

SAUDI ARABIA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia remained poor despite some ongoing improvements. Saudi Arabia's official religion is Islam. The construction of non-Muslim houses of worship and public non-Muslim prayer is forbidden. Non-Muslims are not permitted to construct houses of worship and are confined to worshipping in private settings. However, Saudi Arabia in 2020 [made public overtures](#) to the global Jewish community. A review of the current year of Saudi textbooks also found [significant improvements](#), including more religiously tolerant language and the removal of intolerant passages, while also noting that "problematic examples still remained."

According to the 1992 Saudi Basic Law of Governance, the constitution is the Qur'an and the sunna (traditions of the Prophet). The judicial system is largely governed by a Saudi interpretation of Shari'a as informed by Hanbali jurisprudence, which imposes capital punishment for apostasy; openly declaring one's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) identity; and peaceful religious or political dissent. Throughout 2020, Saudi Arabia continued to detain and mistreat individuals who [dissented](#) from the government's interpretation of Islam, [including](#) USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience [Raif Badawi](#), his lawyer Waleed Abu al-Khair, and atheist poet [Ashraf Fayadh](#). Saudi Arabia also targeted dissidents online, [arresting](#) three people in March for insulting God on social media and [threatening](#) to prosecute [Ayasel Slay](#), who posted a rap video entitled "Daughter of Mecca" on YouTube in February. In July, Saudi Arabian officials arrested Mohammed al-Bokari for posting a Twitter video [calling](#) for LGBTI people to have equal

rights. Prison officials [sexually assaulted](#) al-Bokari and held him in solitary confinement.

Following the outbreak of COVID-19, the Saudi government [imposed a lockdown](#) on the majority-Shi'a province of Qatif. It also failed to respond to incitement on television comparing COVID-19-positive Shi'a Muslims to "ISIS suicide bombers." Despite the government's [promise](#) to review death sentences against minors, several Shi'a prisoners convicted as children received either [no change](#) to their sentence or were sentenced to several [years in prison](#). Four members of the Bohra Shi'a community also remained in prison on multiyear sentences following unsubstantiated charges of money laundering and violating charity collection regulations.

Saudi Arabia maintained key provisions of the religiously grounded [guardianship system](#) in 2020 that violate the religious freedom of Saudi women. It continues to persecute activists who peacefully protest this system. Following [mistreatment](#) in prison, including sexual assault and credible allegations of torture, Loujain al-Hathloul was sentenced alongside Mayaa al-Zahrani to [nearly six years in prison](#), though a portion of the sentences were suspended. Guardianship denies women the rights of legal adulthood and allows abusive male guardians to procure Saudi state resources to force a female ward to return home. This power extends over women who have fled internationally or who are escaping domestic violence. It also denies women, including [U.S. citizens](#), custody and visitation rights with their children regardless of the competence of a male legal guardian.

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
- Impose targeted sanctions on Saudi government agencies and officials responsible

for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Hold public hearings to amplify congressional concerns over prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia, including

Raif Badawi and his counsel Waleed Abu al-Khair, and work with like-minded parliamentarians in other countries to advocate for their release; and

- Reintroduce and pass the bipartisan [Saudi Educational Transparency and Reform Act](#), which requires the U.S. Department of State to report annually on religious intolerance in Saudi textbooks and efforts to remove this content.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Saudi Arabia in 2020](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Guardianship, Women, and Religious Freedom in Saudi Arabia](#)

Background

Saudi Arabia is home to over [34 million Saudis](#), 85–90 percent of whom are Sunni Muslims and 10–15 percent of whom are Shi'a Muslims. The United Nations (UN) estimates that 37 percent of the population are expatriates, including at least two million Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, practitioners of folk religions, and the unaffiliated. Non-Muslim or atheist citizens often hide their identity to avoid harsh social and official consequences. The ruling monarch, King Salman bin Abdel Aziz Al Saud, holds the title "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques." Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has systematically cracked down on both religious and political dissent despite overseeing economic reforms associated with Saudi Vision 2030.

Positive Developments

In January, Muslim World League Chair Mohammed Al Isa [visited](#) the Auschwitz concentration camp, leading one of the most senior delegations of Muslim officials to visit the site. In February, a delegation from the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations [visited](#) Saudi Arabia to meet with Al Isa, the first visit by an American Jewish organization since 1993. That same month, an interfaith delegation including Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu leaders as well as an Israeli rabbi [met with](#) King Salman. In 2020, Saudi Arabia also [relaxed restrictions](#) on the sale of Christmas trees and [Christmas decorations](#) in the capital, Riyadh.

In April, the government [announced](#) its intent to abolish flogging, a punishment often used against religious prisoners of conscience. In August, the Saudi Human Rights Commission announced the Kingdom would [review](#) the death sentences of Shi'a prisoners who were minors when charged. While Saudi Arabia converted [three such sentences](#) to 10 years in prison by February 2021, eight such prisoners still remained at risk of receiving a death sentence.

Mistreatment of Religious Minorities

Shi'a Muslims in Saudi Arabia continued to face discrimination in education, employment, and the judiciary, and they lack access to senior positions in the government and military. The building of Shi'a mosques continued to be restricted outside majority-Shi'a Muslim areas in the Eastern Province, and authorities often prohibited the use of the Shi'a Muslim call to prayer in these areas. In March 2020, the government [locked down](#) the majority-Shi'a Qatif Province, preventing entry and exit. No other province was subject to these restrictions.

Eight Bohra Shi'a in Riyadh were arrested in 2017 and 2018 after collecting funds for the community to participate in the hajj pilgrimage. Two were released in early 2020, but one was rearrested in the summer and the other cannot access his passport. Two of the Bohra Shi'a men in prison suffer health conditions that put them at elevated risk for COVID-19.

Religious Incitement in Textbooks

For more than 15 years, USCIRF has [documented](#) the government's failure to address intolerant content in official textbooks sufficiently. A December 2020 [nongovernmental organization report](#) found that while "extremism persists" in Saudi textbooks, "many problematic examples" of religious intolerance "had been removed" from the most current versions. These [include](#) passages urging the death

penalty for gay men. However, textbooks still teach that "infidels will be punished on Resurrection Day," warn against "polytheists" (a reference to Shi'a Muslims), and include a story describing "Jewish wrongdoers" as "monkeys."

Religious Prisoners of Conscience

Dissident Sheikh Salman al-Ouda remained in prison in 2020 despite a January [letter](#) from three UN Special Rapporteurs noting that his detention may violate international laws concerning freedom of religion and belief. Al-Ouda has been [denied](#) family visits and was [not allowed to call his family](#) for a period in early summer 2020. Following a [secret hearing](#) at the Specialized Criminal Court in November, al-Ouda's son reported that he [lost](#) half his hearing and eyesight.

USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience [Raif Badawi](#) and his lawyer [Waleed Abu al-Khair](#) faced worsening treatment in 2020. Al-Khair was hospitalized in January following a hunger strike to protest mistreatment. He remained on strike [until](#) February 2020. Raif Badawi was sentenced in 2013 on charges of "insulting Islam" and sentenced to 600 lashes and seven years in prison over the content of posts on his blog. In 2020, he was [hospitalized](#) following a hunger strike in protest of being put in solitary confinement and was not permitted to speak with his wife. In May, he was moved out of solitary confinement into a prison cell with [15 other inmates](#). In August, Badawi's wife reported that one of the inmates [tried to assassinate](#) him.

Saudi Arabia also continued to detain and mistreat Loujain al-Hathloul, who [peacefully protested](#) religious guardianship laws. Al-Hathloul's health [deteriorated](#) considerably during a hunger strike protesting prison mistreatment. In November, Saudi Arabia referred her case to the Specialized Criminal Court, which deals with terrorism and national security cases. In December, following a series of hearings, al-Hathloul was [sentenced](#) alongside Mayaa al-Zahrani to a backdated sentence of five years and three months and a five-year travel ban. Al-Hathloul was released in February 2021 but remains under a five-year travel ban.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2020, the Trump administration continued to coordinate with high-level Saudi officials while Congress pursued a more critical approach. On January 7, then President Donald J. Trump [met with](#) Vice Minister of Defense Khalid bin Salman. On February 12, then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo met with Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan. Later that month, then Secretary of State Pompeo travelled to Saudi Arabia for meetings with [King Salman](#) and [Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman](#).

On January 28, Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT) called for the Trump administration to [impose visa restrictions](#) on officials involved in the detention and abuse of Loujain al-Hathloul. In September, five senators [sponsored](#) a bill calling for the release of Saudi women dissidents, including those persecuted for peacefully advocating for freedom of religion or belief. In November, Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ) coordinated a [bipartisan letter](#) to the Saudi ambassador calling for their release. On December 2, the State Department [redesignated](#) Saudi Arabia as a CPC under IRFA, but again issued a waiver on any related sanctions on the country "as required in the 'important national interest of the United States.'"

Individual Views of Commissioner Johnnie Moore

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, under Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman, continues to reform, outpacing expectations. This is a categorical fact. The work remains substantially incomplete, but the trajectory is undeniable—the reforms are ongoing and often remarkable.

Objectively—and obviously—Saudi Arabia is still a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, (without, for instance, a single public non-Islamic house of worship or pilgrimage site) but its progress must be measured against its past. I believe the international community should continue its positive reinforcement of the Crown Prince’s reform agenda. In fact, Saudi Arabia deserves much more credit for its reforms than it is receiving, rather than withering, politicized criticism.

This is also why I continue to support the U.S. Department of State’s decision to maintain its waiver for Saudi Arabia. In fact, Saudi Arabia should be rewarded for its progress and not face threats of coercive action from the United States. Punitive measures will not speed the effect of change in the Kingdom; rather, they would complicate and likely slow it. A continued, strong relationship with the United States—contra malign actors—will likely accelerate change. It is clear that real change is possible. The change must continue and it can accelerate.