

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



USCCB Fact Sheet

Saudi Arabia—Recent Reforms vs Institutionalized Repression

In 2017, 32-year-old Mohammed bin Salman was named crown prince of Saudi Arabia. He embarked on an ambitious set of economic and social reforms, called Vision 2030, that has won him support, particularly among youth and women. In his recent tour of Europe and the United States, he projected an image of Saudi Arabia as “a country of moderate Islam that is open to all religions and to the world.”

But overturning Saudi Arabia’s legacy of repression against minority religious groups will undoubtedly take time as conservative Muslim forces seek to guard the status of the home of Islam’s two holiest sites. Using force and oppressive laws criminalizing dissent and religious opposition, Saudi Arabia has been designated a “Country of Particular Concern” since 2004 by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), due to their systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom.

There is a disconnect between the Saudi government’s attitudes toward religious freedom on the global stage and the reality of religious persecution in country. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia helped establish the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) in Vienna in 2012. KAICIID supports the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, focusing specifically on the right to freedom of religion. Saudi Arabian royal family members have contributed financially to groups promoting religious understanding, such as Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal’s \$20 million gift to Georgetown University’s Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding.

Within Saudi Arabia, however, freedom of religion is not recognized or protected. Islam is the state religion and all citizens must be Muslim by law. Religious intolerance in Saudi Arabia is institutionalized. Religious minorities do not have a right to practice their religion in public and conversion from Islam is considered apostasy, punishable by death.

Saudi Arabia’s population is about 33 million, including about 10 million foreign workers. Sunni Muslims make up about 85-90% and Shia Muslims another 10-15% of the native Saudi population. While many foreign workers are also Muslim, over one million are Christian who find it almost impossible to practice their faith. The

government bans the import of non-Muslim religious material. It is very difficult for non-Muslim clergy to enter the country to perform religious services.

Even Shia Muslims face substantial discrimination. The Saudi government has sometimes imposed bans on Shiite books and audio products, and blocked their websites. Dissenters who criticize the government or its interpretation of Islam are repeatedly arrested, detained, and tortured under charges of inciting terrorism and sedition. In 2014, Raif Badawi, a Muslim Saudi writer and activist, was sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1000 lashes for “insulting Islam through electronic channels.” He is named a “prisoner of conscience” by USCIRF. A Saudi-led coalition has been bombing Yemen, creating a humanitarian catastrophe, largely to restrict Iranian (i.e. Shia) influence in the region.

Freedom of religious assembly is essentially nonexistent. While the Saudi government states that non-Muslims may worship privately, raids such as one on a Christian house resulted in 27 Lebanese Maronite Christians being deported, charged with participating in “un-Islamic prayer” and possessing “the Gospel”.

There are no Christian churches in Saudi Arabia. The government blocks establishing and maintaining any non-Muslim worship sites. While it funds the building of Sunni mosques, it does not finance construction of Shiite mosques. The government frequently denies recognition of certificates for graduates from Shiite religious instruction centers. Higher education centers hire less than two percent Shiite professors. While the Saudis have moved slowly to reform their textbooks and curricula, they have not retrieved older texts in use around the world in Saudi supported religious schools that contain intolerant and anti-Semitic language, suggesting hatred of infidels and the killing of apostates.

In April 2018, a Vatican official was hosted by the Saudi “Etidal” Center and met with King Salman and other Saudi leaders to discuss how religions can work to renounce violence, extremism, and terrorism. The center purportedly aims to “disrupt extremist recruitment and promote tolerance and coexistence amongst different religions and cultures.” Although the Saudi government has a long way to go in realizing this goal of religious tolerance, especially within its own country, this is a step in the right direction.



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