

Thank you, USCIRF, for your invitation,

Religious freedom, as with other rights and freedom, remains as a serious challenge in Saudi Arabia, both because of the theocratic historical nature of state formation and the recent repressive transformation of the state. In the last few years, certain reforms were enacted mainly because of attempts at economic reforms and to promote and elevate the Crown Prince, Mohammed Bin Salman or MbS, to Saudi youth and western allies. One notable reform is banning the notorious religious police from field work, but not from online surveillance. These reforms encouraged more engagement of women in gender-mixed work and public spaces. Newly established public recreational activities and performances aimed to encourage tourism and foreign investment by improving the quality of life. There was also an active attempt to review educational textbooks to remove religious references to radical thoughts or violent actions.

However, these reforms coincided with an excessive use of repressive tactics. Newly established online surveillance system and state security apparatus began conducting waves of mass arrests and issuing strict laws and regulations against perceived critics or dissidents inside and outside of the state. State-sponsored media outlets and religious institutions were deployed in an orchestrated campaign against persons and thoughts aimed at challenging or promoting disobedience to the ruler. One notable religious edict by Sheikh Saleh al-Fozan, a member of the Council of supreme scholars and a father-like figure to MbS, called for killing of dissidents who disobey the ruler especially those using media outlets to incite the public against the ruler. The edict was issued one month before Saudi operatives, close to MbS, killed & dismembered the prominent journalist Jamal Khashoggi, in a Saudi embassy in Turkey. Likewise, Friday sermons in the holy mosque, and other mosques across the county, were politicized to lobby the public against perceived acts of disobedience. The results were catastrophic and manifested in many brutal incidents involving extrajudicial killing, unlawful arrests, and closing off any spaces for public debates on religious beliefs or rights. Systematic use of spyware, arrests and torture became widely used. Judges trained in strict Islamic jurisdiction admit confessions extracted under torture and no serious investigation were held in any of the torture claims by prisoners, including in the case of the women activists.

In 2017, with the rise of MbS to power as a crown prince, episodes of mass arrests of the most notable Saudi figures of all background started to take place. Among them, were the most influential religious figures, of all sects, whose line of thoughts and advocacy were independent from that of the state. Some of the charges brought against these figures included inciting the public against the state fundamental religious beliefs or foundations, acquiring banned books, and working for foreign entities. The prosecution in these cases demanded death penalty, as in the case of the prominent scholar Salman al-Oudah, or lengthy prison sentences, as in the case of Abdullah al-Malki, a young scholar of democracy and Islam.

Sentencing online bloggers who challenged the dominant Islamic beliefs or declared different religious beliefs were also ongoing. The Saudi-based, Yemeni journalist, Ali Aboluhom, was sentenced to 15 years in prison for holding a Twitter account promoting ideas of apostasy, atheism, and blasphemy; a manner that shows the false claims of religious tolerance that the state has been actively promoting worldwide, and consistent with sentencing the prominent blogger, Raef Badawi, to ten years in 2012 for insulting Islam through his online forum of Free Saudi Liberals. Shite minority continue to be banned from rights to have their own Islamic beliefs

taught in schools or build their own mosques in any city or area outside of their historical areas. Hate speech against Shite and other religious minority was also fueled by state-sponsored accounts online as the war against the Houthis in Yemen escalated.

Saudi Arabia's government has also exploited its religious oversight of the two Islamic holy mosques, visited regularly by millions of Muslims across the world, for political advantage. Over the past four years, Saudi Arabia has deported four Uyghurs to China while they were visiting Mecca, and the Saudi Crown Prince has made a public statement in support of China's treatment of Uyghurs. In order to stop a UN investigation into possible war crimes in Yemen by all parties, Saudi Arabia has threatened Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country in the world, that it would create obstacles for Indonesians' visits to Mecca if it supported the investigation.

Women rights show areas of progress and deterioration. The government's ease of restrictions on women's mobility and autonomy gave many women a newly founded sense of freedom to seek work opportunities and greater independence. However, the legal reforms kept the male guardians' control of women's choices by using disobedience claims. Saudi courts consider the cases of women disobedience valid if guardians' express religious concerns over women's choices, such as inappropriate dress code or working in mixed gender places or travelling alone. As social norms are increasingly changing, with more women taking new roles and making different choices, honor-related violence is a prime concern. Violence against women is prevalent in Saudi Arabia with inadequate response system. In 2019, the state introduced the Public Decency Law with [19 violations](#) deemed as inappropriate social behavior by the state, including a vague reference to improper dress code or indecent acts.

Saudi Arabia used to have a viable and alert community of women activists who engaged in public debate and mobilization on important aspects women's rights, including religiously inspired social and legal norms which harm women. However, the climate of repression and fear created by the state in the last few years, not only wiped out that significant organic transformation but also closed off venues of community support for vulnerable women, who aren't able to access help or resources through the state resources. The situation is even dire for migrant women facing violations under the sponsorship system and especially women domestic workers who were exempted from the recent reforms of the system. Religious freedom can only be maintained and defended in a society free to express and debate thoughts and opinions, a situation that is now rendered unattainable in Saudi Arabia.

Sincerely,

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Scholar and activist from Saudi Arabia