

SAUDI ARABIA 2023 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 by the Hanbali school of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence. Freedom of religion is not provided for under the law. The law criminalizes "anyone who challenges, either directly or indirectly, the religion or justice of the King or Crown Prince." The law prohibits "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.

During the year, authorities continued to prosecute Shia citizens at a rate disproportionate with the percentage of Shia present in the overall population. As many as 66 individuals, including 56 Shia individuals, faced the possibility of execution, according to a December report by the Berlin-based European Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR). Some Shia were sentenced to death for crimes that were nonviolent in nature, and in some cases, persons were sentenced to death for crimes allegedly committed while under the age of 18. Local Shia activists and international human rights groups questioned the competence, independence, and impartiality of the judiciary and said that the underlying charges were inconsistent with human rights, including exercise of the freedoms of peaceful assembly, expression, and association.

The government also continued – but indefinitely postponed – the prosecution of a number of academics, members of the media, and Islamic clerics for alleged membership in the Muslim Brotherhood, which the

government designated a terrorist organization in 2014. The UN Human Rights Council's Working Group on Arbitrary Detentions particularly stated that three of the clerics detained in Saudi Arabia were experiencing violations of their right to a timely, full and independent investigation of their crimes.

Shia Muslims continued to state that Shia individuals were subject to discriminatory treatment. Nonetheless, the government made progress in allowing the celebration of Shia traditions and some holidays, including celebrations of the birthdays of imams. Authorities continued to permit limited public commemorations of Ashura and other Shia holidays in Qatif, home to the country's largest Shia population. Contacts alleged, however, that the government placed limitations on the extent of the celebrations and banned for the sixth year in a row the unified mourning procession.

The government completed its review of public-school textbooks, removing almost all problematic references to persons of religions other than Islam. In its annual review of content in Saudi textbooks in June, the Israeli nongovernmental organization (NGO) Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se) stated that officials had removed "almost all examples portraying Christians and Jews in a negative manner" from the latest Saudi textbooks, building on trends seen in previous years. The trend of removing examples regarding violent jihad and martyrdom continued; during the year, almost all problematic issues had been removed. The importance of peace and tolerance was further highlighted in textbooks, particularly in newly introduced textbooks.

U.S. officials engaged Saudi leaders and officials both in Washington and in the kingdom at all levels on religious freedom and tolerance issues. Senior U.S. officials pressed the government to respect religious freedom, eliminate discriminatory enforcement of laws against members of religious minority groups, and promote respect and tolerance for minority religious groups' practices and beliefs. In meetings with government officials, senior embassy and consulate officials raised reports of abuses and restrictions of religious freedom, arbitrary arrests and detention, misuse of the country's

counterterrorism law, and inadequate fair trial guarantees. They also discussed the importance of respect for the rights of minorities and their religious practices. Senior embassy and consulate officials continued to inquire about the legal status of detained or imprisoned individuals and discussed religious freedom concerns with members of religious minority communities, including Shia and citizens who no longer considered themselves Muslims, as well as with non-Muslim foreign residents.

Since 2004, the United States has designated Saudi Arabia 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. On December 29, 2023, 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 total population at 35.9 million (midyear 2023). In May, the Saudi General Authority for Statistics released statistics from the 2022 census showing that the population of Saudi Arabia reached 32.2 million, of whom 41.6 percent were resident foreigners. The U.S. government estimates that between 85 and 90 percent of the country’s citizens are Sunni Muslims. Shia Muslims constitute 10 to 12 percent of the citizen population and an estimated 25 to 30 percent of the Eastern Province’s population.

According to Boston University’s 2020 World Religions Database, the population includes approximately 31.5 million Muslims, 2.1 million Christians, 708,000 Hindus, 242,000 atheists or agnostics, 114,000 Buddhists, and 67,000 Sikhs.

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, the religion of which is Islam. The Basic Law defines the country's constitution as the Quran and the Sunna and states the "decisions of judges shall not be subject to any authority other than the authority of the Islamic sharia." 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 many years.

The Basic Law states the duty of every citizen is to defend Islam, society, and the homeland. Certain non-Muslim foreigners 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. The law deems children born to Muslim fathers as Muslim.

The judicial system was historically largely based on laws derived from the Quran and Sunna and was largely uncodified. All judges are religiously trained, although they are now also required to study nonreligious legal subjects mandated by the Ministry of Justice as part of judicial training. On June 14, the kingdom approved the Civil Transactions law, which codified all civil matters. The law came into force on December 16. A draft criminal code, which would codify all criminal law, is still pending. Law on religious matters, which often affects civil law, is developed by fatwas (official interpretations of religious law) issued by the 21-person Council of Senior Scholars (CSS) that reports to the King. By law, fatwas must be based on the Quran and Sunna. The Basic Law also states that governance is based on justice, *shura* (consultation), and equality, according to sharia.

The law specifies a hierarchical organization and composition of the CSS, the Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Religious Rulings, 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 (Malaki, 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.

On October 31, the Cabinet shifted away from primary use of the Hijri calendar and approved the use of the Gregorian calendar for all official dealings except those related to the provisions of Islamic shariah where the calculation of periods will continue to be based on the *Hijri* (Islamic lunar) calendar.

The counterterrorism law criminalizes, among other things, "calling for atheist thought in any form or calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion." It criminalizes "anyone who challenges, either directly or indirectly, the religion or justice of the King or Crown Prince." The law also bans 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.

According to the Basic Law of Governance, "The judiciary is an independent authority. The decisions of judges shall not be subject to any authority other than the authority of the Islamic sharia. The courts shall apply rules of the Islamic sharia in cases that are brought before them, according to the Holy Quran and the Sunna, and according to laws which are decreed by the ruler in agreement with the Holy Quran and the Sunna." In the absence of a comprehensively codified criminal code, rulings and sentences can diverge widely. Criminal appeals may be made to the appellate and supreme courts, where in some instances, appellate decisions have resulted in a harsher sentence than the original court decision. Government universities provide

training in all four Sunni schools of jurisprudence, with a focus on the Hanbali school.

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 is tasked to follow up on citizen complaints. There are no formal requirements regarding the composition of the HRC. During the year, the commission had 18 voting board members from various parts of the country.

The law permits death as punishment for blasphemy against Islam. Courts have not sentenced individuals to death for blasphemy since 1992. Punishments for blasphemy may include lengthy prison sentences. Criticism of Islam, including expression deemed offensive to Muslims, is forbidden by law on the grounds of preserving social stability.

In 2020, as the result of a Supreme Court decision, the government ended flogging as a *ta’zir* (discretionary) criminal sentence and replaced it with prison sentences or fines. As a result, flogging may no longer be used against those convicted of blasphemy, public immodesty, sitting alone with a person of the opposite sex, and a range of other crimes. Judicial officials have stated, however, that flogging still may be included in sentences for three *hudood* offenses (crimes that carry specific penalties under the country’s interpretation of Islamic law): drunkenness, sexual conduct between unmarried persons, and false accusations of adultery.

In 2020, a royal decree abolished *ta’zir* death penalty sentences for those who committed crimes as minors. The juvenile law sets the legal age of adulthood at 18, based on the Hijri calendar. Minor offenders, however, who are convicted of *qisas*, a category of crimes that includes various types of murder, or *hudood* offenses, could still face the death penalty. The royal decree also capped prison sentences for minors at 10 years.

The country is the location of Mecca and Medina, Islam's two holiest sites. The government prohibits non-Muslims from entering central Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. Muslims visit these cities on the annual Hajj pilgrimage and during Umrah pilgrimage throughout the rest of the year. 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 King employs the official title of "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques," in reference to the two cities. Citing reasons of public safety and logistics, the government establishes national quotas for foreigners and issues permits to Muslim residents (including its own nationals) to participate in the Hajj.

On August 8, the Cabinet approved the establishment of the Presidency of the Religious Affairs of the Grand Holy Mosque and the Prophet's Holy Mosque, reporting directly to the King, to supervise the affairs of the Two Holy Mosques. The new body, which replaced the General Presidency for the Affairs of the Two Holy Mosques, will be financially independent, according to local media outlets.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Call, and Guidance (MOIA) vets, employs, and supervises Sunni Muslim clerics. Those who preach at government-owned mosques are government employees who receive a monthly stipend. The ministry issues general guidelines by which all preachers must abide and directives to cover specific topics. The MOIA oversees clerics via video monitoring and spot inspections and is known to fire preachers who disobey or avoid instructions and sermon topics.

The MOIA must approve clerics traveling abroad to proselytize, and those clerics operate under MOIA supervision while abroad. The stated purpose of this regulation is to limit the ability of religious scholars to travel or to preach overseas and to prevent the actual or apparent interference by 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 must also follow 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 may receive a course on Islamic civilization or alternative coursework in place of the curriculum designed for Saudi students; courses entail one hour of instruction per week. The government permits private international schools to teach courses on other religions or civilizations.

The Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) is a government agency charged with monitoring social behavior and reporting violations of moral standards to law enforcement authorities. It provides counseling and reports individuals suspected of violating the law to police. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) oversees CPVPV operations on the King's behalf. According to law, the CPVPV must "uphold its duties with kindness and gentleness as decreed by the examples of the Prophet Muhammad." CPVPV field officers did not patrol in public during the year but frequented mosques and other religious sites, where they were required to wear identification badges.

The law criminalizes the publication or downloading of offensive sites, and authorities routinely blocked sites containing material perceived as harmful, illegal, offensive, or anti-Islamic. Social media users who post or share content considered to attack religion face imprisonment for up to five years under the Cyber Crimes Law. Those found guilty of distributing content online deemed to disrupt public order, public morals, or religious values may also be subject to a fine up to three million riyals (\$800,000).

The government requires noncitizen legal residents to carry an identity card, which among other descriptors, contains 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 approved a new personal status law in 2022 while retaining provisions that make it difficult for women to resist or object to domestic violence and sexual abuse in marriage. Specifically, the law requires married

women to obey their husbands in a “reasonable manner” with potential financial consequences for disobedience. The law continued the requirement that women obtain a male guardian’s permission to marry, although a court could approve a marriage if a guardian refuses. By default, male guardians are granted legal custody/guardianship of minor children after a divorce, even as women are granted default physical custody. The mother may apply for full custody. The law sets the legal age of marriage at 18 but permits courts to authorize the marriage of a child under 18, provided the child has reached puberty and that the marriage provides an established benefit to the child.

The press law requires all online newspapers and bloggers to obtain a license from the ministry. The law bans publishing anything “contradicting sharia, inciting disruption, serving foreign interests that contradict national interests, or damaging the reputation of the Grand Mufti, members of the Council of Senior Religious Scholars, or senior government officials.”

Affiliation with and support for the Muslim Brotherhood, designated as a terrorist organization in 2014, is prohibited.

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

Government Practices

Because religion and politics are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. NGOs, advocates, and Shia activists said authorities continued to commit a range of abuses against members of Shia communities. While NGOs, advocates, and Shia activists stated that the prosecution of Shia was often based on religious affiliation, observers said that members of other religious groups, including Sunni Muslims, faced arrest and trial for similar offenses and faced many of the same due process deficiencies as Shia defendants.

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

Sources, especially among NGOs dedicated to human rights, documented dozens of cases of Shia defendants facing the death sentences during the year. Not all the facts in the cases were known, but human rights organizations believed that Shia persons in the country faced a disproportionate level of scrutiny and may have faced inflated charges. ESOHR, for example, documented nine individuals on death row who had allegedly committed the crimes for which they were sentenced when they were under the age of 18. Among these nine, eight were members of the Shia community, a clearly disproportionate number given that the Shia represent just 10-15 percent of the Saudi population. In a July report, Human Rights Watch (HRW) said that “Saudi Arabia and ... other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries continue to use overbroad provisions contained within terrorism laws to suppress dissent and target religious minorities” and noted prior instances when the country had reportedly targeted Shia Muslims.

In March, ESOHR reported that the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) Court of Appeals upheld death sentences against Shia minors Yusuf al-Manasif, Hasan Zaki al-Faraj, Ali al-Mabiouq and Ali Hassan al-Subaiti. As of year's end, the sentences had not been carried out.

On November 20, ESOHR said at least nine individuals, including eight Shia, accused of crimes committed as minors remained on death row: Yusuf al-Manasif, Hasan Zaki al-Faraj, Ali al-Mabiouq, Ali Hassan al-Subaiti, Jalal Hassan al-Labbad, Abdullah al-Derazi, Jawad Qureiris, Mahdi al-Mohsen and Abdullah al-Huwaiti. On October 24, Amnesty International stated that it had credible information that the Supreme Court upheld the death sentences of al-Labbad and al-Derazi. On October 16, UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions Morris Tidball-Binz expressed concern at al-Derazi's imminent execution and urged the government to refrain from carrying out al-Derazi's sentence.

On March 29, 2023, ESOHR reported that the SCC Court of Appeals upheld a death sentence against Shia men Ali Hassan al-Safwani and Ali Muhammad

al-Rabea, brother of Hassan al-Rabea, who was extradited to Saudi Arabia from Morocco in January at the government's request. On February 6, 2023, ESOHR reported that the SCC sentenced al-Safwani and al-Rabea to death over terrorism charges, although the public prosecution demanded a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison.

On May 9, ESOHR reported that the SCC Court of Appeals upheld ta'zir death sentences against six Shia men over terrorism-related charges, which ESOHR said "did not include the most serious crimes in international law." In November 2022, the SCC issued preliminary death sentences against Zuhair al-Samkhan, Reda al-Shayeb, Muhammaduma al-Tahnoun, Mustafa Abu Shaheen, Muhammaduma Abdul Razzaq al-Mosbah, and Abdullah Ghazwi, while sentencing Mustafa Ahmed Attia to 20 years in prison and a 20-year travel ban. Authorities arrested the seven men in May and June 2019.

On February 8, the independent news agency Shia Waves reported that the SCC handed down death sentences to Shia men Muhammad al-Shaqaq, Mansour al-Hayyek, Mazrouq al-Fadl, and Raad al-Fadl. The SCC also sentenced Ali al-Hayyeki to 27 years in prison.

In January, the SCC Court of Appeals upheld a death sentence against Shia businessman Saud al-Faraj on terrorism charges. Al-Faraj was arrested in December 2019 and sentenced to death in October 2022 for participating in demonstrations in Qatif, running a terrorist cell, and killing police officers, according to the *Middle East Eye* (MEE) digital news organization. In August, ESOHR reported that al-Faraj began a hunger strike to protest his torture in prison. Al-Faraj had previously filed several complaints to the Public Prosecutor's Office and the Office of the Crown Prince alleging torture, restrictions on communication with his family members, and the inability to defend himself in court.

The SCC indefinitely postponed trials of some clerics, academics, and members of the media for alleged association with the Muslim Brotherhood, which the government continued to regard as a terrorist organization, a view also expressed by the CSS, which stated the Muslim Brotherhood did

not represent the true values of Islam. The accused included prominent scholars of Islam Salman al-Odah and Awad al-Qarni, who were arrested in 2017. According to Saudi and international rights groups, the public prosecutor sought the death penalty against them. According to al-Qarni's son Nasser, al-Qarni, who remained in detention, hasn't attended any hearings since 2019.

On September 10, Abdullah al-Odah, son of detained cleric Salman al-Odah, said his father's trial has been suspended for years, adding that the judges hearing his case were arrested and the public prosecution was seeking the death the penalty for treason. Authorities arrested al-Odah in 2017 and charged him with crimes connected to his alleged ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Qatari government as well as his public support for imprisoned dissidents.

In October, the UN Human Rights Council's Working Group on Arbitrary Detentions issued reports that stated the government's continued detention of both Salman al-Odah and Awad al-Qarni as well as of al-Odah's brother, Khaled, violated provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the two reports, the working group called for the immediate release of all three and for a full and independent investigation of the "violation of [the three men's] rights."

As many as 66 individuals, including a disproportionately high number (56) Shia individuals, faced the possibility of execution, according to a December report by ESOHR. As was the case for detainees of any religious group, international human rights NGOs said that many of the convictions were "based on confessions extracted through prolonged solitary confinement and torture" during pretrial detention and interrogation. Local Shia activists and international human rights groups questioned the competence, independence, and impartiality of the judiciary and said that the underlying charges were inconsistent with international principles of freedom of assembly, expression, and association.

On May 10, Mirat al-Jazeera, a Shia news website stated that since 2016, officials failed to return to families for burial the bodies of at least 144 persons from Qatif and al-Ahsa who were executed or killed in Saudi security raids. On June 4, the Nashet Qatifi account on the X platform reported that the State Security Presidency continued to threaten families and relatives of executed individuals with detention if they spoke publicly about the executions or demanded the return of their bodies. Furthermore, authorities reportedly prohibited gatherings to receive condolences and forced the families to sign pledges to that effect, according to Mirat al-Jazeera website and Nashet Qatifi account.

In a July report prepared for the UN Human Rights Council for the country's 2023 Universal Periodic Review, the NGO MENA Rights Council stated, "Members of the Shia community are at an increased risk of facing the death penalty in Saudi Arabia. They are often convicted in mass trials and sentenced to death on the basis of vague offences that frequently violate their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly."

NGOs and human rights organizations alleged that clerics and imams whose teachings did not align with the official Saudi Government interpretation of Islam faced disproportionate criminal prosecution. The NGO Prisoners of Conscience, a UK-based charity organization that reports on human rights and religious freedom violations, pointed to the January arrest of 88-year-old Syrian scholar Sheikh Saleh al-Shami along with his son and four others as a likely example of this. Prisoners of Conscience reported as a second example that the SCC Court of Appeals added nine to 10 years to the prison sentences of the brother and three sons of detained religious scholar Safar al-Hawali. The government arrested al-Hawali and his sons Abdullah, Abdulrahman and Abdulrahim, and brother Saadallah on undisclosed charges in 2018. Al-Hawali, often linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, rose to prominence 25 years earlier 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. According to the media-monitoring website *Middle East Monitor*, the charges against al-Hawali, in his seventies and facing chronic health issues,

remained unknown. Prisoners of Conscience also reported that a court sentenced the director of al-Hawali's office, Ismail al-Hassan, to 10 years in prison.

According to Prisoners of Conscience, during 2023, the SCC did not conduct hearings in the case of cleric Hassan Farhan al-Maliki, described by HRW as a religious reformer in detention since September 2017. Earlier in 2017, a criminal court convicted and sentenced al-Maliki to three months on charges of extremism, fanaticism, and holding an impure (*takfiri*) ideology. In 2020, his son tweeted that the public prosecutor had sought the death penalty for al-Maliki on 14 charges, including questioning the fundamentals of Islam by casting doubt on the Sunna and hadith (sayings or customs of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions). According to HRW, the charges against him also included criticism of several early Islamic figures, insulting the country's rulers and the Supreme Council of Religious Scholars, and describing them as extremist. Prisoners of Conscience and al-Maliki's son Abu Bakr posted on August 9 that no date had been set for al-Maliki's next hearing since the postponement of his October 2022 hearing, which was the 16th postponement of al-Maliki's trial.

NGOs and human rights group alleged that members of the Shia minority faced disproportionate criminal prosecution. On January 17, ESOHR reported that authorities arrested Shia cleric Hassan al-Khuwailidi after a search of his home. Although no motive for the search and arrest was released, activists said that al-Khuwailidi was "the most prominent Shia preacher in Qatif." On April 17, the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in the Arabian Peninsula (CDHRAP) reported that Shia preacher Ahmed al-Hani was arrested for praying for al-Khuwailidi's release.

On January 30, authorities raided houses in the Eastern Province and arrested 10 Shia men from Qatif, al-Awamiya, Um al-Hamam, and Hafr al-Batin, according to Shia Waves and CDHRAP. On April 24, the Shia news website *Mirat al-Jazeera* reported that security forces raided houses in Qatif villages and arrested 10 men. It was not publicly known what charges the men faced.

On April 19, Shia Waves, an independent news agency focusing on developments affecting Shia Muslims around the world, reported that a court issued a 20-year prison sentence against Shia preacher and orator, Sheikh Fathi al-Janoubi, who was arrested in early October 2021 and forcibly disappeared until his verdict was issued. According to *Mirat al-Jazeera*, 21 Shia scholars, including al-Janoubi, were imprisoned.

Violations of the government's interpretation of religious restrictions also resulted in criminal prosecutions and detentions during the year. On January 29, authorities arrested Libyan pilgrim Hamza al-Busaifi for filming a video at the Holy Mosque in Mecca while performing Umrah, according to *Mirat al-Jazeera* and Libya media. The Libyan press reported that authorities arrested al-Busaifi after he posted the video of a man claiming to be a prophet. Authorities released al-Busaifi on February 12.

On February 11, according to Shia Waves and Shia Rights Watch, authorities arrested Seyyed Nazir Abbas Taqvi, the secretary general of Pakistan's Shia Ulema (Scholars) Council and leader of the Islami Tehreek Pakistan (Islamic Union of Pakistan) political party for carrying a banner at the Holy Mosque in Mecca while performing Umrah. The banner featured the name of Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib, cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad and the first Shia imam.

On March 7, Sunni preacher and former imam of King Abdulaziz Mosque in Dammam, Emad al-Moubayed, reportedly fled the country out of fear of persecution after he shared a video on his account on the X platform criticizing the government's reforms in the entertainment industry and advised "those in power" in the kingdom to "fear God." He further stated that the recent changes in the country were "erasing the Islamic faith."

The *Mirat al-Jazeera* website reported that authorities arrested Yemeni women Marwa al-Sabri and Fikra al-Dhibiani in February and March, respectively, while performing Umrah. The two were arrested following an argument with security officers at the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Al-Sabri was

released in March. Following al-Dhibiani's arrest, the Houthi "ministry of human rights" in Sana'a denounced "the harassment and insults of al-Dhibiani by a policewoman in the Grand Mosque in Mecca before she was assaulted by a Saudi security officer." The statement complained about what it called "violation[s] of human rights, the sanctity of holy places, morals and human values."

On July 9, the SCC sentenced Muhammad bin Nasser al-Ghamdi, the younger brother of exiled dissident scholar Saeed bin Nasser al-Ghamdi, to death for online activity on the X platform and YouTube, according to HRW and Amnesty International. Muhammad bin Nasser al-Ghamdi, a 54-year-old retired teacher, was arrested on June 10, 2022 and sentenced following posts in which he criticized the King, the Crown Prince, and the government's foreign policy, called for the release of detained religious clerics, and protested increased prices, according to Amnesty. According to the *New York Times*, "the younger Mr. al-Ghamdi confessed to holding religious and political beliefs that prosecutors portrayed as grave violations of the kingdom's broadly worded counterterrorism law." According to HRW, documents show that the SCC sentenced al-Ghamdi to death under article 30 of Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism law for "describing the King or the Crown Prince in a way that undermines religion or justice," article 34 for "supporting a terrorist ideology," article 43 for "communication with a terrorist entity," and article 44 for publishing false news "with the intention of executing a terrorist crime."

On March 1, Shia Lebanese engineer and former resident of Saudi Arabia Ali Ahmad Maziad alleged that Saudi authorities detained him for a year and a half on sectarian grounds, forcibly "disappeared" him, and subjected him to torture and arbitrary interrogation, before releasing him due to the lack of evidence. State Security arrested Maziad in August 2021 in Riyadh and released him in December 2022.

On March 3, *Mirat al-Jazeera* reported that the SCC sentenced Shia cleric Sheikh Ali al-Maa to 18 years in prison and Shia detainee Ammar al-Maa to 30 years in prison.

On March 7, authorities executed Shia man Haidar al-Tahaifah on terrorism charges after six years in detention, according to ESOHR. He was arrested in 2017 and sentenced to death. On June 7, Prisoners of Conscience reported that authorities arrested Sunni preacher Wahib bin Saleh al-Sheikh, who disappeared from all social media platforms since late February. Al-Sheikh had a large following on social media and was known for his preaching and Quranic recitation videos.

On June 27, Shia Rights Watch reported that authorities arrested Bahraini Shia cleric Sheikh Jamil Hassan al-Baqeri during Hajj for chanting a supplication at the Holy Mosque in Mecca, which the authorities deemed to contain offensive sectarian slogans. Al-Baqeri was released two days later.

On July 4, Prisoners of Conscience reported that a court issued a 27-year prison sentence against Malik al-Dowaish, son of detained cleric Sulaiman al-Dowaish. In July 2022, authorities arrested Malik after he wrote an article accusing Saudi authorities of abducting, torturing, and forcibly disappearing his father, who has been detained since 2016. The NGOs DAWN and MENA Rights Group reported that security personnel arrested Sulaiman al-Dowaish in 2016 after he posted several tweets summarizing a religious lecture that he delivered in Mecca, warning of the dangers of individuals providing their sons with great privileges and responsibilities without proper oversight and accountability. In March 2021, Saudi human rights organizations ALQST (“Justice”) reported that it obtained information that high-ranking officials “brutally tortured” al-Dowaish after his 2016 disappearance. ALQST stated that the last reported sighting of al-Dowaish was in 2018, and that nothing has been heard of him since then.

On September 13, Prisoners of Conscience accused authorities of detaining president of the Islamic Press Association Ahmad al-Suwayan after the end of his three-year sentence in 2020.

In October, Sanad, a U. K.-based human rights organization focused on Saudi affairs, reported that authorities continued to imprison Ibrahim al-Faris,

whose three-year sentence was completed in September. Faris was among a group of clerics and religious leaders arrested in 2017. The SCC sentenced him in 2020.

On October 27, Sanad and Prisoners of Conscience reported that detained Quran reciter and former imam of the Khadija bint Khuwailed Mosque in Jeddah, Amer al-Muhalhal, was suffering serious deterioration in his physical and mental health and was referred to the prison's mental health clinic. Al-Muhalhal was arrested in 2020 for posting social media accounts of imprisoned Quran reciter Abdullah Basfar, according to Sanad.

In November, Sanad reported that authorities released 87-year-old Saud al-Fanisan, the former head of the Faculty of Sharia at Iman Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University. After his 2020 arrest and initial sentence of two years in 2021, an appellate court in 2022 increased al-Fanisan's sentence to seven years, with three-and-a-half years suspended.

Reports from Shia community members 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. Eastern Province Shia judges dealing with intra-Shia personal status and family laws operated specialized courts. 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 Qatif and al-Ahsa. Community members reported Sunni judges sometimes completely disregarded or refused to hear testimony by Shia Muslims.

According to NGOs and Shia community members, prison officials held Shia inmates in some cases in separate wings of prisons, and they reportedly faced worse conditions than Sunnis.

On May 23, the *Shia News Agency* website reported that authorities in Medina detained three American Shia pilgrims for 12 days in late April for

wearing black T-shirts showing the names of Shia imams. The pilgrims were visiting al-Baqi cemetery, one of the first Islamic cemeteries and a site sacred to Shia. After their detention, the three men were released and returned to the United States.

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

The government continued to incarcerate individuals accused of apostasy and blasphemy, violating Islamic values and moral standards, insulting Islam, and engaging in “black magic” and sorcery.

On January 28, local media outlets reported that the security force at the Holy Mosque in Medina arrested a Saudi man who appeared in a video discussing content described as impinging on religious values. The man, who was reportedly suffering from a psychological disorder, was referred to the relevant authority, and legal action was taken against him.

On August 18, Riyadh police announced that they arrested a citizen in his 30s for offending Prophet Muhammad and insulting his wife, Aisha, in a video on social media. Authorities initiated criminal proceedings against him and referred his case to the prosecution’s office, according to a Riyadh police spokesperson.

On September 12, local media reported that the General Authority of Media Regulation summoned a young Saudi woman for sharing posts insulting Prophet Muhammad and his wife Khadija on the X platform. The social media activist was referred to the Public Prosecution for further legal action and could face a prison term of five years and a fine of three million Saudi riyals (\$800,000), according to *Gulf News*.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

Authorities demonstrated increased tolerance for the practice of Shia religious functions, including celebrations of the birthdays of imams.

Husseinyas (Shia prayer halls) organized seminars and sermons, and private houses were decorated in celebration and opened for food distribution. Authorities continued to permit limited public commemorations of Ashura and other Shia holidays in Qatif, home to the country's largest Shia population. According to community members, the government allowed processions and gatherings to continue with greater coordination between the Shia community and authorities.

On June 12, Shia Waves reported that authorities relaxed the ban on visits to the tombs of Shia imams in the Baqi al-Gharqad Cemetery in Medina for 14-days during the Hajj, allowing Shia pilgrims to perform prayers and rituals during the visits. The *Shia News Agency* reported that informed sources said that the government also allowed access to Baqi al-Gharqad to Shia Muslims during Muharram, when Ashura is commemorated. In October, Saudi authorities permitted the celebration of the Prophet's birth in Qatif with vocalists and poets.

On August 2, Shia Waves reported that mourning ceremonies associated with Ashura, the day that commemorates the death of Hussein, were publicly held as the government eased some of the restrictions imposed in previous years.

On July 5, Shia Rights Watch reported that authorities closed a husseiniya in al-Fudul village in the Eastern Province to prevent Eid al-Ghadir celebrations. On July 26, Shia Rights Watch stated it received credible reports that authorities imposed restrictions on Shia citizens across the country as Ashura approached. The restrictions included summoning some individuals in charge of husseiniyas, removing mourning banners, and preventing women from attending mourning gatherings. It added that authorities arrested three Shia orators in Qatif and al-Ahsa and Shia cleric Sheikh Saleh al-Gharib in Safwa in addition to preventing sheikh Ahmed al-Qatari from reciting at mourning gatherings.

On July 26 and 27, authorities closed Abu Aziz Mosque in Tarout to prevent Shia worshippers from performing rituals and prayers, according to Shia

Rights Watch. It also reported that authorities closed a number of husseiniyas in the village of al-Qadeeh and removed black mourning banners and flags in the village of al-Rabeayah. On July 30 and August 8, the Nashet Qatifi account on the X platform tweeted that authorities banned the unified mourning procession for the sixth consecutive year while security officers patrolled Qatif villages, banned mourning banners on the streets, and lowered the volume of loudspeakers.

On July 29, the Nashet Qatifi Twitter account on X platform reported that authorities in Qatif arrested two individuals in charge of mourning gatherings, closed three mourning gatherings in al-Majidia neighborhood, and banned shops and kiosks selling religious books and recordings.

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 prohibited. On May 4, Minister of Islamic Affairs Abdullatif bin Abdulaziz al-Sheikh instructed all imams in the city of Riyadh to recite the Quran in the classic "Najdi" style of the central Najd region of the country. He added that the government would replace noncompliant imams and move them to mosques outside Riyadh and the ministry would train imams on the Najdi style.

In mixed neighborhoods of Sunni and Shia residents, authorities generally required all mosques, including Shia mosques, to use the Sunni call to prayer. In predominantly Shia areas such as Qatif, however, and in some Shia areas of al-Ahsa Governorate in the Eastern Province, authorities allowed Shia mosques to use the Twelver Shia variant of the call to prayer.

The government continued to prohibit the public practice of any non-Islamic religion. 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 detention, discrimination, harassment, and, for noncitizens, deportation. Members of

the expatriate Christian community said that congregations were able to conduct large Christian worship services discreetly and regularly without substantial interference from the CPVPV or other government authorities. Members of other minority faith communities similarly reported less interference in private religious gatherings than public ones.

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 quasigovernmental organization), and, when appropriate, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).

Authorities generally permitted Muslim detainees and prisoners to perform Islamic religious observances, such as prayers.

On June 13, Sanad said Saudi authorities violated international law and the country's responsibility as protector of Mecca and Medina by using the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages to repress foreign dissidents by arresting and deporting them to countries where they were at risk of arrest and imprisonment. The CDHR stated that the government was involved in "repeated incidents of arresting visitors to the Grand Mosque in Mecca directly inside the mosque, without taking into account the sanctity of the place or the rights of those present in [the mosque]."

The government took measures to regulate and facilitate the performance of the Hajj and Umrah.

On June 27, Minister of Hajj and Umrah Tawfiq Al-Rabiah announced that more than 1.8 million pilgrims from more than 150 countries performed Hajj after all COVID-19 restrictions were removed for the first time since 2019. Local press said approximately 183,000 residents of Saudi Arabia performed the Hajj, while Iran's official media said 87,550 Iranians made the pilgrimage. Iranian pilgrims told Reuters they were provided with better transport services by Saudi authorities than in previous years, and it was easier for the pilgrims to secure accommodation. Press reports stated that about two-

and-a-half million persons made the pilgrimage in 2019 before the pandemic and 926,000 made the pilgrimage in 2022.

The MOIA maintained active oversight of the country's religious establishment and provided guidance to Sunni imams on the substance of Friday sermons. The MOIA did not vet sermons in advance but sometimes directed imams to dedicate Friday sermons to certain topics, such as denouncing groups associated with political Islam. At times, imams had to choose from a list of Friday sermons on the MOIA website. The ministry restricted content in those sermons considered sectarian, political, or extremist, promoting hatred or racism, or including commentary on foreign policy. During the year, the MOIA 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. MOIA supervisors sometimes attended Friday sermons to ensure compliance with MOIA directives. In spite of this, there were reports that some Sunni clerics who received government stipends used antisemitic, anti-Shia, and religiously intolerant language in their sermons. Unlicensed imams continued to express discriminatory or intolerant views in internet postings and in unsanctioned sermons in areas of the country lacking government monitoring.

According to local observers, Shia clerics did not receive guidance on their sermons from MOIA and did not submit them for preapproval. Shia clerics, however, continued to exercise significant self-censorship.

The October 7 Hamas attack on Israel and ensuing Israel-Hamas conflict led to some antisemitic rhetoric. On October 13, Ahmed bin Talib bin Hameed, an imam at the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, praised the "martyrs" who sacrificed their lives for the sake of God and referred to their enemies as "the killers of prophets," an antisemitic phrase the religious establishment phased out in recent years under government pressure.

On June 2, Minister of Islamic Affairs al-Sheikh stated that preachers who deceived people through false or extremist ideologies and fatwas must personally and publicly renounce their previous comments. He added that renunciations of past ideas or fatwas must come in the same form as the original statements – publicly and “seriously.”

On August 18, in an interview with *Asharq al-Awsat* newspaper, Minister of Islamic Affairs al-Sheikh stated that the ministry was monitoring all mosques, including small ones, and dismissed a number of preachers due to their deviant ideology, but more than 95 percent of preachers fulfilled their duties.

The government continued to mandate that imams and muezzins of the two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina be “moderate,” and “tolerant,” and hold a degree from a Saudi sharia college.

On March 4, the MOIA again banned the live broadcast of prayers from mosques during Ramadan, according to state-run press agency SPA. The ministry banned the use of cameras at mosques to film imams and worshippers during prayers and prohibited the livestreaming of prayers via all kinds of media. MOIA spokesperson Abdullah al-Anzi said the ban aimed to avoid any wrong messages that might negatively affect Muslims and protect pulpits from exploitation.

Some travelers entering the country reported they were able to import bibles for personal use. There were no reports that the government confiscated personal, non-Islamic religious materials. Media reported the confiscation of sorcery-related items.

Customs officials reportedly routinely opened mail and shipments to search for contraband. Informants allegedly reported “seditious ideas,” “antigovernment activity,” or “behavior contrary to Islam” in their neighborhoods.

The government continued to enforce Islamic norms, such as prohibiting eating, drinking, or smoking in public during Ramadan. Government policy guidance instructed journalists in the country to uphold Islam, oppose atheism, promote Arab interests, and preserve cultural heritage.

The government continued to block certain websites as part of a broader policy of censoring “objectionable” content, such as views of religion it considered extremist or misinformed. The government shut down or blocked accounts on the X platform for “religious and ethical violations,” and authorities arrested an undisclosed number of social media users under the Cyber Crimes Law. The government also shut down websites it regarded as being used to recruit jihadis or inspire violence.

Mosques continued to be the only legally permissible public places of worship, although husseiniyas existed in areas inhabited by Shia residents. 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. The MOIA continued to use ministry inspectors, regional branch inspectors, field teams, citizen feedback, and the media to monitor and address any reported violations of the ministry’s instructions and regulations in mosques. MOIA oversight of mosques in less populated areas was not always as strict as in urban areas. The MOIA maintained a hotline for individuals to report statements by imams that observers considered objectionable. An MOIA mobile phone app called *Masajed* (“Mosques”) allowed mosque-goers to monitor sermons and rate their preacher on a number of aspects of their work.

The government financially supported approximately 70 percent of Sunni mosques, with the remaining 30 percent located in private residences or built and endowed by private persons. The construction of any new mosque required permission from 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 clerics. On August 18, Minister

of Islamic Affairs al-Sheikh said there were about 90,000 mosques in the country and this number was increasing daily.

The government did not finance the construction or maintenance of Shia mosques. Shia congregations self-funded construction, maintenance, and repairs. 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 endorse these mosques, according to some NGOs. Authorities prohibited Shia Muslims outside of the Eastern Province from building Shia-specific mosques. Two Shia mosques in Dammam licensed by the government served approximately 750,000 worshippers. Construction of Shia mosques required government approval, and authorities required Shia communities to receive permission from their neighbors to start construction on mosques. There were no licensed Shia mosques in Jeddah and Riyadh. Shia in those areas were obliged to hold prayers in private homes and community centers, where, some Shia said, they were subject to police harassment. Expatriate Shia residents in the country reported threats of arrest and deportation if they gathered privately in large groups to worship.

State security services continued to provide protection for many Shia mosques and gathering places in the Eastern Province. Media and other sources additionally 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.

The government continued a multiyear project, begun in 2007, to revise textbooks, curricula, and teaching methods with the stated aim of removing content disparaging religions other than Islam.

In its annual review of content in Saudi textbooks in June, the Israeli NGO IMPACT-se stated that “almost all examples portraying Christians and Jews in a negative manner” had been removed from the latest Saudi textbooks, building on trends seen in previous years. Prominent examples removed

included implications “that Jews and Christians are the enemies of Islam,” and “Jews and Christians are criticized for having ‘destroyed and distorted’ the Torah and Gospel,” according to the review. The report also found that negative portrayals of “infidels” and “polytheists” had been toned down; some problematic examples remained, however, for example in the approach to perceived heretical practices associated with Shia Muslims and Sufism. The trend of removing examples of violent jihad and martyrdom continued. During the year, almost all problematic previously identified issues were removed. The importance of peace and tolerance was further highlighted in textbooks, particularly in newly introduced textbooks.

On Israel and the Palestinians, IMPACT-se found moderation of language, but not yet full acceptance of Israel. In addition, certain references to “the Israeli enemy” or “the Zionist enemy” were replaced with “the Israeli occupation” or “the Israeli occupation army.” However, other negative references to Israel remained in all areas examined, and Israel continued to be omitted on maps. There continued to be no mention of the Holocaust. In the 2022-23 curriculum, a lesson on patriotic poetry removed an example of “opposing the Jewish settlement of Palestine.” A high school social studies textbook no longer contained a section describing the “positive results” of the First Intifada, the late 1980s Palestinian uprising against Israel. And one textbook “removed an entire chapter addressing the Palestinian cause.” The modifications “are an encouraging sign that progress [on eliminating problematic content] may include attitudes toward Israel and Zionism,” according to IMPACT-se.

Shia community members reported the government did not recognize certificates of educational attainment for employment credit for graduates of Shia religious training centers. They also reported and that the government did not apply the same standards to graduates of Sunni religious training institutions applying for government positions and religious jobs.

According to human rights groups, Shia Muslims were 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 were Sunni, although 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.

At the 2023 Riyadh International Book Fair, organized by the Ministry of Culture, a 16th century Torah scroll was displayed in a pavilion alongside other rare manuscripts. Items in the pavilion belong to the King Abdulaziz Complex for Endowment Libraries, the King Salman Library at King Saud University, and the King Fahad National Library.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

According to HRW, the government systematically discriminated against members of Muslim religious minorities, notably Shia, including in the justice system, education, and employment.

Members of the Shia community reported discrimination based on their religion and had difficulty securing or being promoted in government positions. They were significantly underrepresented in national security-related positions, including the Ministries of Defense and Interior and the National Guard. In predominantly Shia areas, Shia representation was higher in the ranks of traffic police and employees of municipalities and public schools. A small number of Shia occupied high-level positions in government-owned companies and government agencies. Shia were also underrepresented in employment in primary, secondary, and higher education.

In March, the *Mirat al-Jazeera* website reported that authorities demolished properties in al-Bahari village in the primarily-Shia Qatif governorate in order to widen a road that passes through the village. They undertook the demolition without compensating property owners. The website stated that 18 other neighborhoods in Qatif were completely or partially demolished.

The government explained that police were unable to patrol areas outside of the area that authorities described as a “criminal’s haven.”

While authorities indicated that they considered members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community to be Muslims, the group’s legal status remained unclear, and community members said the mainly foreign-resident Ahmadiyya Muslims hid their faith to avoid scrutiny, arrest, or deportation.

At year’s end, the 35-member cabinet contained no Shia ministers after the only Shia minister, Muhammad bin Faisal Abu Saq, was relieved of his position as Minister of State for Shura Affairs in January 2022. There were no Shia governors, deputy governors, ministry branch directors, or security commanders. Although Shura Council members’ religious affiliations are not publicly announced, there were an estimated seven or eight Shia on the 150-member council.

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 to which one could report violations of this policy.

There is no religious worker visa category, but non-Muslim clergy were able to enter the country to minister to their communities. Non-Muslim clergy also were able to bring religious items, including books, when traveling.

According to government policy, non-Muslims are generally not allowed to be buried in the country. There were, however, public non-Islamic cemeteries in Jeddah and Riyadh that, according to officials, are used in cases where repatriation was not possible, such as when there were no claimants for a body, the family did not accept the body, or the deceased received the death penalty. There were unconfirmed reports of a non-Islamic cemetery in Dhahran available only to Saudi Aramco employees. Diplomatic missions reported most non-Muslims opted to repatriate their deceased to their home countries whenever financially possible. On February 5, *Saudi Gazette* reported that the Ministry of Municipal and Rural

Affairs and Housing directed a number of its mayoralities to establish cemeteries for non-Muslims in their regions to accelerate the completion of the burial procedures.

On August 28, CPVPV President Abdulrahman al-Sanad launched an awareness campaign to protect Saudi youth against “misguided ideas.”

On May 26, Sheikh Saleh bin Humaid, a member of the CSS, delivered a Friday sermon at the Grand Mosque in Mecca calling on God to “destroy the usurping occupiers of al-Aqsa Mosque.” On September 8, bin Humaid delivered a Friday sermon at the Holy Mosque in Mecca denouncing atheism and disbelief, which he said are the results of ignorance of Islam.

On November 2, the General Secretariat of the CSS urged Muslims in the country to donate to a national aid campaign to provide relief to Palestinians in the Gaza Strip through King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center. On November 2, the MOIA instructed all imams to devote the Friday sermon to encourage worshippers to contribute to the campaign.

On November 3, the imam of Quba Mosque in Medina, Sulaiman al-Rahili, cautioned in a Friday sermon against “deviant calls” exploiting Muslim outrage over the Israel-Hamas conflict to foment breaking allegiance to and disobedience of the rulers.

Transnational Repression

NGOs and human rights groups alleged that the government’s disproportionate prosecution of the Shia minority extended beyond Saudi borders via transnational repression. They pointed to the case of Hassan al-Rabea, a Shia, who was deported from Morocco on February 6 at Saudi Arabia’s request despite repeated calls for his release from international human rights organizations. Moroccan authorities, acting on a request from the government, arrested al-Rabea in January at the Marrakesh airport on charges of collaborating with terrorists to flee his native country. Al-Rabea’s brother and cousins had already faced prosecution in Saudi Arabia for

protest activities the Saudi government equated to terrorism and that human rights groups linked to Shia persecution. Fearing that al-Rabea could be subjected to torture and mistreatment, 24 human rights organizations, including HRW and Amnesty International, sent the Moroccan Prime Minister a letter seeking an explanation for the extradition decision. Amnesty International stated that al-Rabea's extradition amounted to refoulement, the transfer of a person to a country where they would be at risk of persecution or other serious human rights abuse and noted that refoulement is prohibited under international law.

Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom

The discounting of testimony because of gender or religion was outlawed under the evidence law, which was approved in 2021 and came into effect on July 8. Previously, judges could discount the testimony of Muslims whom they deemed deficient in their knowledge of Islam and favored the testimony of Muslims over the testimony of non-Muslims. In certain circumstances, the court considered testimony of a woman equal to half that of a man.

In March, Archbishop of Vienna Cardinal Christoph Schoenborn visited Saudi Arabia upon an invitation from the Muslim World League (MWL) and met with senior officials, including MWL Secretary-General Mohammad bin Abdulkarim al-Issa, Minister of Islamic Affairs al-Sheikh and Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Waleed El Khereiji. According to press reports, Schoenborn discussed efforts to build bridges of cooperation and effective communication among leaders in confronting hatred and "extremist" ideas.

During the year, the government condemned incidents of burning and tearing of the Quran in some European countries, including Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden, adding that such acts provoke millions of Muslims across the world. In July, the MFA summoned the Swedish Ambassador, then the Swedish Chargé d'Affaires and Denmark's Chargé d'Affaires over burnings of the Quran and handed them a memo "demanding a halt to the

disgraceful acts that violate all religious teachings, laws and international norms,” according to the ministry’s statement.

In April and September, the MFA issued a statement condemning the storming of the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound by “a group of extremists under the protection of Israel occupation forces,” according to the Saudi Press Agency.

On May 23, according to local press reports, the secretary-general of the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, Zuhair Al-Harhi, visited the Vatican and met with Cardinal Ayuso Guixot, the president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and a member of center’s board of directors at the Vatican department. Al-Harhi also held talks with Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the prime minister of the Vatican State. On June 7, Al-Harhi met with Pope Francis and Vatican officials to promote interfaith dialogue.

On July 7, imam and preacher of the Grand Mosque in Mecca Sheikh Faissal Ghazzawi delivered a Friday sermon at the Grand Mosque in Mecca warning against the growing immoral tendencies in the society, especially sexual perversion, saying that homosexuality is a heinous crime. “This situation reached a level where the devilish forces poised to obliterate the innate nature and mislead people to introduce laws legitimizing marriage of a man with a man (gay marriage) and a woman with a woman (lesbian marriage), intermarriage with animals, incitement to sexual perversion and all kinds of pornography as they call it civilization while they take a hostile stance against those who disprove this and label them backward people and extremists,” he said.

On September 11, the country hosted an international meeting in Riyadh sponsored by UNESCO to explore ways to promote stakeholder dialogue on the protection of World Heritage properties, including UNESCO religious and sacred sites. Attendees included an Israeli delegation making the first publicly announced official Israeli visit to the country.

On October 2, Israel's Communication Minister Shlomo Karhi visited Riyadh for the Universal Postal Union Congress. The UAE-based newspaper *The National* cited Israeli news networks which reported that Karhi performed "Talmudic rituals and Sukkot prayers in Riyadh," with accompanying photos of him reading from a Torah scroll in his hotel.

On September 14, the *Arab News*, owned by a member of the royal family, published an article by former White House Middle East envoy Jason D. Greenblatt marking Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, entitled "Rosh Hashanah: No matter our religion, we all want peace." Greenblatt's article described how many GCC states have become more welcoming of Jews, Christians, and others into their countries.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Observers reported citizens discussed current events and religious issues on social media, but local residents said self-censorship was common, given the risk of government reprisals. While discussion of sensitive topics on social media was frequent, self-censorship on social media was believed to be widespread when discussing topics such as religion or the royal family. Online discussions included disparaging remarks about members of various religious groups or "sects." Terms like "rejectionists" (referring to Shia who view as illegitimate the first three caliphs that Sunni Muslims recognize as the Prophet Muhammad's legitimate successors) which Shia consider insulting, and images of donkeys, comparing them to Shia, were occasionally found in social media discourse.

On March 3, during a televised interview with the Rotana Khalijia television channel, former chief of the CPVPV branch in Mecca Province Ahmed al-Ghamdi said people are free to decide whether they adhere to Islam or become apostates, arguing that there is no verse in the Quran explicitly stating that the punishment for apostasy is death. However, a ruler may impose a punishment if apostasy causes negative consequences, like inciting

sedition or negatively affecting others, according to al-Ghamdi. On the other hand, Abdulrahman Abdulkarim from the Saudi Fiqh Association rebutted that the Quran prescribes the death penalty for apostates, and that there is a consensus among Islamic jurists on the subject.

On March 16, Saudi writer Ali al-Shuaibi published a post suggesting that restaurants open during the daytime in Ramadan for non-Muslims and people who can't fast for health reasons. In response, CSS member Abdulsalam al-Sulaiman said such a call disrespects Muslims and God's rituals, even though restaurants operate through food delivery apps throughout the month. In an online poll by Saudi Referendum (released on its account on the X platform), 60 percent of respondents opposed the suggestion to open restaurants in the daytime during Ramadan.

On March 19, Saudi preacher Ibrahim al-Mehimeed published a post on the X platform, issuing a fatwa to kill a Saudi dissident in the UK, according to the Secretary General of the opposition National Assembly Party, Abdullah al-Odah. In a November 28 post, during the ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas conflict, Mehimeed posted a picture of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, describing him as "the leader of the brotherhood of apes and pigs."

On March 20, the Arab News ran an editorial titled "Easter enjoyment in a time of tolerance" saying that holidays such as Christmas, Halloween, and Easter have seen a shift in public acceptance.

On April 7, in an interview aired on the official channel Saudia TV, former imam of Quba Mosque in Medina Saleh Al-Moghamsy expressed his wish to establish a new school of Islamic jurisprudence arguing that there was a dire need for such a school, saying that reexamination of the work of ancient scholars was inevitable. In response, the CSS General Secretariat issued a statement on April 10 rejecting this call and describing it as "unrealistic and lack[ing in] objectivity." The CSS statement added that Islamic jurisprudence, with its various recognized sects and legal interpretations, responds to all demands of modern life and balances between its needs and Islamic sharia.

On July 28, Alekbariya Television, the Saudi official news channel, broadcasted a report titled “Ashura a Deep National Image that Shows Harmony Between the Citizens and the Security.” The short report showed images of husseinyas, Ashura black banners, and interviewed Shi’a clerics.

In an article published in *al-Riyadh* Arabic daily on November 19, against the backdrop of the Israel-Hamas conflict, Lebanese-Saudi Shia cleric and the Secretary-General of the Arab Islamic Council Muhammad Ali Al-Husseini wrote that Islam champions peace and sanctifies human life, and has never been a religion of violence, bloodshed, or war. He explained that Islam permits fighting only in self-defense and in accordance with specific rules and under specific conditions, such as when Muslims are prepared, and when a ruler deems it necessary. He asserted that any jihad that does not meet these conditions is forbidden.

According to a survey done for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), 43 percent of Saudis agreed with the statement: “We should listen to those among us who are trying to interpret Islam in a more moderate, tolerant, and modern direction.” WINEP stated that this proportion is about double the figure recorded just six years ago and it has remained fairly stable over the past three years. However, 25 percent of those responding, “strongly disagreed” with the statement, while 30 percent of those surveyed said that they “somewhat disagreed.” WINEP said that the survey results were generally consistent across age groups.

Community members 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. The NGO Open Doors reported that women in particular feared loss of parental rights or being subjected to physical abuse as a result of converting from Islam.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Ambassador, as well as embassy and consulate officials, engaged Saudi leaders and officials at all levels on religious freedom and tolerance. Embassy officers raised religious freedom principles and individual cases with the HRC, the National Society for Human Rights, members of the Shura Council, the MFA, the MWL, the Ministry of Education, and other ministries and agencies during the year. Senior U.S. officials pressed the government to respect religious freedom, eliminate discriminatory enforcement of laws against members of religious minority groups, and promote respect and tolerance for minority religious practices and beliefs.

In meetings with government officials, senior embassy and consulate officials raised reports of abuses and restrictions of religious freedom, arbitrary arrests and detention, misuse of the country's counterterrorism law, and inadequate fair trial guarantees. They also discussed the importance of respect for the rights of members of minority and their religious practices.

Senior embassy and consulate officials continued to inquire about the legal status of detained or imprisoned individuals and discussed religious freedom concerns with members of religious minority communities, including Shia and citizens who no longer considered themselves Muslims, as well as with non-Muslim foreign residents. Embassy officials attended or sought access to a number of trials related to religious freedom. The embassy and Department of State officials also engaged Saudi officials regarding these detainees.

Embassy representatives also met with non-Islamic religious leaders and actors to discuss their ability to gather and practice their faith. Embassy officials engaged regularly with like-minded partners and with religious leaders and actors and participate in interfaith discussions and expressed support for the principles of tolerance and interfaith comity.

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. On December

29, the Secretary of State redesignated Saudi Arabia as a CPC and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompany designation pursuant to section 407 of the act as required in the important national interest of the United States.