. In 2022, police detained Buheliqemu Abula and her teenage daughter near Mecca.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States continued [bilateral coordination](#) with Saudi Arabia on regional [security](#) issues, including discussions of [defense guarantees](#) and cybersecurity cooperation, amid regional tensions surrounding the ongoing conflict in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. Then U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [traveled](#) multiple times to [Saudi Arabia](#) in 2024, where he [met](#) with Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud and [Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud](#) as well as Saudi Arabia’s Ambassador to the United States Princess Reema bint Bandar Al Saud, to coordinate a response to that conflict. In January, during the United Nations Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review of Saudi Arabia, then U.S. Ambassador Michèle Taylor [recommended](#) that Saudi authorities reform laws and judicial processes negatively impacting FoRB. In July, 32 members of Congress [wrote](#) to then President Joseph R. Biden and then Secretary Blinken urging them to ask Saudi authorities to immediately release a list of prisoners of conscience in the country, including FoRB prisoners.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [redesignated](#) Saudi Arabia as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.