

# SAUDI ARABIA

## USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

### KEY FINDINGS

Religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia remained poor in 2023 despite some improvements. Power is highly centralized within the Al Saud ruling family. The ruling monarch, King Salman bin Abdel Aziz Al Saud, holds the title “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques.” The King’s son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, is prime minister. Public non-Muslim worship and the construction of houses of worship other than mosques remain prohibited. However, the government permitted a visiting Israeli delegation to [hold](#) Sukkot services in a Riyadh hotel in October. Shi’a Muslims face systematic discrimination in employment and government mistreatment. Ahead of Saudi Arabia’s United Nations (UN) Universal Periodic Review in January 2024, the UN Special Rapporteur on summary, extrajudicial, or arbitrary killings expressed [concern](#) over the Supreme Court’s upholding of a death sentence for [Abdullah al-Derazi](#), a Shi’a man arrested in 2014 for crimes he was alleged to have committed as a minor.

In recent years, the Saudi government has made changes to the male guardianship system, a set of laws and regulations [rooted](#) in the government’s official interpretation of Islam and imposed on women regardless of their religious beliefs. The government has also begun to codify aspects of its religiously grounded penal code, making these punishments more standardized and transparent. In February 2023, the governor of Mecca Governorate approved plans for a committee to reconcile disputes over *qisas* crimes (a religious category of crimes for which retaliatory punishment is permitted). The Kingdom has permitted gender mixing and relaxed religious dress codes at specific nightlife and music events. A May [study](#) of Saudi textbooks noted “further progress and improvement” with regard to the removal of religiously intolerant content, while noting that some such content still remained, including passages using religious interpretations to equate homosexuality and atheism with terrorist ideology.

The Saudi government continues to issue egregious prison sentences for those expressing dissenting religious views on social media. In March, the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) resentedenced [Salma al-Shehab](#) to 27 years in prison—a reduction from 34—over tweets supporting activists peacefully challenging the guardianship system. That same month, al-Shehab and other activists undertook a three-and-a-half-week hunger strike to protest their detention conditions. In June, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention expressed [concern](#) over the use of antiterrorism and cybercrime laws to target al-Shehab—whose cybercrime charges were dropped in March 2023—and activist [Nourah al-Qahtani](#). The SCC charged al-Qahtani for possessing a banned book by jailed dissident religious scholar [Salman al-Ouda](#). In October, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention [determined](#) that al-Ouda’s detention was arbitrary. In August, the SCC sentenced Mohammed al-Ghamdi to death after holding him incommunicado in solitary confinement for four months and charging him with “supporting a terrorist ideology” over tweets calling for the release of religious clerics. Regarding this decision, the crown prince [told](#) a U.S. journalist in September, “I cannot tell a judge [to] ... ignore the law... But do we have bad laws? Yes. We are changing that.” Al-Ghamdi’s brother Saeed is a United Kingdom-based religious scholar and dissident, indicating that the sentence is part of the broader Saudi campaign of [transnational repression](#) of those who challenge the official interpretation of Islam. In July, a court sentenced Malik al-Dowaish, son of cleric [Sulaiman al-Dowaish](#), to 27 years in prison after he posted a video inquiring about his father’s mistreatment.

During a USCIRF visit to Saudi Arabia in March 2024, government officials asked Chair Rabbi Abraham Cooper to remove his kippah at the Diriyah UNESCO World Heritage Site and for all other times when out in public. After being escorted from the site, the USCIRF delegation [truncated the trip](#).

### 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), and lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation; and
- Identify legal options for penalizing U.S. companies complicit in the Saudi government’s religious freedom violations, including those enabling electronic surveillance of cellular phones, emails, social media accounts, and the private messages of religious minorities and religious dissidents.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Hold public hearings to amplify bipartisan concerns over religious freedom violations in Saudi Arabia, including the prolonged detention of religious prisoners of conscience, and work with like-minded parliamentarians in other countries to advocate for them and other prisoners of conscience to be released.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Transnational Repression of Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)
- **Issue Brief:** [Personal Status and Family Law in the Middle East and North Africa](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Leaves Saudi Arabia After Government Official Insisted Chair to Remove Kippah](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Saudi Arabia](#)

## Background

Out of [34 million Saudis](#), 85–90 percent are Sunni Muslim, and 10–15 percent are Shi'a Muslim. An estimated 38 percent of the population are expatriates, including at least two million Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, practitioners of folk religions, and the unaffiliated. Under Saudi law, the constitution is the Qur'an and the sunna (traditions of the Prophet), and the judicial system enforces an official interpretation of Shari'a as informed by Hanbali jurisprudence. Apostasy and blasphemy are both capital crimes. Same-sex relations are legally punishable by death, but the government has conducted no such executions in recent years.

## Shi'a Muslim Discrimination

Shi'a Muslims face discrimination in housing, employment, and the judiciary and lack access to senior positions in the government and military. The government continues to prosecute those involved in 2011 protests against religious discrimination in the predominantly Shi'a Eastern Province. In March, a court sentenced Shi'a activist [Mariam Al Qisoom](#) to a 25-year prison sentence and subsequent travel ban. In June, authorities arrested Shi'a Bahraini cleric Sheikh Jamil al-Baqari for posting a social media video in which he recited a prayer for the deliverance of Imam Mahdi. Official religious interpretations in Saudi Arabia oppose venerating religious figures.

## Social Media Crackdowns

The Saudi government actively surveilles social media. It has arrested citizens over their peaceful religious expression, accusing them of offenses including sending material that may "harm public order and religious values." These include "explicitly denying the Qur'an," "contempt for the teachings of the Islamic religion," and "opposition to the provisions of Islamic Shari'a." In January, Riyadh police arrested four people for posting a dancing video on TikTok and referred them to the Public Prosecutor for violating the Law on Information Crimes and Public Morals. They were later released. In September, the General Authority for Media Regulation summoned a female blogger over a tweet deemed "insulting to the Prophet of Islam and his wife." In March, Sheikh Imad al-Mubayed disappeared after posting a video on Twitter criticizing the government's interpretation of Islam, which he later recanted. He posted a [video](#) later that month claiming he had found refuge in a "safe country."

In January, the Riyadh Criminal Court heard charges against social media influencer [Manahel al-Otaibi](#). They included publishing content related to abolishing the guardianship system that allegedly violated "public morals," supporting activists who oppose guardianship, and dressing "improperly" according to religiously grounded guidelines. The court transferred the case to the SCC, where al-Otaibi faced charges under the 2017 counterterrorism law. In July, the SCC postponed her scheduled court hearing without setting a new date. In September, she alleged physical and psychological abuse during her ongoing detention at Malaz Prison, including unjust solitary confinement. al-Otaibi was held incommunicado from November 5 through the end of the reporting period. Manahel's sister Fouz, who was charged with similar crimes, is outside Saudi Arabia and posted a video in August [criticizing](#) the targeting of Saudi women for wearing

clothing defying religious notions of modesty while permitting more lenient requirements for foreign female performance artists.

## Religious Guardianship

Saudi women have benefited from recent legal reforms but continue to face restrictions on their religious freedom. Many activists who advocated for now-implemented changes to these laws were arrested and—in some cases—subjected to harassment, sexual assault, and abuse in prison. Several women punished for religious expression on social media wrote in support of reforms to the guardianship system and activists who have advocated for its abolition.

## Transnational Repression

Outside its borders, Saudi Arabia continues to pursue religious dissidents. It also imposes punishments, including travel and media bans, on family members of religious dissidents living abroad to encourage self-censorship. [Abdulrahman al-Sadhan](#), whose sister is a U.S. citizen and critic of Saudi policy, remains jailed on a 20-year sentence for satirizing religious officials. [Loujain al-Hathloul](#), an activist against the religious guardianship system, remains unable to leave Saudi Arabia despite her travel ban expiring in 2023, likely related to her sister Lina's activism. In March 2023, USCIRF expressed [concern](#) and the U.S. Department of State [said](#) it was "studying" indications of Saudi government involvement in the repatriation under duress and subsequent suicide of Eden Knight. A 23-year-old Saudi citizen, Knight flew to Saudi Arabia from the United States in December 2022 despite a fear of religiously grounded persecution on the basis of gender. In text messages, she explicitly cited her religious beliefs as the source of this fear. She committed suicide in March 2023 after being subjected to familial abuse and fearing her attempt to obtain a new passport via the governmental *Absher* app would result in a notification being sent to her father.

## U.S. Policy

The United States continued close [security](#) coordination with Saudi Arabia on regional security issues, including discussions of defense guarantees. This coordination continued following the outbreak of conflict in Israel and Gaza in October. In March, the U.S. Senate [confirmed](#) Michael Ratney as ambassador to Saudi Arabia. That same month, Senators Chris Murphy (D-CT) and Mike Lee (R-UT) introduced a [privileged resolution](#) that would require the Joseph R. Biden administration to issue a report on Saudi Arabia's human rights record. In August, Senator Murphy [tweeted](#) expressing concern for Mohammed al-Ghamdi. In October, Saudi Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman met with [senior](#) U.S. [officials](#) during a visit to Washington, DC. Also in October, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken traveled to Saudi Arabia and met with Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister [Mohammed bin Salman](#) and Saudi Foreign Minister [Faisal bin Farhan](#) to coordinate a response to the conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. In FY 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) over \$112,000 in foreign assistance to Saudi Arabia. On December 29, 2023, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) Saudi Arabia as a CPC under IRFA but reimposed the longstanding waiver on taking any presidential action as a consequence of the designation.