

SAUDI ARABIA 2020 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 Mohammed). The legal system is based largely on sharia as interpreted by the Hanbali school of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence. Freedom of religion is not provided 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 criminalizes "the promotion of atheistic ideologies in any form," "any attempt to cast doubt on the fundamentals of Islam," publications that "contradict the provisions of Islamic law," and other acts including non-Islamic public worship, public display of non-Islamic religious symbols, conversion by a Muslim to another religion, and proselytizing by a non-Muslim. In practice, there is some limited tolerance of private, non-Islamic religious exercise, but religious practices at variance with the government-promoted form of Sunni Islam remained vulnerable to detention, harassment, and, for noncitizens, deportation. According to Shia community members, processions and gatherings continued due to decreased political tensions and greater coordination between the Shia community and authorities, and Ashura commemorations (of the martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed) were marked by improved sectarian relations and public calls for mutual tolerance. Shia activists stated, however, that authorities continued to target members of their community on a religious basis with security operations and legal proceedings. In July, Shia Rights Watch (SRW) reported that security forces raided the largely Shia town of Safwa, resulting in several arrests and one injury. In September and October, rights groups reported the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) in Riyadh issued verdicts in the trials of a number of clerics arrested in 2017, sentencing them to between three to 10 years in prison. In February, rights groups reported the Supreme Court upheld the death sentence against Shia activist Mustafa al-Khayat, who was convicted on charges including disrupting security and participating in demonstrations. On May 24, Sheikh Saleh bin Humaid, a royal advisor and a member of the Council of Senior Scholars (CSS), delivered an Eid al-Fitr sermon in the Holy Mosque in Mecca in which he prayed to God to "destroy the usurping occupying Zionist Jews." Government leaders, including the head of the government-sponsored Muslim World League, continued to advocate for interreligious tolerance and dialogue and to denounce religious extremism. In September, following the UAE and Bahrain's agreement to normalize ties with Israel, the government-appointed imam of the

Grand Mosque in Mecca said in a televised sermon that the Prophet Mohammed was good to his Jewish neighbors, and he urged listeners to avoid “passionate emotions.”

The Saudi-owned MBC television network aired a historical drama series during the prime Ramadan viewing season centered on a Jewish midwife living in an unnamed multireligious Persian Gulf community in the 1930s to 1950s. Observers praised the series for promoting a vision of a tolerant Middle East; one writer called it “daring” to explore the social history of Jewish presence in the Arab world. Journalist Wafa al-Rashid wrote two editorials in the daily *Okaz* urging authorities “to adapt religious perceptions to the spirit of the times and not be afraid of concepts such as secularism, the civil state, or the separation of religion and state.” She emphasized that separating religion from the state did not mean abolishing religion or fighting it, and that this notion in fact conformed to certain ideas in the Quran. Some social media platforms for discussion of current events and religious issues included disparaging remarks about members of various religious groups or “sects.” Terms such as “rejectionists,” which Shia considered insulting, were commonly found in social media discourse. Anti-Semitic comments appeared in the media.

In discussions with the Human Rights Commission (HRC), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Ministry of Islamic Affairs (MOIA), and other ministries and agencies, senior U.S. officials, including the Ambassador, continued to raise and discuss reports of abuses of religious freedom, arbitrary arrests and detentions, enforcement of laws against religious minorities, promotion of respect and tolerance for minority Muslim and non-Muslim religious practices and beliefs, the country’s counterterrorism law, and due process standards.

Since 2004, Saudi Arabia has been designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Most recently, on December 2, 2020, the Secretary of State redesignated Saudi Arabia as a CPC and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompany designation as required in the important national interest of the United States pursuant to section 407 of the Act.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the country’s total population at 34.2 million (midyear 2020 estimate). In 2019, the UN estimated that approximately 38.3

percent of the country's residents are foreigners. Between 85 and 90 percent of the approximately 21 million Saudi 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. Approximately 80 percent of Shia are "Twelvers" (Shia who recognize 12 imams) and are primarily located in the Eastern Province. The Nakhawala, or "Medina Shia," are also Twelvers and reside in small numbers in the western Hejaz region. Estimates place their numbers at approximately 1,000. Twelver Shia adhere to the Ja'afari school of jurisprudence. Most of the remaining Shia are Sulaimani Ismailis, also known as "Seveners" (those who branched off from the Twelvers to follow Isma'il ibn Ja'afar as the Seventh Imam). Seveners number approximately 500,000 and reside primarily in Najran Province, where they are believed to constitute a majority of the province's inhabitants. Another branch of Sevenser Shia, the Bohra Ismailis, reportedly number several hundred, most of South Asian origin. Pockets of Zaydis, members of another branch of Shia Islam, numbering in total approximately 20,000, reside primarily in the provinces of Jizan and Najran along the border with Yemen.

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 (sayings and teachings of the Prophet Mohammed) 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 recent years.

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

The judicial system is largely based on laws derived from the Quran and the Sunna. All judges are religiously trained, although they often also have specialized knowledge of nonreligious legal subjects. In several areas, including commercial and financial matters and criminal law related to electronic and cybercrimes or terrorism, jurisprudence increasingly is based on international models rather than religious texts. Law on religious matters, which often affects civil law, particularly on personal status issues, is developed by fatwas (official interpretations of religious law) issued by the 21-person CSS that reports to the King. By law, these 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.

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."

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 common law system and comprehensive 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.

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

The Basic Law requires the state to protect human rights in accordance with sharia. The HRC, a government entity, is tasked with protecting, enhancing, and ensuring implementation of international human rights standards “in light of the provisions of sharia,” and regularly follows up on citizen complaints. There are no formal requirements regarding the composition of the HRC. During the year, the commission had approximately 26 members from various parts of the country, including four Shia members.

Blasphemy against Islam is legally punishable by death, but 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 on the grounds of preserving social stability.

In April, the Supreme Court instructed all courts to end flogging as a *ta'zir* (discretionary) criminal sentence and to replace it with prison sentences or fines. As a result of this decision, 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. However, judicial officials noted 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 April, 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 or religious sites 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.

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

Clerics traveling abroad to proselytize must be granted approval by the MOIA and operate under MOIA supervision. 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 are not permitted to deviate from the official, government-approved religious curriculum. Private international schools are required to teach Saudi students and Muslim students of other nationalities an Islamic studies course, while non-Muslim, non-Saudi students sometimes receive a course on Islamic civilization or alternative coursework in place of the curriculum designed for Saudi students; courses entail one hour of instruction per week. Private international schools may also teach courses on other religions or civilizations.

The Commission 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. The CPVPV’s powers have been significantly curbed in recent years and its activities are now limited to providing counseling and reporting individuals suspected of violating the law to police. The CPVPV may not detain, arrest, pursue, or demand the identification documents of any person; these actions are explicitly reserved to the purview of law enforcement officials. 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 Mohammed.” CPVPV field officers do not wear uniforms, but they are required to wear identification badges.

A royal decree bans publishing anything “contradicting sharia, inciting disruption, serving foreign interests that contradict national interests, and damaging the reputation of the Grand Mufti, members of the Council of Senior Religious Scholars, or senior government officials.”

Social media users who post or share content considered to attack religion face imprisonment for up to five years under the Anticybercrime 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 of three million riyals (\$800,000).

The law does not allow for political parties or similar associations. The law does not protect the right of individuals to organize politically and specifically bans a number of organizations with political wings, including the Muslim Brotherhood, as regional and local terrorist groups.

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

Government Practices

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and Shia activists said authorities committed a range of abuses against members of Shia communities. While NGOs and Shia activists stated that the prosecution of Shia was often based on religious affiliation, observers said that members of other religious groups faced arrest and trial for similar offenses.

In February, online activists reported that the Supreme Court upheld a death sentence against Shia activist Mustafa al-Khayat. The court convicted al-Khayat on charges including participating in demonstrations, disrupting security, and carrying weapons, according to the Berlin-based European Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR).

On June 8, ESOHR reported that on January 24, 2019, the Public Prosecutor’s Office sought the hudood penalty for *hirabah* (unlawful warfare or insurgency) against Shia Jalal Hassan Labbad on a variety of charges, including participating in protests, some of which dated to when he was a minor. ESOHR also stated that authorities tortured Labbad during his imprisonment.

In July, SRW stated that security forces raided the predominately Shia town of Safwa, resulting in several arrests and one individual being shot and injured.

As many as 53 individuals, most believed to be Shia, faced the possibility of execution, according to an October report by ESOHR. The trials of 25 individuals, most of them Shia, on charges carrying potential death sentences were ongoing at year's end, and one of those convicted was awaiting a Supreme Court ruling. International human rights NGOs stated 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 noted that the underlying charges were inconsistent with international principles of freedom of assembly, expression, and association.

On October 29, ESOHR reported the SCC held a new hearing in the trial of eight Shia detainees, including five minors (Ahmed Abdul Wahid al-Faraj, Ali Mohammed al Bati, Mohammed Hussein al Nimr, Ali Hassan al-Faraj, and Mohammed Issam al-Faraj). Human Rights Watch reported that prosecutors were seeking the death penalty for the eight men under hudood, which would leave them ineligible for pardons if sentenced to death. They faced charges that included "seeking to destabilize the social fabric by participating in protests and funeral processions," and "chanting slogans hostile to the regime." ESOHR reported that a total of 13 Shia youth who were arrested for crimes committed as minors faced possible execution, including Ali al-Nimr (nephew of Nimr al-Nimr, a Shia cleric executed by the government in 2016), Dawood al-Marhoon, and Abdullah al-Zaher.

On August 26, the HRC said in a statement that the Public Prosecutor's Office ordered a review of the death sentences of al-Nimr, al-Zaher, and al-Marhoon as part of the implementation of a royal decree announced in April abolishing ta'zir death sentences for crimes committed as minors. The HRC stated that under the decree, the three will be resentenced based on the Juvenile Law, which provides for a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison.

The Washington Post reported that authorities refused to return the bodies of at least 33 Shia Muslims executed in April 2019, ignoring repeated pleas from the families. ESOHR stated this refusal was "part of a cycle of persecution" against Shia and reported that from 2016 through the end of 2019, the bodies of at least 84 Shia men executed or killed in Saudi security raids were not returned for burial.

NGOs that track arrests and convictions of Shia Muslims stated that more than 300 persons arrested since 2011 in connection with at times violent public protests for

Shia rights remained detained in prisons throughout the Eastern Province. Most were held on charges involving nonviolent offenses, including participating in or publicizing protests on social media, inciting unrest in the country, and insulting the King. Other individuals linked to the protests remained barred from international travel.

Shia inmates were in some cases held in separate wings of prisons and reportedly faced worse conditions than Sunnis.

The SCC continued trials against Thumar al-Marzouqi, Mohammed al-Sadiq, and Bader al-Ibrahim, who had written about discrimination faced by Shia in the country. On April 24, authorities arrested Shia activist Atef Abdulwahid al-Ghanem for protesting “discriminatory and racist policies” in Qatif, in the Eastern Province, according to the *Mirat al-Jazeera* news website.

On August 25, ESOHR reported that the Public Prosecutor’s Office no longer sought the death penalty for female Shia activist Israa al-Ghomgham, detained in 2015 after participating in antigovernment protests, but that the Public Prosecutor’s Office was still pursuing the death penalty for her codefendants, including her husband Moussa al-Hashim. At year’s end, she was on trial at the SCC along with five other Shia individuals.

On September 4, the Twitter account Prisoners of Conscience, which monitors and documents arrests in human rights cases in the country, reported that in August, security forces arrested Quran reciter Sheikh Abdullah Basfar, an associate professor of sharia and Islamic studies at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah. It added that authorities also arrested the former head of the Faculty of Sharia at Imam Mohammed ibn Saud Islamic University, Dr. Saud al-Fanisan, in March. There was no further information on the charges; observers noted that persons of any religious affiliation who expressed views not supported by the government did so at personal risk, and when clerics were arrested, it was often for expressing views that are counter to government policy.

In February, Prisoners of Conscience reported that the SCC in Riyadh upheld an eight-year prison sentence and travel ban against Murtaja Qureiris, a 20-year-old Shia whom authorities had arrested as a juvenile after he participated in protests when he was between the ages of 10 and 13. The SCC issued its verdict following a 2019 decision that had reversed the death sentence initially imposed on Qureiris. On May 11, seven UN special rapporteurs sent a letter to the government regarding Shia cleric Sheikh Mohammed Hassan al-Habib and Murtaja Qureiris expressing

concern at the use of torture and mistreatment to extract confessions and possible incriminating evidence.

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.

Raif Badawi remained in prison based on his 2013 conviction for violating Islamic values, violating sharia, committing blasphemy, and mocking religious symbols. On April 30, Badawi’s wife said authorities referred Badawi’s case to court after he staged a hunger strike to protest poor treatment and because he did not feel safe in prison after he was attacked by a fellow inmate. Badawi had originally been sentenced to seven years in prison and 600 lashes in 2013, but a court increased his sentence on appeal to a 10-year prison term and 1,000 lashes. Badawi received 50 lashes in 2015; the government has not carried out the remaining 950 lashes. The impact on Badawi’s case of the April Supreme Court directive ending flogging and replacing it with prison sentences or fines remained unclear at year’s end.

According to media reports, authorities arrested Ahmad al-Shammari and sentenced him to death for apostasy in 2017 after he posted videos to social media in which he renounced Islam and the Prophet Mohammed. He was believed to be incarcerated as of year’s end. It was unknown whether any appeals in his case remained pending.

In September, local media reported authorities arrested an Arab expatriate of unspecified nationality for sorcery. A court in Jeddah sentenced an African businessman to six years in prison and deportation after serving his sentence on charges of fraud, impersonating a diplomat, and sorcery.

On March 21, Prisoners of Conscience reported the arrest of Islamic scholar Abdullah al-Saad after he posted a video online denouncing the government decision to suspend all prayers at mosques to limit the spread of COVID-19. Prisoners of Conscience reported in April that authorities released al-Saad 10 days after his arrest. On March 27, the Public Prosecutor’s Office ordered the arrest of four individuals for claiming the spread of novel coronavirus was a “punishment from God.” The Public Prosecutor’s Office said in a statement that it ordered the arrest of another three individuals who “exploited social media to interpret God’s will amid the coronavirus.”

On July 12, the Saudi Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) issued a statement announcing the suspension of the children’s television show *Green Wish* after the host asked members of the audience to pin their wishes on a wishing tree and hope they would come true, which many viewers said was “a call for polytheism.” In the statement, the SBC affirmed the adherence of its programs to “tolerant” Islam.

On March 21, local media reported that Mecca police arrested a Saudi man and two female Yemeni residents in Jeddah for “mocking Islamic religious rituals” after the man appeared in a photo kneeling down before one of the women as a sign of worship in front of a mosque in Jeddah.

On April 30, local media reported that Riyadh police arrested a man for posting a Snapchat video “mocking prayers.”

During the year, the SCC held at least three hearings in the case of cleric Hassan Farhan al-Maliki, described by Human Rights Watch as a religious reformer, in detention since September 2017. Following a December 25 hearing, his son tweeted that the public prosecutor sought the death penalty for al-Maliki on 14 charges, including calling into question the fundamentals of Islam by casting doubt on prophetic Sunna and hadith (the record of the traditions or sayings of the Prophet Mohammed). According to Human Rights Watch, 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.

The SCC, which specializes in terrorism and national security cases, continued 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 Muslim scholars Salman al-Odah, Awad al-Qarni, and Ali al-Omari, who were arrested in 2017. According to Saudi and international rights groups, the public prosecutor sought the death penalty against them. Most of the 37 charges against al-Odah concerned alleged ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Qatari government as well as his public support for imprisoned dissidents. Al-Odah’s son stated in a December press article that his father’s physical and mental condition had declined during three years of solitary confinement and that he had partially lost his sight and hearing due to medical negligence. Beginning in mid-May through mid-September, activists said authorities denied al-Odah access to family telephone calls.

Prisoners of Conscience stated a number of clerics were detained, charged, or sentenced for offenses related to their religious opinions, although the charges were not specified. In September, Prisoners of Conscience said the SCC issued verdicts in the trials of a number of clerics and religious leaders arrested in 2017 and charged for offenses related to free expression and their religious views, including Dr. Ibrahim al-Harthi, Abdullah al-Maliki, Khalid al-Ajeemi, Ahmed al-Suwayan, Dr. Yousef Ahmad al-Qasem, Sheikh Ghorom al-Bishi, Rabea Hafez, Fahad al-Sunaidi, and Dr. Ibrahim al-Faris. According to Prisoners of Conscience, the SCC sentenced them to between three and 10 years in prison.

On October 9, Prisoners of Conscience said the SCC sentenced cleric Naif al-Sahafi to 10 years in prison. Authorities arrested al-Sahafi in a wide-ranging crackdown on Shia clerics in 2017.

On October 14, Prisoners of Conscience reported that the SCC sentenced cleric Ali Badahdah, detained since 2017, to six years in prison. On October 15, Prisoners of Conscience said the SCC sentenced Habib bin Mualla, in detention since 2017, to three-and-a-half years in prison. Mualla previously served as an advisor at the Ministry of Islamic Affairs.

On October 12, Prisoners of Conscience said authorities suspended clerics Khaled al-Mushaiqeh and Abdulrahman al-Aqel from preaching and giving religious lectures.

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

The government continued to prohibit the public practice of any non-Islamic 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 MOIA maintained active oversight of the country's religious establishment and provided guidance to Sunni imams on the substance of Friday sermons. It restricted the inclusion of content in those sermons considered sectarian, political, or extremist, promoting hatred or racism, or including commentary on foreign policy. According to local observers, Shia clerics did not receive guidance on their sermons from MOIA and did not submit them for preapproval. However, Shia clerics continued to exercise significant self-censorship in light of the government's well-known views on the scope and substance of acceptable preaching.

Mosques continued to be the only legally permissible public places of worship, although *housseiniyas* (prayer halls) were found 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. In 2018, the MOIA created 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.

There were media reports that some Sunni clerics who received government stipends used anti-Semitic and religiously intolerant language in their sermons. 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. On May 26, Minister of Islamic Affairs Abdullatif al-Sheikh announced Sunni imams were required to select their sermons from among those published on the MOIA portal. Unlicensed imams, however, continued to express discriminatory or intolerant views in internet postings or unsanctioned sermons in areas without government monitoring.

According to a report in the newspaper *al-Watan*, the government fired 100 imams and preachers for failing to condemn the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, as instructed by MOIA.

On February 27, in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, authorities suspended the Umrah for pilgrims traveling from outside the country and did the same on March

4 for citizens and residents of the country. The MOIA announced that on March 17, it was suspending daily prayers and weekly Friday prayers at all mosques in the country, except for the two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina. The government also closed Shia husseiniyas, allowing them to reopen in late-July to be used for August Ashura commemorations. On March 20, the Grand Presidency of the Two Holy Mosques announced that it would stop worshippers from entering the two Holy Mosques. Prayers resumed at mosques outside Mecca on May 31 and resumed in Mecca on June 21.

On June 22, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah announced that the 2020 Hajj would be limited to approximately 1,000 pilgrims, all living in-country, approximately 700 of whom would be noncitizens representing 160 nationalities. On September 23, the government announced that it would start allowing pilgrims to perform Umrah in gradual stages beginning on October 1. On October 18, the government allowed citizens and noncitizen residents to pray in Mecca's Grand Mosque.

The government continued to mandate that imams and muezzins of the two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina be "moderate" and "tolerant," among other requirements, including holding a degree from a Saudi sharia college.

Authorities continued to permit public commemorations of Ashura and other Shia holidays in Qatif, home to the country's largest Shia population, a practice begun in 2016. According to community members, processions and gatherings continued due to decreased political tensions and greater coordination between the Shia community and authorities; such events were also scaled down during the year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They stated that the Shia Ashura commemoration was marked by improved sectarian relations and publicity for mutual tolerance. In one instance, a photograph of a Sunni police officer aiding an elderly Shia follower was shared across social media platforms, drawing praise for the message of tolerance it depicted. In Qatif, authorities eased restrictions imposed after civil unrest in 2011-2012 and took steps to encourage development and tourism to improve conditions for the town's predominantly Shia residents.

On October 6, according to SRW, authorities arrested two orators, Muhammad Bou Jabara and Ali Khulayya, for their participation in Arbreen ceremonies (the Shia mourning observance occurring 40 days after the Day of Ashura).

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

community members reported that Shia pilgrims were permitted to celebrate Eid al-Ghadir, a Shia-specific holiday, after the Hajj.

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. In smaller Shia villages, community members stated it was common for Shia businesses to close for three prayer times (not five times, per Sunni practice) or in some instances not to close at all. Residents in Sunni and Shia communities noted that although businesses historically were required to close after the call to prayer, there appeared to be a gradual but growing tendency for businesses to remain open during prayer times.

According to the NGO SRW, on April 17, authorities bulldozed Shia graves in Awamiya, Qatif, damaging historical structures and monuments. SRW also reported that on May 14, military forces raided the neighborhood of Umm al-Jazm in Qatif, to prevent use of the Shia variant of the call to prayer. According to SRW, raids by government forces occurred in Shia-dominant neighborhoods in October, July, February, and January.

The al-Awamiyah mosque of former Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr was demolished by authorities in December.

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 Ahmadi Muslims hid their faith to avoid scrutiny, arrest, or deportation.

In January, Muslim World League (MWL) secretary-general Mohammed al-Issa announced that Saudi Arabia will stop funding mosques in foreign countries. According to the Swiss newspaper *Le Matin Dimanche*, the country planned to establish local administrative councils for each of these mosques in cooperation with the local authorities, in order to transfer these mosques to "secure hands."

Observers stated that judges sometimes discounted 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. Under their interpretation of sharia and the Quran, judges may place the value of a woman's

testimony at half that of a man's in certain cases, such as financial disputes or criminal charges.

The government continued to enforce Islamic norms, such as prohibiting eating, drinking, or smoking in public during Ramadan. On October 13, local media reported that the CPVPV in Khobar Governorate intensified its field presence with foot and vehicle patrols in markets, malls, and streets to implement the programs and events of the "Prayer is Light" campaign, which aimed to highlight the importance of prayer. According to media reports, the government prohibited parents from giving their children any of 50 listed names deemed blasphemous, non-Arabic, or non-Islamic.

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 MFA.

According to government policy, non-Muslims generally were prohibited from being buried in the country. There were, however, public non-Islamic cemeteries in Jeddah and Riyadh that, according to officials, were 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 also was a private, non-Islamic cemetery in Dhahran only available to Saudi Aramco employees. Diplomatic missions reported most non-Muslims opted to repatriate their deceased to their home countries whenever financially possible.

The government continued a multi-year project, begun in 2007, to revise textbooks, curricula, and teaching methods with the stated aim of removing content disparaging religions other than Islam. According to a February report by the Israeli NGO Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se), Saudi curricula for the years 2016-2019 taught students that non-Muslims – including Christians and Jews – were infidels and described them as enemies of Islam. Christians were referred to derogatorily as "polytheists." In addition, textbooks also taught students to consider Jews "monkeys" and "assassins" and "eternally treacherous, murdering prophets, committing irreparable evil, and determined to harm Muslim holy places." In a separate study published in December on a review of textbooks used in the 2020-2021 school year, IMPACT-se found a notable reduction in anti-Semitic content. In a statement about the report, the NGO said, "While the latest...report did not find that new tolerant material had been injected into the curriculum, it did find

that a substantial amount of offensive material had been removed.” IMPACT-se’s CEO said, “The Saudi authorities have begun a process of rooting out anti-Jewish hate.”

On February 19, Minister of Education Hamad bin Mohammed al-Sheikh dismissed Dr. Jamil bin Abdulmohsin al-Khalaf, dean of the Sharia Faculty at Imam Mohammed Bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh, after he reportedly invited “people with deviant ideology” to a faculty event. In a statement, the university said the decision was intended to “purify” its campus of intellectual impurities that could harm national security or contradict moderate Islam.

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

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

The 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 Twitter accounts for “religious and ethical violations,” and authorities arrested an undisclosed number of social media users under the cybercrimes law. The government also shut down websites it regarded as being used to recruit jihadis or inspire violence. In 2017, authorities announced they unblocked the calling features of certain applications, including FaceTime and Facebook Messenger. However, some users continued to report that the calling features of WhatsApp and Skype remained blocked.

Members of the Shia community complained of discrimination based on their religion when seeking government employment. Representation of Shia Muslims in senior government positions continued to be well below their proportion of the population. They were significantly underrepresented in national security-related positions, including in 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 very 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. According to HRW, the government

systematically discriminated against Muslim religious minorities, notably Twelver Shia and Ismailis, including in the justice system, education, and employment.

The 35-member cabinet contained one Shia minister, Mohammed bin Faisal Abu Saq, who has held the position of Minister of State for Shura Affairs since 2014. 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. A small number of Shia Muslims occupied high-level positions in government-owned companies and government agencies. Multiple municipal councils in the Eastern Province, where most Shia Saudis reside, had large proportions of Shia Saudis as members to reflect the local population, including a majority in Qatif and 50 percent in al-Ahsa.

Shia stated the government did not recognize certificates of educational attainment for graduates of some Shia religious training centers for employment credit 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.

Multiple municipal councils in the Eastern Province had significant proportions of Shia members, including in the two major Shia population centers of Qatif and al-Ahsa, where five of the 12 government-appointed municipal council members were Shia, and Shia Muslims held 16 of the 30 elected seats on the municipal councils. 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.

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 officially endorse these mosques, according to some NGOs. Authorities prohibited Shia Muslims outside of the Eastern Province from building Shia-specific mosques. Construction of Shia mosques required government approval, and Shia communities were required to receive permission from their neighbors to start construction on mosques. Two Shia mosques in Dammam licensed by the government served approximately 750,000 worshippers. There were no licensed Shia mosques in major urban centers, such as Jeddah and Riyadh. Shia in those areas had to hold prayers in private homes and community centers, where some Shia said they were subject to police harassment. Expatriate Shia reported threats of arrest and deportation if they gathered privately in large groups to worship.

Following ISIS attacks against Shia mosques and gathering places in 2015, security services continued to provide protection for many Shia mosques and gathering places in the Eastern Province. 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.

Reports from Shia groups cited discrimination in the judicial system as the catalyst for lengthy prison sentences handed down to Shia Muslims for engaging in political expression or organizing peaceful demonstrations. 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 sources reported Sunni judges sometimes completely disregarded or refused to hear testimony by Shia Muslims.

On April 16, Minister of Islamic Affairs al-Sheikh said the MOIA would refer to the Public Prosecutor's Office a number of women preachers who delivered religious sermons and lectures without prior permits from the MOIA, which constituted a violation of the law.

The government required noncitizen legal residents to carry an identity card containing a religious designation of "Muslim" or "non-Muslim." Some residency

cards, including some issued during the year, indicated other religious designations, such as “Christian.”

The government’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 should report violations of this policy.

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

The government did not officially permit most non-Muslim clergy to enter the country for the purpose of conducting religious services. Entry restrictions made it difficult for non-Muslims to maintain in-person contact with clergy not resident in the country, according to non-Muslim religious groups in neighboring countries.

On January 23, MWL secretary general al-Issa led a delegation of Muslim leaders to visit the Auschwitz death camp to mark the 75th anniversary of its liberation. The visit was part of a joint enterprise between the MWL and the American Jewish Committee. In a June 9 online ceremony, the Combat Anti-Semitism Movement and the American Sephardi Federation presented al-Issa with their inaugural Combat Anti-Semitism Award. On February 20, King Salman received a delegation from the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue that included Israeli Rabbi David Rosen, who became the first Israeli rabbi to meet with a Saudi king in recent history.

In February, a delegation of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations visited the country and met with senior government officials and MWL secretary-general al-Issa to discuss countering violent extremism in the Middle East. This was believed to be the first official visit to the kingdom by an American Jewish organization since 1993, when the American Jewish Congress sent a delegation to Saudi Arabia to endorse the Oslo agreements.

On June 14, MWL Secretary-General al-Issa said that Jews and Muslims working together could defeat “anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, or any other form of prejudice.” In a speech delivered at the American Jewish Committee Virtual Global Forum 2020 and posted to YouTube, he said the MWL was proud to “stand shoulder-to-shoulder with our Jewish brothers and sisters to build understanding, respect, love, and interreligious harmony.”

In August 22 remarks to an online media forum, al-Issa stressed the need for promoting coexistence among different faiths and cultures, and he called for confronting perpetrators of the ideology of hatred and racism to achieve lasting global peace.

On September 4, shortly after the UAE and Bahrain agreed to normalize ties with Israel, the imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Abdulrahman al-Sudais, said in a televised sermon that Muslims should avoid “passionate emotions and fiery enthusiasm” toward Jews, and he emphasized that the Prophet Mohammed was good to his Jewish neighbors and the best way to persuade Jews to convert to Islam was to “treat them well.”

On October 13, the country hosted a virtual global interfaith forum as part of its presidency of the Group of 20, with participation from Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Baha’i, and Christian leaders, among other religious representatives. The online forum was accessible to Saudis and international participants.

Instances of anti-Semitic statements by public officials continued. On May 24, Sheikh Saleh bin Humaid, a royal advisor and a CSS member, delivered an Eid al-Fitr sermon in the Holy Mosque in Mecca in which he prayed to God to “destroy the usurping occupying Zionist Jews.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In February, cleric and former director of the CPVPV in Mecca Ahmed al-Ghamdi said during a media interview that secularism was not tantamount to atheism and that it did not force people to renounce their religion or deny them the right to religious exercise.

In April and May, during the prime viewing month of Ramadan, the Saudi-owned, Dubai-based MBC network aired *Umm Haroun*, a historical drama series centered on the life of a Jewish midwife in an unnamed, multireligious Persian Gulf community. *The New York Times* stated, “Fans laud the program, set in the 1940s and 1950s, for highlighting an often-overlooked aspect of the region’s past – Jewish communities in the Persian Gulf – while providing a much-needed example of coexistence among different faiths.” Observers praised the series for promoting a vision of a tolerant Middle East; one writer called it “daring” to explore the social history of Jewish presence in the Arab world.

Journalist Wafa al-Rashid wrote two editorials in the daily *Okaz* urging authorities “to adapt religious perceptions to the spirit of the times and not be afraid of concepts such as secularism, the civil state, or the separation of religion and state.” She emphasized that separating religion from the state did not mean abolishing religion or fighting it, and that this notion in fact conformed to certain ideas in the Quran. She called for embracing change, religious enlightenment, and the application of reason in religious interpretation to bring the younger generation closer to Islam.

Social media provided an outlet for citizens to discuss current events and religious issues, but self-censorship was common, given the risk of official reprisals. While discussion of sensitive topics on social media was frequent, self-censorship on social media remained prevalent 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” (of the first three caliphs that Sunni Muslims recognize as the Prophet Mohammed’s legitimate successors), which Shia consider insulting, were common in public discourse. In September, cleric Nasser Saleh al-Muazaini referred to Shia as “rejectionists” in a tweet under the hashtag “rejectionists’ creed.”

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 Ambassador and embassy and consulate officials engaged Saudi leaders and officials at all levels on religious freedom and tolerance issues. The Ambassador and embassy officers raised religious freedom principles and cases with the HRC, the National Society for Human Rights, members of the Shura Council, the National Committee for Interreligious and Multicultural Dialogue, the MFA, the MOIA, the MWL, 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 religious minorities, and promote respect and tolerance for minority religious practices and beliefs.

Senior embassy and consulate officials raised reports of abuses and restrictions of religious freedom, arbitrary arrests and detention, the country’s counterterrorism

law, and due process standards. They also discussed the importance of respect for the rights of minorities and their religious practices. Embassy representatives also met with non-Islamic religious leaders to discuss their ability to gather and practice their faith.

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.

Since 2004, Saudi Arabia has been designated as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Most recently, on December 2, 2020, 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.