

SAUDI ARABIA

RELIGION



- Muslims: 92,1%
- Christians: 4,3%
- Hindus: 2%
- Others: 1,6%



AREA	POPULATION
2.206.714km ²	32.158.000

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, who has been King of Saudi Arabia since 2015, is both head of state and head of government. The Kingdom bases its legitimacy on its interpretation of Shari'a (Islamic law) and the 1992 Basic Law of Governance. Under the late King Abdullah (2005-15), the country gradually modernised. With about 20 percent of the world's known oil reserves, the country is one of the wealthiest in the region and a leading power in the Arab world.

In recent years, demands for political reform have increased along with calls for social change, such as the right of women to drive and freedom of expression. In 2016, the Saudi government adopted ambitious economic reforms: Vision 2030 and the National Transformation Programme 2020 to reduce dependence on oil revenues.¹

More than 30 percent of the country's resident population is foreign-born,² mostly Christians, Buddhists and Hindus.³ An unofficial census published by the Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia estimates that Saudi Arabia's Catholics number 1.5 million,⁴ mainly foreign workers from India and the Philippines. Some reports indicate a growing number of Saudis identifying as atheists⁵ or Christians.⁶ But, as a result of harsh social and legal consequences for leaving Islam, they keep quiet about their conversion.⁷ The Kingdom does not have official diplomatic ties with the Holy See.⁸

Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam and home to its two holiest sites – Mecca and Medina – with the Saudi king serving as the official Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. According to the Basic Law, the Qur'an and the Sunna serve as the country's constitution.⁹ While the law is based on the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence, the interpretations of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, upon whose teachings Wahhabism is based, are also highly influential. The term Wahhabism is not used inside Saudi Arabia, but some would argue that the form of Islam practised in the country is best characterised as Wahhabism. The country follows a strict interpretation of Sunni Islam, including restrictions on women and harsh penalties for a range of crimes, including capital punishment (beheading) for minors. Saudi citizens must be Muslims. Non-Muslims must convert to Islam to be

eligible for naturalisation. Children born to Muslim fathers are deemed to be Muslim. It is prohibited to publicly promote non-official Islamic teachings.¹⁰

Religious freedom is neither recognised nor protected. Conversion from Islam to another religion is considered apostasy, which is legally punishable by death, as is blasphemy against Sunni Islam. Importing and distributing non-Islamic religious materials is illegal as is proselytism for both Saudi nationals and foreigners.¹¹ Non-Muslim places of worship and the public expression of non-Muslim creeds are prohibited. Failure to comply can mean discrimination, harassment and detention. Non-citizens may be deported. Despite government statements that non-Muslims who are not converts from Islam can practise their religion privately, the lack of clear rules has left believers at the mercy of local police.¹²

Religious instruction based on the official interpretation of Islam is mandatory for state schools. Separate curricula for private schools are prohibited. Non-Muslim students in private schools receive mandatory classes on Islamic civilisation.¹³

Despite government policy against non-Muslim burial in the Kingdom, at least one public, non-Islamic cemetery exists according to a US report.¹⁴ Non-Muslim clerics are not allowed in the country.¹⁵

Defendants must be treated equally in accordance with Shari'a. Of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence, the Hanbali school predominates as the basis for interpreting Islamic law. There is no comprehensive written penal code. Rulings and sentences vary widely from case to case.¹⁶

Human rights are not protected. During the period under review, there were frequent reports of restrictions on free speech. No laws or regulations ban discrimination in employment and occupation based on religion as well as other grounds (race, sex, gender identity).¹⁷

The semi-autonomous Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) monitors public behaviour, reporting to police to enforce a strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islamic norms. Since 2016, the CPVPV members have to carry official identification papers, and their powers have been significantly limited by royal decree. Both Muslims and non-Muslims have reported less harassment and fewer raids.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs has intensified its efforts against extremist Islamic preaching through video surveillance of mosques and close monitoring of Facebook and Twitter.¹⁸

Incidents

According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, Saudi Arabia "continues to prosecute, imprison, and flog individuals for dissent, apostasy, blasphemy, and sorcery".¹⁹ Like other Muslim nations, apostasy is a capital offence.

Minority Shias continued to suffer social, legal, economic and political discrimination and are significantly under-represented in public sector roles. The authorities have responded to the situation with anti-discrimination courses for law enforcement agencies at the King Abdulaziz Centre for National Dialogue.

In 2016, the Saudi government announced plans to turn Awamiya, the hometown of Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr, into a commercial zone. This has been perceived as an attempt to displace the largely Shia population. Although UN experts called on the government to protect city's old district because of its historic mosques and prayer halls (huseiniyas), demolition started in May 2017. Thousands of residents who were displaced received financial compensation.²⁰

In April 2016, Saudi Arabia decided to restrain its often-criticised Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Its members are no longer allowed to detain people and must "carry out the duties of encouraging virtue and forbidding vice by advising kindly and gently".²¹ Sheikh Ahmed Al Ghamdi, former head of Mecca's religious police, said that "it was a very good change" for its roughly 5,000 members. Al Ghamdi added that unfortunately some officers working for the commission²² had misunderstood Islam, which is a "very kind" religion.

Seen by some as a step towards modernising the country, these changes are perceived by others as sidelining the arch-conservatives who have traditionally been the pillar supporting the royal family. With opposition to reform muted by the Kingdom's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, some analysts see the reforms as superficial and cosmetic, meant to consolidate the latter's power and authority and change the international community's perception of Saudi Arabia, without really changing its deeply rooted conservatism.²³

In November 2017 the government upgraded its the Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing, which criminalises showing the king and crown prince "in any way that brings religion and justice into disrepute".²⁴

Officials at the Ideological Warfare Centre, a Ministry of Defence-affiliated body launched by Mohammed bin Salman to combat extremist ideology, acknowledged in December 2017 different religious interpretations of punishment for apostasy. Nevertheless, Saudi authorities insisted that apostasy remains an offence against the country's Basic Law.²⁵

In March 2018, the Crown Prince declared that the abaya (a usually black robe worn by women) was not compulsory, according to Islamic teachings.²⁶ In an interview, he told Norah O'Donnell of CBS: "We have extremists who forbid mixing between the two sexes and are unable to differentiate between a man and a woman alone together, and their being together in a workplace. Many of those ideas contradict the way of life during the time of the Prophet and the Caliphs. This is the real example and the true model [of Islam]."²⁷ This provoked a buzz on social media.

During this period, Saudi officials increased contact with Christian Churches. In November 2017, Cardinal Bechara el-Rahi, head of Lebanon's Maronite community, made an unprecedented official visit to Saudi Arabia where he met with Saudi King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.²⁸ This was the first such invitation (originally made in 2013)²⁹ to a senior Maronite official, the first visit by a cardinal, and the first visit by an Eastern patriarch since that of Greek Orthodox Patriarch Elias IV of Antioch in 1975.³⁰ Although the trip was mainly political in nature,³¹ the fact that it happened at all in a country where public expression of faith is forbidden for non-Muslims and where Christian symbols and churches

are banned, was seen as a sign of openness. In particular, many observers noted that at the official meetings the religious leaders wore their vestments and their gold crosses.³²

A few days later, an official Saudi delegation headed by Dr Abdullah Bin Fahd al-Luhaidan, Adviser to Minister of Islamic Affairs, Call and Guidance, met with Pope Francis at the Vatican.³³ The visit itself was set up to thank the Pope for his calls for peace and coexistence, as well as his rejection of any link between religion and terrorism, and his support for dialogue and peaceful coexistence between religions and cultures.³⁴

In early March 2018, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman made an historic visit to Saint Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo, Egypt, where he met Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II in what many saw as another sign of openness.³⁵

That same month, the Crown Prince met with the Archbishop of Canterbury during his visit to the UK. The leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion, the Most Rev Justin Welby, and Mohammed bin Salman discussed Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 development plan.³⁶

Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, head of the Vatican's Council for Interreligious Dialogue, made an official trip to Riyadh in April 2018 where he met with high-ranking Saudi officials, as well as King Salman. The visit raised hopes of greater religious openness in the Kingdom. For the Saudi monarch, it was his first meeting with a Catholic Church official. In an unprecedented declaration, the cardinal said that "[...] all religions are faced with two dangers: terrorism and ignorance", adding that "Christians and non-Muslims are spoken of well in schools and that they are never considered second-class citizens."³⁷ In light of social changes and the Vision 2030 agenda, the Crown Prince promised to promote interfaith dialogue as part of the country's reforms. For his part, Cardinal Tauran said that "the new generation can really help 'change gears'".³⁸

The cardinal's visit coincided with the anniversary of the inauguration of Rome's first mosque in 1995, that took place with the Vatican's blessing. The late Pope John Paul II noted in a speech at the time that "following an event as significant as this one, one must unfortunately point out that in some Islamic countries similar signs of recognition for religious liberty are lacking. On the threshold of the third millennium the world is awaiting those signs."³⁹

Despite these signs of openness, the crackdown on activists is still happening. For example, the conviction of Saudi blogger Raif Badawi for various crimes including apostasy and "insulting Islam through electronic channels" was upheld in March 2017. In 2014 he was sentenced to 10 years in prison, 1,000 lashes, and a fine of one million Saudi riyals (US\$266,000).

During the period under review, raids and arrests for witchcraft and sorcery continued, mostly among foreign workers from Africa or Southeast Asia accused of using such practices against their employers. Foreign workers were also accused of fomenting disorder in Saudi society and distorting scriptures.⁴⁰ Such offences are punishable by death. The CPVPV has special units to combat sorcery and witchcraft. In December 2017, a special event was held in Mecca at the Grand Mosque to train CPVPV members to identify witchcraft materials.⁴¹

A group of UN experts, including the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, issued a statement in January 2018 in which they condemned arbitrary detentions and urged Saudi authorities to release people detained for “peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression, assembly, association and belief”.⁴²

Prospects for freedom of religion

Apart from the one expression of Islam legitimised by the state, there is a comprehensive repression of religious life in Saudi Arabia. The above-mentioned incidents show that the country has so far failed to make significant changes.

Under the late King Abdullah, the country’s religious principles became more flexible and the power of the religious police was restricted for a while. Abdullah also reached out to non-Muslim religious leaders including Pope Benedict XVI and established an inter-faith centre in Vienna. Under the current ruler, King Salman, efforts to halt extremist influences have been made but ultra-conservative Salafist Islam, which some would simply describe as Wahhabism, remains the only religion allowed.

Despite some encouraging signs of openness, Saudi Arabia is still responsible for “systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom”⁴³ and remains a country of great concern with respect to religious freedom and human rights. Numerous human rights activists and advocates of reforms have been arrested and imprisoned, but some optimistic Western observers highlight the few changes implemented so far, appearing to support the authoritarian methods of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. In general, public opposition to the prince’s reforms has been muted because of an important crackdown on dissent,⁴⁴ including the arrest of prominent clerics with millions of followers on social media.

Endnotes

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- 22 The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice is also known as Haia and it employees (the religious police) as Muttawaa.
- 23 Behind his ostensibly liberal attitude and decisions, Mohammed bin Salman is viewed by many as an authoritarian leader who is imposing changes with an iron hand.
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