

SAUDI ARABIA 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

According to the 1992 Basic Law of Governance, the country's official religion is Islam and the constitution is the Quran and Sunna (traditions and practices based on the life of the Prophet Muhammad). The legal system is based largely on sharia as interpreted within the Hanbali School of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence. Freedom of religion is not provided under the law. The government does not allow the public practice of any non-Muslim religion. The law criminalizes "anyone who challenges, either directly or indirectly, the religion or justice of the King or Crown Prince." The law criminalizes "the promotion of atheistic ideologies in any form," "any attempt to cast doubt on the fundamentals of Islam," publications that "contradict the provisions of Islamic law," and other acts including non-Islamic public worship, public display of non-Islamic religious symbols, conversion by a Muslim to another religion, and proselytizing by a non-Muslim. In March UN experts said 15 Shia were convicted of spying for Iran and financing terrorism and were facing execution after legal processes that human rights organizations deemed lacking in fair trial guarantees and transparency. In January the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) sentenced prominent Shia cleric Sheikh Mohammed al-Habib to seven years in prison after the Public Prosecution's objection to his 2017 acquittal. Some human rights organizations stated convictions of Shia on security charges, including several carrying the death penalty, stemming from 2017-18 clashes were motivated by sectarianism, while the government stated the individuals were investigated, prosecuted, and sentenced as a result of security-related crimes and in accordance with the law. A December report by the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism expressed concern at the "systemic repression against the country's Eastern Province, where the majority Shia population lives." Charges announced by the government during the year for prominent clerics, religious scholars, and academics, reportedly detained in September 2017, include alleged connections to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) or MB-affiliated groups. The government continued to censor or block some religion-related content in the media, including social media and the internet. The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV, commonly known outside the country as the "religious police") monitored social behavior to encourage obedience to laws and regulations protecting "public morals." Many observers noted a continued decreased public presence of CPVPV officers in major cities, with the exception of Mecca and Medina, and fewer reports

of CPVPV harassment. On March 4, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman met publicly with Coptic Pope Tawadros II in Cairo's largest Coptic cathedral. On November 1, the crown prince met with U.S. evangelical Christian figures in Riyadh.

Instances of prejudice and discrimination against Shia Muslims continued to occur in private sector employment. Social media provided an outlet for citizens to discuss current events and religious issues, which sometimes included making disparaging remarks about members of various religious groups or "sects." In addition, terms such as "rejectionists," which Shia considered insulting, were commonly found in public discourse.

Embassy, consulate general, and other U.S. government officials continued to press the government to respect religious freedom, eliminate discriminatory enforcement of laws against religious minorities, and promote respect and tolerance for minority Muslim and non-Muslim religious practices and beliefs. In discussions with the Human Rights Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Ministry of Islamic Affairs (MOIA), and other relevant ministries and agencies, senior embassy and consulate officials continued to raise and discuss reports of abuses of religious freedom, arbitrary arrests and detentions, the country's counterterrorism law, and due process standards. Embassy and consulate officials continued to query the legal status of detained and imprisoned individuals and discuss religious freedom concerns, such as religious assembly and importation of religious materials, with members of religious minorities, including Shia Muslims and citizens who no longer considered themselves Muslims, as well as with non-Muslim foreign residents.

Since 2004, Saudi Arabia has been designated as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Most recently, on November 28, the Secretary of State redesignated Saudi Arabia as a CPC, and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompany designation as required in the important national interest of the United States pursuant to section 407 of the Act.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the country's total population at 33 million (July 2018 estimate), including more than 12 million foreign residents. Between 85 and 90 percent of the approximately 20 million citizens are Sunni Muslims.

Shia Muslims constitute 10 to 12 percent of the citizen population. Approximately 80 percent of Shia are “Twelvers” (Shiites who recognize 12 imams) and are primarily located in the Eastern Province. Nakhawala, or “Medina Shia,” are also Twelvers and reside in small numbers in the western Hejaz region. Estimates place their numbers at approximately 1,000. Twelver Shia adhere to the Ja’afari School of jurisprudence. Most of the remaining Shia are Sulaimani Ismailis, also known as “Seveners” (those who branched off from the Twelvers to follow Isma’il ibn Ja’afar as the Seventh Imam). Seveners number approximately 500,000 and reside primarily in Najran Province, where they constitute the majority of the province’s inhabitants. Another branch of Sevenser Shia, the Bohra Ismailis, number approximately 2,000, most of whom are of Yemeni or South Asian origin. Pockets of Zaydis, members of another branch of Shia Islam, numbering a total of approximately 20,000, reside primarily in the provinces of Jizan and Najran along the border with Yemen.

Foreign embassies indicate the foreign population in the country, including many undocumented migrants, is mostly Muslim. According to a 2010 survey by the Pew Research Center, of the country’s total population (including foreigners), there were approximately 25.5 million Muslims, 1.2 million Christians (including Eastern Orthodox, Protestants, and Roman Catholics); 310,000 Hindus; 180,000 religiously unaffiliated (including atheists, agnostics, and individuals who did not identify with any particular religion); 90,000 Buddhists; 70,000 followers of folk religions; and 70,000 adherents of other religions.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The Basic Law of Governance establishes the country as a sovereign Arab Islamic state in which Islam is the official religion. The Basic Law says sharia is the “foundation of the Kingdom” and states the country’s constitution is the Quran and the Sunna. The Basic Law contains no legal recognition or protection of freedom of religion. Conversion from Islam to another religion is grounds for the charge of apostasy, which is legally punishable by death, although courts have not carried out a death sentence for apostasy in recent years.

Blasphemy against Islam may also be legally punishable by death, but courts have not sentenced individuals to death for blasphemy in recent years. Punishments for blasphemy may include lengthy prison sentences and lashings. Criticism of Islam,

including expression deemed offensive to Muslims, is forbidden on the grounds of preserving social stability.

The 2017 counterterrorism law criminalizes “anyone who challenges, either directly or indirectly, the religion or justice of the King or Crown Prince.” By year’s end, authorities had not yet issued new implementation regulations, and the implementation regulations of the 2014 counterterrorism law remained in effect. Those regulations criminalize “calling for atheist thought in any form, or calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion.” The right to access legal representation for those accused of violating the counterterrorism law is limited; according to the law, “the Public Prosecutor may, at the investigative stage, restrict this right whenever the interests of the investigation so require.” There is no right to access government-held evidence.

The Basic Law states the duty of every citizen is to defend Islam, society, and the homeland. Non-Muslims must convert to Islam before they are eligible to naturalize. The law requires applicants for citizenship to attest to being Muslim and to obtain a certificate documenting their religious affiliation endorsed by a Muslim religious authority. Children born to Muslim fathers are deemed Muslim by law.

The country is the home of Mecca and Medina, Islam’s two holiest sites. The government prohibits non-Muslims from entering central Mecca or religious sites in Medina. Muslims visit the cities on the annual Hajj pilgrimage and on the Umrah pilgrimage. The government has stated that caring for the holy cities of Mecca and Medina is a sacred trust exercised on behalf of all Muslims. The country’s sovereign employs the official title of “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques,” in reference to the two cities. The government also establishes national quotas for foreigners and issues permits to Muslim residents (including its own nationals) to participate in the Hajj.

Clerics are vetted and employed by the MOIA. Only government-employed clerics are permitted to deliver sermons, which must be vetted by MOIA in advance.

Since 2016 Saudi-based clerics traveling abroad for proselytization activities must first obtain the permission of MOIA. The stated purpose of the regulation is to limit the ability of religious scholars to travel, particularly those the government regards as having questionable credentials, and to prevent the appearance of

interference, or actual interference, by Saudi-based clerics in the domestic affairs of other states.

Public school students at all levels receive mandatory religious instruction based on Sunni Islam according to the Hanbali School of jurisprudence. Private schools are not permitted to deviate from the official, government-approved religious curriculum. Private international schools are required to teach Saudi students and Muslim students of other nationalities an Islamic studies course, while non-Muslim, non-Saudi students sometimes receive a course on Islamic civilization, or else “free time” in place of the curriculum designed for Saudi students; both courses amount to one hour of instruction per week. Private international schools may also teach courses on other religions or civilizations.

The CPVPV is a semiautonomous government agency with authority to monitor social behavior and report violations of moral standards consistent with the government’s policy and in coordination with law enforcement authorities. A 2016 decree limited the CPVPV’s activities to only providing counseling and reporting individuals suspected of violating the law to the police. CPVPV field officers do not wear uniforms, but are required to wear identification badges and legally may only act in their official capacity when accompanied by regular police. The CPVPV’s purview includes discouraging and reporting public and private contact between unrelated men and women (gender mixing); practicing or displaying emblems of non-Islamic faiths or failing to respect Islam; “immodest” dress, especially for women; displaying or selling media contrary to Islam, including pornography; producing, distributing, or consuming alcohol; venerating places or celebrating events inconsistent with approved Islamic practices; practicing “sorcery” or “black magic”; and committing, facilitating, or promoting acts, publications, or thoughts considered lewd or morally degenerate, including adultery, homosexuality, and gambling. The CPVPV reports to the king through the Council of Ministers, and the Ministry of Interior (MOI) oversees its operations on the king’s behalf.

The judicial system is based on laws largely derived from the Quran and the Sunna, developed by fatwas issued by the 21-person Council of Senior Scholars (CSS) that reports to the king, and other royal laws and ordinances. The Basic Law states governance is based on justice, *shura* (consultation), and equality according to sharia and further identifies the Quran and the Sunna as the sources for fatwas. The law specifies a hierarchical organization and composition of the CSS, the Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Religious Rulings (*ifta*), and the Office of the Mufti, together with their functions. The Basic Law

recognizes the CSS, supported by the Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Religious Rulings, as the supreme authority on religious matters. The CSS is headed by the grand mufti and is composed of Sunni religious scholars and jurists, 18 of whom are from the Hanbali school of jurisprudence, with one representative of each of the other Sunni schools (Maliki, Hanafi, and Shafi'i). There are no Shia members. Scholars are chosen at the king's discretion and serve renewable four-year terms, with many serving for life.

The country's legal architecture does not derive from a common law system, and judges are not bound by legal precedent. In the absence of a comprehensive criminal code, rulings and sentences can diverge widely. Criminal appeals may be made to the appellate and Supreme courts, although appellate decisions sometimes result in a harsher sentence than the original court decision. Government universities provide training in all four Sunni schools of jurisprudence, but with a focus on the Hanbali school.

In legal cases involving accidental death or injury, compensation differs according to the religious affiliation of the plaintiff. In the event a court renders a judgment in favor of a plaintiff who is a Jewish or Christian male, the plaintiff is entitled to receive 50 percent of the compensation a Muslim male would receive; other non-Muslims may only receive one-sixteenth the amount a male Muslim would receive.

Judges have been observed to discount the testimony of Muslims whom they deemed deficient in their knowledge of Islam, and to favor the testimony of Muslims over the testimony of non-Muslims. Under the government's interpretation of the Quran, judges may place the value of a woman's testimony at half that of a man's in certain cases.

The Basic Law requires the state to protect human rights in accordance with sharia. The Human Rights Commission (HRC), a government entity, is tasked with protecting, enhancing, and ensuring implementation of international human rights standards "in light of the provisions of sharia," and regularly follows up on citizen complaints. There are no formal requirements regarding the composition of the HRC; during the year, the commission had approximately 28 members from various parts of the country, including two Shia members.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

There were reports of prison authorities abusing Shia prisoners, including one incident leading to death. Online media and NGOs reported in March that Ahmed Attia, a Shia activist deported to the country from Bahrain in January, reportedly suffered memory loss as a result of physical abuse while in detention in Dammam prison. Shia Rights Watch (SRW) also reported the March 13 death of 61-year-old Haj Ali Jassim Nazia as a result of physical abuse in prison.

Some human rights organizations stated convictions of Shia on security charges, including several carrying the death penalty, stemming from 2017-18 clashes were motivated by sectarianism, while the government stated the individuals were investigated, prosecuted, and sentenced as a result of security-related crimes and in accordance with the law. On March 15, UN experts said 15 individuals convicted of spying for Iran and financing terrorism were facing imminent execution after their sentences were referred to the Royal Court for ratification by the king. The Specialized Criminal Court in Riyadh sentenced the 15 individuals, all of whom were Shia, to death in December 2016 and further court rulings in July and December 2017 upheld the sentences. Human rights organizations widely decried the legal process as not heeding international standards for fair trial guarantees and transparency. At the end of the year, the government had not carried out the sentences.

International NGOs stated they were unable to obtain any information on the status of Ahmad al-Shammari, who had reportedly been sentenced to death for charges related to apostasy in April 2017, and was believed still to be incarcerated. It was unknown whether any appeals in his case remained pending.

On January 4, the SCC sentenced prominent Shia cleric Sheikh Mohammed al-Habib to seven years in prison after the Public Prosecution's objection to his 2017 acquittal. The ruling overturned a previous verdict issued by the SCC in July 2017, acquitting al-Habib of the charges of inciting sedition and sectarianism, incitement against the rulers, and defaming religious scholars. According to human rights groups, authorities detained al-Habib in response to his public statements urging the government to address anti-Shia sectarianism, including in the educational curriculum, and criticizing government clerics who had espoused anti-Shia views.

In August the public prosecutor announced charges against six Shia activists, including female activist Israa al-Ghomgham, from the Eastern Province arrested between September 2015 and April 2016 based on the Islamic law principle of

ta'zir, in which the judge has discretion over the definition of what constitutes a crime and over the sentence. The charges include “instigating riotous gatherings” in Qatif, “joining a terrorist organization linked to an enemy state,” “chanting anti-government slogans,” and “providing moral support for those rioting and instigating sectarian strife.” According to HRW, the SCC in the Qatif region was the venue for the defendants’ trial. There were no updates on the case at year’s end.

Up to 34 individuals, all believed to be Shia, faced the possibility of execution as they awaited implementation orders for death sentences already confirmed by the Supreme Court for their roles in protests in the Qatif area of the Eastern Province in 2011 and 2012, according to human rights organizations. Up to nine of these persons – including Ali al-Nimr (the nephew of Nimr al-Nimr, who was executed in 2016), Dawood al-Marhoon, Abdullah al-Zaher, Abdulkareem al-Hawaj, and Mujtaba al-Sweikat – may have been minors at the time they committed the acts for which they were convicted; however, the government disputed these claims, noting the courts and sharia system use the *hijri* (lunar/Islamic) calendar for age computations. Human rights organizations said many of the convictions were based on confessions extracted through prolonged solitary confinement and torture. Many of these individuals alleged authorities tortured them during pretrial detention and interrogation. Local Shia activists and international human rights groups questioned the competence, independence, and impartiality of the judiciary, and noted that the underlying charges were inconsistent with international principles of freedom of assembly, expression, and association.

The government continued to imprison individuals accused of apostasy and blasphemy, violating Islamic values and moral standards, insulting Islam, black magic, and sorcery.

On June 7, police arrested Vishnu Dev Radhakrishnan, an Indian national and employee of the Saudi Arabian Oil Company (also known as Saudi Aramco) for “cybercrime pertaining to blasphemy and spreading messages against the Kingdom through social media.” Radhakrishnan allegedly sent messages on Twitter criticizing the Prophet Mohammed. On September 13, a court sentenced him to five years’ imprisonment and a 150,000 riyal (\$40,000) fine.

Raif Badawi remained in prison at the end of the year based on his 2013 conviction for violating Islamic values, violating sharia, committing blasphemy, and mocking religious symbols on the internet. Originally sentenced to seven years in prison and 600 lashes in 2013, a court increased Badawi’s sentence on appeal to a 10-year

prison term and 1,000 lashes. By year's end, the government had not carried out the remaining 950 lashes.

At year's end, the status of Ahmad al-Shammari's appeal of his death sentence following his 2017 conviction on charges related to apostasy was unknown. According to media reports, Shammari allegedly posted videos to social media accounts in which he renounced Islam and the Prophet Muhammad.

In September the SCC opened trials against some clerics, academics, and members of the media for alleged association with the MB. The accused included prominent Muslim scholars Salman al-Odah, Awad al-Qarni, and Ali al-Omari. The three were arrested in September 2017. The public prosecutor reportedly sought the death penalty against them. The public prosecutor leveled 37 charges against al-Odah, the vast majority of which were connected to his alleged ties with the MB and Qatari government, and his public support for imprisoned dissidents. In reviewing some of the specific charges, HRW noted, "The initial charges are mostly related to his alleged ties to the MB and other organizations supposedly connected to it." None referred to specific acts of violence or incitement to acts of violence, according to a HRW statement on September 12. The 30 charges against al-Omari included "forming a youth organization to carry out the objectives of a terrorist group inside the Kingdom." The government continued to regard the MB as a terrorist organization.

Authorities are reported to have arrested cleric Abdelaziz al-Fawzan in July after he spoke out against the arrests of other religious leaders in the country, according to the website Middle Eastern Eye. The Prisoners of Conscience Twitter account reported that Fawzan, a professor of comparative religious law at the Saudi Higher Institute of Justice, had been arrested over a tweet in which he had "expressed his opinion against the suppression of sheikhs and preachers."

According to Reuters, the government detained influential religious scholar Safar al-Hawali and three of his sons in July, widening an apparent crackdown against clerics, intellectuals, and rights campaigners. Al-Hawali, often linked to the MB, rose to prominence 25 years ago as a leader of the Sahwa [Awakening] movement, which agitated to bring democracy to the country and criticized the ruling family for corruption, social liberalization, and working with the West. Authorities reportedly transferred al-Hawali to a hospital in September after his health deteriorated.

In August multiple media outlets reported that the government detained Saleh al-Talib, an imam and preacher at the Grand Mosque in Mecca, after he reportedly delivered a sermon on the duty in Islam to speak out against the spread of vice.

In September social media and activist websites reported on the suspension or detention of Mecca Grand Mosque imams. Khalid bin Ali al-Ghamdi was reportedly suspended and ordered to refrain from preaching or engaging in Islamic *da'wa* (religious outreach). No reason was announced for the suspension. Sheikh Faisal bin Jameel al-Ghazawi was reportedly suspended from his position at the Mecca Grand Mosque. Al-Ghazawi was reportedly also barred from all preaching and *da'wa* activities. A third Mecca Grand Mosque imam, Sheikh Bandar Abdulaziz Balila, was reportedly detained by security forces for four days for unknown reasons.

In October the Public Prosecutor's Office charged cleric Hassan Farhan al-Maliki with calling into question the fundamentals of Islam by casting doubt on prophetic Sunna and *hadith* (the record of the traditions or sayings of the Prophet Mohammad), propagating deviant beliefs, holding an impure (*takfiri*) ideology, insulting the rulers and CSS and labelling them as extremists, glorifying the Khomeini-led revolution in Iran, and supporting Hizballah and ISIS, among other charges. He remained in detention waiting a second trial at year's end.

On July 2, authorities detained Zuhair Hussein Bu Saleh to implement a prior sentence of two months imprisonment and 60 lashes for practicing congregational prayers at his house due to the lack of Shia mosques in the Eastern Province, according to the international NGO European Saudi Organization for Human Rights. Bu Saleh was previously arrested in 2015 for "calling for unauthorized gatherings," and the government closed the prayer hall he supervised.

In August authorities referred cleric Ali Al-Rabieei for prosecution for allegedly tweeting sectarian and anti-Shia content, according to media reports. Al-Rabieei subsequently apologized for this tweet and reportedly fled abroad.

In August the public prosecutor ordered the arrest of a man who appeared in a video carrying machine guns and threatening to kill Shia citizens in Najran, in the southern part of the country.

According to Shia groups that track arrests and convictions of Shia, more than 300 persons remained in detention in prisons throughout the Eastern Province and additional individuals remained subject to travel bans. Authorities had arrested

more than 1,000 Eastern Province Shia since 2011 in connection with public protests demanding greater rights for Shia, including acts of violence, according to NGO reports. Most were held on charges involving nonviolent offenses, including participating in or publicizing protests on social media, inciting unrest in the country, and insulting the king.

SRW reported in April government forces raided a Shia prayer hall in Qatif, arresting three men. According to SRW, the forces also surrounded multiple neighborhoods in Qatif, setting up checkpoints and restricting entry to and departure from the areas. SRW also reported that authorities arrested a teenage female Shia activist, Nour Said Al-Musallam, for tweets critical of the government.

The UK newspaper *The Independent* reported that social media users who posted or shared satire attacking religion faced imprisonment for up to five years under strict new laws introduced in the country. Those found guilty of distributing content online deemed to disrupt public order or disturb religious values would also be subject to a fine of three million riyals (\$800,000), the country's public prosecutor's office said in a statement on Twitter: "Producing and distributing content that ridicules, mocks, provokes and disturbs public order, religious values and public morals through social media will be considered a cybercrime."

A December report by the UN special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, issued after a visit to the country in April and May, stated "The special rapporteur is further concerned at the pattern of systematic repression in the country's Eastern Province, where the majority Shi'a population resides. The Special Rapporteur has received credible allegations that many individuals protesting against repression of the Shia have been detained. Their cases are currently making their way through the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC). Many of these individuals were reportedly peaceful protesters, simply asking for increased religious freedoms, equal rights for the Shi'a community and political reform. Some have been convicted for the expression of their political views; some for coordinating protests through social media; and some even for providing first aid to protesters. In this process, a number of individuals who were under the age of criminal responsibility at the time they committed the alleged offences have now been sentenced to death. Others have already been executed."

Human rights organizations and legal experts continued to criticize antiterrorism laws for using overly broad and vague language, making them susceptible to politicization and other abuse.

The government continued to prohibit the public practice of any non-Islamic religions. According to civil society sources and media reports, non-Muslims and many foreign and local Muslims whose religious practices differed from the form of Sunni Islam promoted by the government could only practice their religion in private and remained vulnerable to discrimination, harassment, detention, and, for noncitizens, deportation.

The MOIA maintained active oversight of the country's religious establishment and provided guidance on the substance of Friday sermons and restricted the inclusion of content in those sermons it considered sectarian or political, promoting hatred or racism, or including commentary on foreign policy. Mosques continued to be the only legally permissible public places of worship. The government continued to address ideology it deemed extremist by scrutinizing clerics and teachers closely and dismissing those found promoting views it deemed intolerant, extreme, or advocating violence abroad, including in Syria and Iraq. The MOIA continued to use ministry inspectors, regional branch inspectors, field teams, citizen feedback, and the media to monitor and address any violations of the ministry's instructions and regulations in mosques. MOIA oversight of mosques in less populated areas was not always as strict as it was in urban areas. In July the MOIA created a hotline for individuals to call in and report on statements by imams that observers considered objectionable. In August Minister of Islamic Affairs Abdul Latif Al-Sheikh announced the ministry was developing a mobile phone app which would monitor sermons and allow mosque-goers to rate their preacher on a number of aspects of their work content and length. According to a BBC report in August, the government was engaged in deliberations on the reform of religious teachings and in a debate on unifying the content of sermons to steer people away from "foreign, partisan, or Muslim Brotherhood" thought.

Practices diverging from the government's official interpretation of Islam, such as public celebrations of Mawlid al-Nabi (the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad) and visits to the tombs of renowned Muslims, remained forbidden.

While authorities indicated they considered members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community to be Muslims, the group's legal status remained unclear, and the mainly foreign resident Ahmadi Muslims reportedly hid their faith to avoid scrutiny, arrest, or deportation.

In March MOIA official Hashem bin Mohammed al-Barzanji referred to Shia as "rejectionists" in a tweet.

Since 2016, authorities permitted large-scale public commemorations of Ashura and other Shia holidays in Qatif, Eastern Province, home to the largest Shia population in the country. As a result of several 2015 ISIS-inspired or directed attacks on Shia gathering places in the Eastern Province, there was again a significant deployment of government security personnel in the Qatif area during the Ashura commemoration in September. According to community members, processions and gatherings appeared to increase over previous years due to decreased political tensions and greater coordination between the Shia community and authorities.

According to members of the expatriate community, some Christian congregations were able to conduct large Christian worship services discreetly and regularly without substantial interference from the CPVPV or other government authorities.

The government stated that individuals who experienced infringements on their ability to worship privately could address their grievances to the MOI, HRC, the National Society for Human Rights (a quasi-governmental organization), and, when appropriate, the MFA. Religious groups reported, however, that officials typically charged those arrested during private worship services with gender-mixing, playing music, or other infractions not explicitly related to religious observance. There were again no known reports of individuals contacting these or other governmental agencies for redress when their ability to worship privately was infringed.

According to government policy, non-Muslims were prohibited from being buried in the country. There was, however, at least one public, non-Islamic cemetery in Jeddah, although the government did not support it financially. The only other known non-Muslim cemetery was private and only available to Saudi Aramco employees. Diplomatic missions reported most non-Muslims opted to repatriate their deceased to their home countries whenever financially possible.

Authorities generally required Shia mosques to use the Sunni call to prayer, including in mixed neighborhoods of both Sunni and Shia residents. In some predominantly Shia areas of al-Ahsa Governorate in the Eastern Province, authorities allowed Shia mosques to use the Shia call to prayer. In smaller Shia villages where there was virtually no CPVPV presence, reports indicated it was common for Shia businesses to close for three prayer times (not five times per Sunnis practice), or not at all.

The government continued to set policy aimed at enforcing Islamic norms; for example, the government threatened to expel foreigners who did not refrain from eating, drinking, or smoking in public during Ramadan. According to media reports, it prohibited parents from giving their children any of 50 listed names deemed blasphemous, non-Arabic, or non-Islamic.

The CPVPV continued to monitor social behavior and promote official standards of morality, although instances of CPVPV interactions with individuals reportedly decreased significantly in most urban areas, such as Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam.

The government did not recognize certificates of educational attainment for graduates of some Shia religious centers of instruction or provide them employment benefits, which the government provided to graduates of Sunni religious training institutions.

The government continued a multi-year project, begun in 2007, to revise textbooks, curricula, and teaching methods with the stated aim of removing content disparaging religions other than Islam. The project continued as part of the government's Vision 2030 development and reform plan announced in April 2016. The government continued to distribute revised textbooks, although intolerant material remained in circulation, including older versions of textbooks, particularly at the high school level, that contained language disparaging Christians and Jews. Content included statements justifying the execution of "sorcerers" and social exclusion of non-Muslims, as well as statements that Jews, Christians, Shia Muslims, and Sufi Muslims did not properly adhere to monotheism. In September Human Rights Watch reported some school textbooks continued to employ biased, anti-Semitic, and anti-Shia language. Some teachers reportedly continued to express intolerance of other faiths and of alternative viewpoints regarding Islam.

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) issued a report on textbooks in November, entitled "Teaching Hate and Violence: Problematic Passages from Saudi State Textbooks for the 2018-19 School Year." The report found that school textbooks for the 2018-19 academic year contained "dozens of troubling passages that clearly propagate incitement to hatred or violence against Jews, Christians, Shi'ite Muslims, women, homosexual men, and anybody who mocks or converts away from Islam." In its press release announcing the report, the ADL stated "The Saudi curriculum is replete with intolerant passages about Jews and Judaism; some passages even urge violence against Jews. Others retread classic anti-Semitic

stereotypes and assert conspiracy theories about alleged Jewish and Israeli plots to attack the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.”

Some travelers entering the country reported they were able to import a Bible for personal use, but the government regularly exercised its ability to inspect and confiscate personal non-Islamic religious materials.

Some academic experts reported the government continued to exclude perspectives at variance with the Salafi tradition within Sunni Islam from its extensive government-owned religious media and broadcast programming.

The CPVPV, in coordination with the Information and Communication Technologies Authority, continued to block certain websites as part of a broader policy of censoring online content that reportedly contained “objectionable” content and “ill-informed” views of religion. The CPVPV shut down or blocked Twitter accounts for users “committing religious and ethical violations,” and authorities arrested an undisclosed number of social media users in accordance with the anticybercrimes law. The government also reportedly located and shut down websites used to recruit jihadis or inspire violence. In 2017 authorities announced they unblocked the calling features of certain private messenger apps, including Viber, FaceTime, and Facebook Messenger. Some users reported that the calling features of WhatsApp and Skype still remained blocked, however.

The government financially supported approximately 70 percent of Sunni mosques, while the remaining 30 percent were at private residences or were built and endowed by private persons. The construction of any new mosque required the permission of the MOIA, the local municipality, and the provincial government, which allocated space and issued building permits. The MOIA supervised and financed the construction and maintenance of most Sunni mosques, including the hiring of clerical workers.

Shia Muslims managed their own mosques under the supervision of Shia scholars. Most existing Shia mosques in the Eastern Province did not seek official operating licenses, as doing so would require asking the government to extend its explicit endorsement of these mosques, according to some NGO reports. The government did not finance the construction or maintenance of Shia mosques. Authorities prohibited Shia Muslims outside of the Eastern Province from building Shia-specific mosques. Construction of Shia mosques required government approval, and Shia communities were required to receive permission from their neighbors to start construction on mosques. Two Shia mosques in Dammam remained licensed

by the government and served approximately 750,000 worshippers. According to NGO reports, construction of Shia mosques was not approved outside Shia enclave areas. There continued to be no licensed Shia mosques in major urban centers such as Jeddah, Riyadh, or al-Khobar. Shia in those areas were therefore forced to hold prayers in private homes and community centers, where some Shia said they were subject to police harassment. Expatriate Shia reported threats of arrest and deportation if they gathered privately in large groups to worship and were detected by authorities.

Following ISIS attacks against Shia mosques and gathering places in 2015, security services continued to provide protection for many Shia mosques and gathering places in the Eastern Province. Additionally, media and other sources reported coordination between Shia volunteers and government security services to ensure security outside mosques and other gathering places during Friday sermons or other large public events.

Multiple reports from Shia groups cited discrimination in the judicial system as the catalyst for lengthy prison sentences handed down to Shia Muslims for engaging in political expression or organizing peaceful demonstrations. The government permitted Shia judges in the Eastern Province to use the Ja'afari School of Islamic jurisprudence to adjudicate cases in family law, inheritance, and endowment management. There were five Shia judges, all government-appointed, located in the Eastern Province cities of Qatif and al-Ahsa, where the majority of Twelver Shia live. According to a Human Rights Watch report issued in September “the Saudi judicial system...often subjects Saudi Shia to discriminatory treatment or arbitrary criminalization of Shia religious practices.”

Reported instances of prejudice and discrimination against Shia Muslims continued to occur with respect to educational and public sector employment opportunities. Shia stated they experienced systemic government discrimination in hiring. There was no formal policy concerning the hiring and promotion of Shia in the private sector, but some Shia stated that public universities and employers discriminated against them, occasionally by identifying an applicant for education or employment as Shia simply by inquiring about the applicant's hometown. Many Shia reportedly stated that openly identifying as Shia would negatively affect career advancement.

Although Shia constituted approximately 10 to 12 percent of the total citizen population and at least one-quarter of the Eastern Province's population, representation of Shia Muslims in senior government positions continued to be

well below their proportion of the population, including in national security-related positions in the Ministry of Defense, the National Guard, and the MOI. In contrast with previous years, the 35-member cabinet contained one Shia minister. There were no Shia governors, deputy governors, or ministry branch directors in the Eastern Province. There were five Shia members of the 150-member Shura Council. A very small number of Shia occupied high-level positions in government-owned companies and government agencies.

Multiple municipal councils in the Eastern Province, where most Shia were concentrated, had large proportions of Shia as members, including in the two major Shia population centers of Qatif and al-Ahsa, where five of the 12 government-appointed municipal council members were Shia, and Shia held 16 of the 30 elected seats on the municipal councils. Eastern Province Shia judges dealing with intra-Shia personal status and family laws operated specialized courts. Shia were significantly underrepresented in national security-related positions, including the Ministries of Defense and Interior and the National Guard. According to an article published in September by both *Foreign Policy* magazine and HRW, “Shiite students are generally kept out of military and security academies, and they rarely find jobs within the security force.” In predominantly Shia areas, there was some Shia representation in the ranks of the traffic police, municipal government, and public schools. Shiites are regularly denied access to justice, are arbitrarily arrested, and face discriminatory verdicts. Scores of them have described the ... religiously motivated charges they face in court, including the standard charges of “cursing God, the Prophet, or his companions.”

Shia were reportedly not represented in proportion to their percentage of the population in academic positions in primary, secondary, and higher education, and virtually all public school principals remained Sunni, while some teachers were Shia. Along with Sunni students, Shia students received government scholarships to study in universities abroad under the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Program for Foreign Scholarship.

There were continued media reports however, that some Sunni clerics, who received government stipends, used anti-Semitic, religiously intolerant language in their sermons. Cases of government-employed clerics using anti-Semitic language in their sermons, including some instances at Friday prayers in Mecca, were rare and occurred without authorization by government authorities. During the year, the ministry issued periodic circulars to clerics and imams in mosques directing them to include messages on the principles of justice, equality, and tolerance and to encourage rejection of bigotry and all forms of racial discrimination in their

sermons. According to the ministry, during the year, similar to the previous year, no clerics publicly espoused intolerant views warranting dismissal. Unlicensed imams, however, continued to employ intolerant views in internet postings or unsanctioned sermons in areas without government monitoring.

The government's stated policy remained for its diplomatic and consular missions abroad to inform foreign workers applying for visas that they had the right to worship privately and to possess personal religious materials. The government also provided the names of offices where grievances could be filed.

The government required noncitizen legal residents to carry an identity card containing a religious designation of "Muslim" or "non-Muslim." Some residency cards, including some issued during the year, indicated other religious designations such as "Christian."

The government did not formally permit most non-Muslim clergy to enter the country for the purpose of conducting religious services. Entry restrictions made it difficult for non-Muslims to maintain regular contact with resident clergy, according to non-Muslim religious groups in neighboring countries. This was reportedly particularly problematic for Catholic and Orthodox Christians, whose religious traditions require they receive sacraments from a priest on a regular basis. Multiple press outlets reported that visiting Bishop Anba Morkos of Shoubra el-Kheima held the first Coptic Orthodox Mass in the country in December, in a private residence.

The country's crown prince told *The Atlantic* in an April interview that he recognized the right of the Jewish people to have a nation-state of their own next to a Palestinian state. According to the magazine, no Arab leader has ever acknowledged such a right. In the interview, he also said that the Shia "are living normally" in the country.

According to NGO reports, Umm al-Qura University's Department of Islamic Studies continued to teach a course on Judaism saying that Jews rely on three texts: "The Torah, The Talmud, *The Protocols of Zion*." (*The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is an anti-Semitic tract originally disseminated by the Czarist secret police alleging a Jewish plot aimed at world domination.) In addition, the reports characterized the university's course curriculum as heavily anti-Semitic, speaking of the "evil traits" of the Jewish people.

According to the ADL, state television hosted several hour-long programs during Ramadan featuring Saad al-Ateeq, a preacher who called for God to “destroy” the Christians, Shia, Alawites, and Jews. State television also featured Saleh al-Fawzan, who remained a member of the CSS and was visited in April by the crown prince, according to *al-Arabiya*. *The Economist* previously reported that Fawzan claimed ISIS was actually a creation of Jews, Christians, and Shia. According to Human Rights Watch, he characterized Shia Muslims as “the brothers of Satan.” According to the ADL, the government gave the honor of delivering the Eid al-Fitr sermon in June at the Grand Mosque in Mecca to Saleh bin Humaid, who holds a seat on the CSS. Bin Humaid previously claimed it was in Jews’ “nature” to “plot against the peoples of the world.”

According to the Simon Wiesenthal Center, anti-Semitic books including *Mein Kampf* were offered for sale at the Riyadh Book Fair.

During the year, some Qatari nationals reported being unable to perform the annual Hajj pilgrimage due to logistical obstacles stemming from the border closures and restrictions imposed by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt on Qatar in 2017. The government offered Qatari pilgrims internet registration and visa issuance on arrival in Jeddah. Qatari nationals were purportedly also able to register for Hajj through third country governments.

Al-Monitor, a website covering news from the Middle East, reported in November that the government halted visa issuances to people who held temporary passports and no national identification. This prevented Palestinians living in Jerusalem and the West Bank, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and elsewhere from traveling to perform religious rites, particularly the Hajj and Umrah.

In April, in the first visit to the country by a senior Catholic official, Chairman of the Pontifical Council for Interfaith Dialogue Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran met with King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh to discuss the role of followers of religions and cultures in renouncing violence, extremism, and terrorism and achieving worldwide security and stability. On March 4, the crown prince met publicly with Coptic Pope Tawadros II in Cairo’s largest Coptic cathedral.

On November 1, the crown prince met with U.S. evangelical Christian figures in Riyadh. Following the meeting, the group met with the government-sponsored Muslim World League’s (MWL) Secretary-General Mohammed al-Issa to discuss ways both parties could counter extremism and exchanged ideas on possible

initiatives and programs to increase mutual respect at the grass roots level. Al-Issa stated the meeting was an exchange to advance understanding and the message of a “moderate and tolerant Islam.” On January 28, al-Issa wrote a public letter to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, calling the Holocaust “an incident that shook humanity to the core, and created an event whose horrors could not be denied or underrated by any fair-minded or peace-loving person.” In October MWL representatives discussed religious cooperation with several non-Muslim religious community leaders including a prominent U.S. Jewish leader at the MWL-sponsored Cultural Rapprochement Between the US and the Muslim World conference in New York.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Instances of prejudice and discrimination against Shia Muslims continued to occur in private sector employment. Social media provided an outlet for citizens to discuss current events and religious issues, which sometimes included making disparaging remarks about members of various religious groups or “sects.” In addition, terms like “rejectionists,” which Shia considered insulting, were commonly found in public discourse.

Open Doors, an international NGO, reported that individuals who converted from Islam to Christianity almost always did so in secret, fearing the reactions of family members and the threat of criminal charges, up to and including execution. Women in particular feared loss of parental rights or being subjected to physical abuse as a result of converting from Islam.

While discussion of sensitive topics on social media was frequent, according to Freedom House, “self-censorship [on social media] remained prevalent when discussing topics such as politics, religion, or the royal family.”

Anti-Semitic comments continued to appear in the media. For example, in May the newspaper *Al-Iqtisadiyya* printed an editorial cartoon showing a grinding machine in the shape of the Star of David, grinding Gazans into skulls.

According to MEMRI.org, Abdulwahab al-Omari, a government-licensed imam in Bisha, preached in January that Jews would be turned into apes and pigs, and that on Judgment Day, they would be the soldiers of the Antichrist. According to MEMRI.org’s translation, al-Omari said Jesus would descend before the Judgment Day, accept sharia, and pursue and kill the Antichrist. The Muslims would then “pounce on the Jews and kill them.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Senior embassy and consulate general officials continued to press the government to respect religious freedom, eliminate discriminatory enforcement of laws against religious minorities, and promote respect and tolerance for minority religious practices and beliefs. In discussions with the Human Rights Commission, members of the Shura Council, the MFA, MOIA, the government-funded Muslim World League, and other relevant ministries and agencies during the year, senior embassy and consulate officials raised reports of abuses and violations of religious freedom, arbitrary arrests and detention, the country's counterterrorism law, and due process standards. They also discussed the importance of respect for the rights of minorities and their religious practices.

Senior embassy and consulate officials continued to query the legal status of detained or imprisoned individuals and discussed religious freedom concerns, such as religious assembly and importation of religious materials, with members of religious minorities, including Shia and citizens who no longer consider themselves Muslims, as well as with non-Muslim foreign residents.

Since 2004, Saudi Arabia has been designated as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Most recently, on November 28, the Secretary of State redesignated Saudi Arabia as a CPC, and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompany designation as required in the important national interest of the United States pursuant to section 407 of the Act.