

SAUDI ARABIA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia remained poor. Systematic challenges to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) included egregious punishments for individuals who deviate from the state's singular interpretation of Islam, the constitutional prohibition on public non-Muslim worship, criminalization of blasphemy, and a religiously based male guardianship system.

Judges issued and carried out approximately 355 death sentences throughout the year, including against Shi'a Muslims for protesting religious discrimination. In [April](#) and [September](#), United Nations (UN) human rights experts called on the Saudi government to cease executions of young Shi'a Saudi men convicted of offenses allegedly committed as minors. In August and October, respectively, authorities executed [Jalal Labbad](#) and [Abdullah al-Derazi](#), both Shi'a Muslim men who were sentenced to death despite being minors at the time of their involvement in 2011 protests over discrimination against Shi'a Muslims. [Youssef al-Manasif](#), another Shi'a Muslim sentenced to death for protesting religious discrimination as a youth, faced imminent execution after the Saudi Court of Appeal upheld his death sentence in August.

Saudi Arabia continued imposing severe punishments for individuals expressing dissenting religious views, including excessively long prison sentences, travel bans, and cruel treatment in detention. In early 2025, judicial authorities resented Malik al-Dowaish, son of Sunni cleric [Sulaiman al-Dowaish](#), to 15 years' imprisonment after previously sentencing him for posting 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 adequate 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](#), which is explicitly [rooted](#) in the state's particular interpretation of Islamic legal principles, the government continued penalizing individuals with religious beliefs that deviate from the system, which restricts women in marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance without the permission of a male guardian under a unique interpretation of the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam. [Loujain al-Hathloul](#), a prominent 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. In February, al-Hathloul was barred from attending a UN conference in Riyadh over her previous criticism of the Saudi government, including religious restrictions on women driving.

The government undertook some changes in 2025 to advance religious freedom. Saudi government officials have expressed publicly that the law allows for all residents, including non-Muslims, to worship in private with full approval from relevant authorities. Throughout 2025, authorities allowed Christians of various denominations to gather privately under strict conditions. Additionally, in recent years, the government-funded Muslim World League has organized global conferences to promote interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance.

In April, authorities released four Uyghurs—including a minor—from prison, where for years they were at risk of forcible repatriation to China. Before their release, prison authorities reportedly subjected them to harsh conditions without sufficient air, sun, and medical treatment. The individuals were arrested in 2020 and 2022 after arriving on tourist visas to perform Umra, a Muslim religious pilgrimage. Chinese authorities had previously subjected one of them to torture in Xinjiang, China, where the government has perpetrated [genocide](#) and crimes against humanity against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims.

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;
- Integrate religious freedom improvements in Saudi Arabia into broader U.S.-Saudi security cooperation efforts, such as release of prisoners of conscience and lifting travel bans on religious dissidents; and
- Direct the U.S. Department of State to request through the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh updates from the Ministry of Justice about standardizing religiously grounded sentences and punishments through a draft penal code.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Conduct bipartisan congressional and staff delegations to Saudi Arabia to raise religious freedom concerns and the importance of protecting FoRB as a contributing factor to the success of Saudi Vision 2030; and
- Hold hearings to raise religious freedom conditions, including prolonged detention of FoRB prisoners, discrimination against Shi'a Muslims, the male guardianship system, and transnational repression.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Welcomes the Release of Two Religious Prisoners in Saudi Arabia](#)
- **Press Release:** [Saudi Arabia Undermines U.S. Bilateral Relationship with Execution of Shi'a Advocate](#)
- Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2

Background

In 2025, of the 37 million Saudi nationals, 85–90 percent were Sunni Muslim and 10–12 percent were Shi’a Muslim. Nearly half of the population was 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. Apostasy and blasphemy remain capital crimes for which the government invokes an explicit religious justification.

Systematic Enforcement of Official Interpretation of Religion

In 2025, the Saudi government began implementing a new personal status law rooted in Islamic religious concepts. The 41-article regulation builds upon previous reforms to the religiously grounded guardianship system and offers women expanded legal rights in divorce and custody. The law also relies heavily on judicial discretion, creating a lack of transparency and consistency in relation to religious matters, which therefore renders proposed reforms uncertain.

In 2025, efforts to reform Saudi Arabia’s penal code stalled. Experts have raised concerns that the draft code does not amend existing provisions in the law that authorities have used to repress religious dissenters. These 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 limitations on religion or belief. Throughout the year, the government systematically wielded both laws to stifle individuals promoting ideas that deviate from the state’s interpretation of Shari’a.

In February, authorities released [Salma al-Shehab](#), arrested in 2021 and previously sentenced to 27 years for social media activity criticizing the male guardianship system. [Nourah al-Qahtani](#) continues to serve her reduced sentence of 35 years for criticizing the government’s interpretation of the religiously grounded guardianship system. Authorities have reportedly held al-Qahtani in solitary confinement since February despite her rapidly declining health.

Mistreatment of Individuals Detained on a Religious Basis

In May, al-Ha’ir Prison authorities refused a UN expert visit to dissident Islamic scholar [Salman al-Ouda](#)—detained since 2017 and held in solitary confinement—to probe reports of continued mistreatment and declining health. Throughout the year, authorities continued to hold Sheikh Awad al-Qarni, another Islamic scholar detained in 2017 for expressing his religious views and government criticism online, in solitary confinement. Authorities subjected him to inhumane treatment and denied him needed medical care. Cleric [Mohammad bin Hassan al-Habib](#) continues to be denied sufficient medical treatment for his declining health and was repeatedly placed in solitary confinement throughout the year.

In August, after repeatedly prolonging judicial proceedings, the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) overturned the 11-year sentence for social media influencer [Manahel al-Otaibi](#) but handed down a new

five-year sentence, including a travel ban, for violating social media, counterterrorism, and male guardianship laws. Authorities arrested al-Otaibi in 2022 for not wearing “decent” clothing and protesting the male guardianship law’s systematic religious restrictions on women and girls. Prison authorities denied her family contact and subjected her to abuse, affecting her ability to walk.

In 2025, Saudi women and girls remained forcibly detained in “care home” (Dar al-Reaya) facilities for purportedly violating religious guardianship laws. Security officials in these facilities have assaulted women and girls held there, including through whipping, medical mistreatment, and dragging them by their hair. Hundreds of Saudi women or girls are likely detained in such institutions, where they are subject to forced religious teachings.

Discrimination against Religious Minorities

Although the government’s treatment of Shi’a Muslims was less severe compared to previous years, the community continued to face de facto discrimination in housing, employment, the judiciary, and access to senior government positions.

Throughout the year, authorities systematically targeted Christians, including by issuing deportation visas, interrogating converts from Islam, closing bank accounts of religious leaders, and creating challenges for worshipers to obtain exit visas.

Transnational Repression

Saudi Arabia continues to pursue religious dissidents abroad and impose punishments on their family in the country. In April, a young Saudi woman remained in a Jeddah detention center after authorities abducted her from a private residence in Australia and forcibly returned her to Saudi Arabia. In 2022, she fled Saudi Arabia to escape the male guardianship system. In February, authorities released [Assad al-Ghamdi](#), brother of United Kingdom-based religious scholar and Saudi government critic Saed al-Ghamdi, whom the SCC sentenced to 20 years for “insulting religion.” Their brother, [Mohammad al-Ghamdi](#), continues to serve a 30-year sentence after the SCC overturned his death sentence in 2024.

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 Israel-Hamas conflict, [tensions](#) in Syria, [Houthi](#) violence, and other global issues. In May, President Donald J. Trump and U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio [traveled](#) multiple times to Saudi Arabia for meetings with Gulf partners. In November, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman [visited](#) Washington for the first time since 2018 for high-level meetings on increased military, technological, and commercial cooperation.

The U.S. Department of State last [redesignated](#) Saudi Arabia as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023. Any presidential action taken as a result of this designation terminates by the end of 2025 unless expressly reauthorized by law.