

SAUDI ARABIA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

Sunni Islam is the official religion, and the country's constitution is the Quran and the Sunna, or traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. The legal system is based on the Hanbali School of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence, and freedom of religion is not addressed in the law. The law criminalizes "calling for atheist thought," "calling into question the Islamic religion," and "sowing discord in society." One citizen was publicly lashed 50 times in accordance with a sentence based on his 2013 conviction for violating Islamic values, violating sharia, committing blasphemy, and mocking religious symbols on the internet. The government imprisoned individuals accused of apostasy and blasphemy, violating Islamic values, insulting Islam, black magic, sorcery, and "immoral activity." The government sentenced at least two individuals to death for apostasy and blasphemy, and both sentences were pending appeal at year's end. Citing rules on activities such as gender mixing, noise disturbances, and immigration violations, the government harassed, detained, arrested, and occasionally deported some foreign residents who participated in private non-Islamic religious activities. Instances of prejudice and discrimination against Shia Muslims continued to occur with respect to access to public services and equitable representation in government, educational and public-sector employment opportunities, and judicial matters. Shia clerics and activists who advocated for equal treatment of Shia Muslims were arrested, and at least one Shia cleric awaited execution after being convicted on charges of "violent opposition" to the government. The government continued to censor or block media content it deemed objectionable, and employed religious police to enforce public morality. The government did not recognize the freedom to practice publicly any non-Muslim religions. The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) continued to receive criticism in both traditional and social media for aggressive policing. The government did not complete its project with the stated aim of removing content disparaging religions other than Islam from textbooks, although it continued to phase in a newly revised curriculum.

Local affiliates of Da'esh (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) claimed to have conducted at least five attacks against Shia targets in the country during the year. The government condemned and investigated the attacks, and increased security at Shia places of worship.

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Instances of societal prejudice and discrimination against Shia Muslims continued regarding private-sector employment. Social media provided an outlet to discuss current events and religious issues, which sometimes included making disparaging remarks about members of religious groups. Editorial cartoons exhibited anti-Semitism characterized by the use of stereotypical images of Jews along with Jewish symbols, particularly at times of heightened political tension with Israel.

Embassy and consulate officials at all levels continued to press the government to respect religious freedom, eliminate discriminatory enforcement of laws against religious minorities, and promote respect and tolerance for minority Muslim and non-Muslim religious practices and beliefs. During the year, the Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to raise and discuss violations of religious freedom, and queried the legal status of those detained with officials from a variety of government entities. Embassy and consulate officials continued to discuss religious freedom concerns such as religious assembly and importation of religious materials with members of religious minorities, including Shia Muslims and citizens who no longer considered themselves Muslims, as well as with non-Muslim foreign residents.

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 February 29, 2016, 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 27.7 million (July 2015 estimate), including more than eight million foreign residents. Approximately 85 to 90 percent of the approximately 20 million citizens are Sunni Muslims who predominantly adhere to the Hanbali School of Islamic jurisprudence.

Shia Muslims constitute 10 to 15 percent of the citizen population. Approximately 80 percent of Shia are “Twelvers” (followers of Muhammad ibn Hasan al-Mahdi, whom they recognize as the Twelfth Imam) and are primarily located in the Eastern Province. Nakhawala, or “Medina Shia,” are also Twelvers and reside in small numbers in the western Hejaz region. Estimates place their numbers at

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approximately 1,000. Twelver Shia adhere to the Jafari 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 Jafar as the Seventh Imam). Seveners number approximately 700,000 and reside primarily in Najran Province, where they represent the majority of the province’s inhabitants. Another branch of Sevenser Shia, the Bohra Ismailis, number approximately 1,000, the majority of whom are South Asian expatriates who reside in the western Hejaz region. Pockets of Zaydis, another offshoot of Shia Islam, number approximately 20,000 and reside primarily in the provinces of Jizan and Najran along the border with Yemen.

UN data indicate foreigners constitute more than 30 percent of the total population. Similarly, foreign embassies indicate the foreign population in the country, including many undocumented migrants, may exceed 10 million, most of whom are Muslim. According to the Pew Research Center, this population includes approximately 1.2 million Christians (including Eastern Orthodox, Protestants, and Roman Catholics); 310,000 Hindus; 180,000 religiously unaffiliated (including atheists, agnostics, and people who did not identify with any particular religion); 90,000 Buddhists; 70,000 followers of folk religions; and 70,000 followers of other religions.

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 in which Islam is the official religion. The Basic Law stresses sharia as the “foundation of the Kingdom” and states that the “country’s constitution is the Quran and the Sunna.” The Basic Law contains no legal recognition or protection of religious freedom, and does not address the concept of inviolability of conscience other than for Islam. Conversion from Islam to another religion is grounds for charges of apostasy, a crime which is legally punishable by death, although Saudi courts have not carried out a death sentence for apostasy in recent years.

Blasphemy against Sunni Islam is a crime that may also legally be punished by death, but in practice courts have not sentenced individuals to death for blasphemy in recent decades. Common penalties for blasphemy are lengthy prison sentences and lashings, often after detentions without trial, or so-called “protective custody.”

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Criticism of Islam, including expression deemed offensive to Muslims, is forbidden on the grounds of preserving social stability.

The country's counterterrorism law criminalizes "calling for atheist thought in any form, or calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion." The law also prohibits "attending conferences, seminars, or meetings inside or outside [the country] targeting the security of society, or sowing discord in society," and "inciting or making countries, committees, or international organizations antagonistic to the Kingdom." The right to access legal representation for those accused of violating the counterterrorism law is limited to an unspecified period before the matter goes to court with the timeframe determined by the investigative entity. There is no right to access government-held evidence.

All citizens are required to be Muslim. 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 obtain a certificate documenting their religious affiliation endorsed by a Muslim religious authority. Children born to Muslim fathers are deemed Muslim by law.

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. Non-Muslim students in private international schools are required to study "Islamic civilization" in place of the curriculum designed for Muslim students.

The CPVPV, sometimes referred to as the "religious police," is a semi-autonomous government agency with authority to monitor social behavior and enforce "morality" consistent with the government's policy and in coordination with law enforcement authorities. CPVPV field officers do not wear uniforms but are required to wear identification badges and legally can only act in their official capacity when accompanied by regular police. The CPVPV reports to the king through the Council of Ministers, and the Ministry of Interior (MOI) oversees its operations on the king's behalf.

The purview of the CPVPV includes combatting public socializing and private contact between unrelated men and women (gender mixing); practicing or displaying emblems of non-Muslim faiths or failing to respect Islam; "immodest"

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dress, especially for women; displaying or selling media contrary to Islam, including pornography; producing, distributing, or consuming alcohol; venerating places or celebrating events inconsistent with approved Islamic practices; practicing “sorcery” or “black magic;” and committing or facilitating acts that are considered lewd or morally degenerate, including adultery, homosexuality, and gambling.

The judicial system is based on laws derived from the Quran and the Sunna, and on fatwas (legal opinions or interpretations) of the 20-person Council of Senior Religious Scholars (*ulema*) that reports to the king. The Basic Law states governance is based on justice, *shura* (consultation), and equality according to sharia and further identifies the Quran and the Sunna as the sources for fatwas. The law specifies hierarchical organization for the composition of the Council of the Senior Ulema, the Research Administration, and the Office of the Mufti, together with their functions. The Basic Law recognizes the council, supported by the Board of Research and Religious Rulings, as the supreme authority on religious matters. The council is headed by the grand mufti and is composed of Sunni religious scholars and jurists, most of whom are from the Hanbali School of jurisprudence, with one representative of each of the other Sunni Schools (Maliki, Hanafi, and Shafi’i). There are no Shia members. Scholars are chosen at the king’s discretion and serve renewable four-year terms, with most members serving for life.

Decisions in Islamic law are not bound by precedent, and rulings can diverge widely. Appeals are made to the appellate and supreme courts, provided higher courts agree to hear the case. Government universities provide training in all four Sunni Schools of jurisprudence, with a focus on the Hanbali School; consequently, most Islamic law judges follow the Hanbali system. The calculation of accidental death or injury compensation 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, the plaintiff is entitled to receive only 50 percent of the compensation a Muslim male would receive; all other non-Muslims are entitled to receive only one-sixteenth the amount a male Muslim would receive. Judges have been observed to discount the testimony of Muslims whom they deemed deficient in their knowledge of Islam, and to favor the testimony of Muslims over the testimony of non-Muslims. Under the government’s interpretation of the Quran, courts place the value of a woman’s testimony in capital cases as half that of a man’s.

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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 regularly follows up on citizen complaints. Although there are no formal requirements regarding the composition of the HRC, during the year the commission had approximately 28 members from various parts of the kingdom, including two Shia.

Government Practices

The government imprisoned individuals accused of apostasy and blasphemy, violating Islamic values, insulting Islam, black magic, sorcery, and “immoral activity.” Authorities arrested Shia clerics and activists who advocated for equal treatment of Shia Muslims, and at least one Shia cleric awaited execution after being convicted on charges of “violent opposition” to the government. There were no reports of executions for either apostasy or blasphemy during the year. Many foreign residents worshiped privately within their homes or in other small gatherings, but authorities raided some private, non-Muslim religious meetings and arrested, detained, or deported participants. The government continued to censor or block media and online content it deemed objectionable, and employed religious police to enforce public morality. Authorities continued to engage in instances of prejudicial treatment and discrimination against Shia Muslims with respect to access to public services, equitable representation in government, educational and public-sector employment opportunities, and judicial matters.

There were numerous reports of government authorities calling for the prosecution of atheists, and during the year, there were two known cases of courts prosecuting accused atheists. In February national media reported the General Court in Hafr al-Batin sentenced an individual to death on charges of apostasy related to renouncing his Muslim faith and desecrating a Quran on video, although his execution had not been carried out at year’s end.

In November media and local sources reported that the General Court in Abha had sentenced Palestinian poet Ashraf Fayadh to death for apostasy, overturning a previous sentence of four years’ imprisonment and 800 lashes. Officials from the CPVPV initially arrested Fayadh in August 2013 after reports that he had made disparaging remarks about Islam. Fayadh was initially charged with blasphemy, spreading atheism in public places, and having illicit relationships with women. Court documents show the General Court judge rejected defense witnesses’

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testimony and Fayadh's statement of repentance. An appeal was pending before the Supreme Court at year's end.

In October the Supreme Court upheld the death sentence of Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr, who was convicted in 2014 on charges of "disobeying the ruler, firing on security forces, sowing discord, undermining national unity, and interfering in the affairs of a sisterly nation," the latter presumably referring to Bahrain. Al-Nimr had been arrested in July 2012 after a series of sermons in which he allegedly demanded greater rights for Shia Muslims and defended four men accused of celebrating the death of then-Crown Prince Naif, whom they viewed as promoting anti-Shia discrimination. At year's end, the sentence had not yet been carried out, and he remained at Ha'ir Prison.

In September and October the Supreme Court also reportedly upheld the death sentences for three Shia men who were previously convicted of attacking security forces in the Eastern Province when they were legally minors. These included Nimr al-Nimr's nephew, Ali al-Nimr, who alleged authorities tortured him during detention to obtain a confession; Dawood al-Marhoon; and Abdullah al-Zaher. Many Shia and international human rights groups considered the death sentences were motivated by sectarian hostility toward Shia Muslims, particularly as the public prosecutor in each case asked that the defendant be executed and his corpse publicly displayed.

In January authorities publicly lashed Raif Badawi 50 times in accordance with a sentence based on his 2013 conviction for violating Islamic values, violating sharia, committing blasphemy, and mocking religious symbols on the internet. Originally sentenced to seven years in prison and 600 lashes in July 2013, Badawi's sentence was increased on appeal to a 10-year prison term and 1,000 lashes. By year's end, the government had not carried out the remaining 950 lashes.

In January the CPVPV arrested a blogger after he allegedly posted distorted Quran verses and identified himself as an "infidel" on his Twitter page. Members of the CPVPV seized the man, reportedly in his twenties, in his hometown of Tabuk in the northwest of the country, accused him of being an atheist, and handed him over to the police. The individual reportedly expressed a desire to repent once he was detained, and the outcome of his case was unknown.

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On January 6, the appeals division of the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) upheld Shia Sheikh Tawfiq Jaber Ibrahim al-Amr's eight-year prison sentence, to be followed by a 10-year ban on overseas travel and delivering religious sermons and public speeches. The SCC had initially convicted al-Amr in August 2014 of inciting sectarianism, defaming the country's ruling system, ridiculing the mentality of its religious leaders, calling for change, and disobeying the ruler.

On January 30, authorities released Souad al-Shammari, a women's rights and human rights activist who had been detained without charge since October 28, 2014. Authorities detained al-Shammari on charges of insulting Islam and criticizing clerics in a social media post in 2013.

Arabic press reported that government authorities released Sunni cleric Hassan Farhan al-Maliki on December 22, 2014, following two months' detention on accusations of insulting Islam. Al-Maliki had been arrested after making public statements suggesting a link between Sunni religious ideology and Da'esh.

Reports from international human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) indicated the government had released two members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, Sultan Hamid al-Enezi and Saud Falih al-Enezi, brothers who were reportedly arrested for apostasy and imprisoned after refusing to recant their beliefs. The judicial status and whereabouts of the brothers remained uncertain. Authorities indicated they consider Ahmadis to be Muslims, but the group's legal status in the country remained unclear, and the mainly foreign resident Ahmadis reportedly hid their faith to avoid scrutiny, arrest, or deportation.

The authorities have arrested more than 1,000 Eastern Province Shia since 2011 in connection with public protests demanding greater rights for Shia. Shia Muslims groups in Qatif that track arrests and convictions of Shia reported that more than 260 persons remained in detention in prisons throughout the Eastern Province, and others remained subject to travel bans. 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. At least 30 Shia Muslims, including Nimr al-Nimr and Ali al-Nimr, were convicted of capital crimes, however.

There were reports that authorities barred citizens who converted to Christianity while abroad from re-entering the country.

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The government continued not to recognize the freedom to practice any non-Muslim religions publicly. According to civil society sources and media reports, non-Muslims and many foreign and Saudi 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 discrimination, harassment, detention, and, for noncitizens, deportation.

Certain Christian congregations were reportedly able to conduct large Christian worship services discreetly and regularly without substantial interference from the CPVPV or other government authorities.

Mosques continued to be the only legally permissible public places of worship. 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 abroad, including in Syria and Iraq. The Ministry of Internal Affairs (MOIA) continued to use ministry inspectors, regional branch inspectors, field teams, citizen feedback, and the media to monitor and address any violations of the ministry’s instructions and regulations in mosques.

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 extend its explicit endorsement of these mosques.

The government reported 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 quasi-autonomous NGO), and, when appropriate, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Religious groups, however, reported that officials typically charged those arrested during private worship services with gender-mixing, playing music, or other infractions not explicitly related to religious observance. There were no known reports of individuals contacting these or other governmental agencies for redress when their ability to worship privately was infringed.

Practices diverging from the 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, were forbidden.

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Shia mosques were generally required to use the Sunni call to prayer, including in mixed neighborhoods of both Sunni and Shia residents. In some predominantly Shia areas of al-Ahsa Governorate, authorities allowed Shia mosques to use the Shia call to prayer. There were also reports of officials forcing Shia businessmen to close their shops during all five prayer times in accordance with the country's official Sunni practices, despite Shia observance of only three of the five daily prayers that Sunnis observe. In smaller Shia villages where there was virtually no CPVPV presence, reports indicated it was common for Shia businesses to close only for the three prayer times, or not at all.

Authorities permitted large-scale public commemorations of Ashura and lesser Shia holidays in Qatif, Eastern Province, where the population is almost completely Shia Muslim. Following a Da'esh-inspired shooting at a Shia gathering place in a Qatif suburb on October 16, a week before Ashura, there was a significant deployment of government security services in the Qatif area.

The government continued to set policy aimed at enforcing Islamic norms; for example, the government threatened to expel foreigners who did not refrain from eating, drinking, or smoking in public during Ramadan, and it prohibited parents from giving their children certain names deemed blasphemous.

The CPVPV continued to monitor social behavior and promote "morality." CPVPV field officers reportedly continued to approach and harass individuals without regular police present. CPVPV members reportedly could no longer interrogate subjects or determine charges, although they retained the authority to arrest those they deemed to violate religious edicts or moral customs when accompanied by regular police. In March for example, a woman was reported to have been forced by CPVPV members to cover her eyes while working in one of the oldest markets in the city of Ha'il. Twitter users shared a video showing the woman complaining, "I will send it to the press, and to the king." The reactions were largely negative and critical of the CPVPV members involved, and women published photos of their eyes in solidarity with the Ha'il woman. In January the CPVPV instructed the Ministry of Health to notify all public hospitals and health facilities that the celebration of "religious or personal" birthdays inside their compounds was forbidden. A CPVPV scholar added that Muslims were not allowed to greet non-Muslims on religious occasions like Christmas because that would constitute an endorsement of a non-Muslim's religion.

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The CPVPV reported in October that over the course of the previous year, 78 percent of the cases it handled dealt with failure to comply with mandatory prayer times; 24 percent involved moral issues; 12 percent dealt with behavior in nonpublic locations; 12 percent involved misbehavior in public places; 3 percent dealt with commercial issues; and 1 percent involved drugs and alcohol. Reports indicated the CPVPV was considered to be more prevalent and aggressive in policing public places in the central Nejd region, including Riyadh, than in the coastal cities of Jeddah and Dammam.

In October the Ministry of Labor, citing instructions from religious scholars, announced new regulations stipulating that women would be fined 1,000 riyals (\$267) if they failed to wear the hijab (head covering) while at work.

In October media reports indicated the Department for Health Affairs in Eastern Province docked the monthly pay of a Shia Muslim hospital worker in Dammam after she reportedly played the Shia call to prayer on her mobile phone. An image stated to be of her reduced paycheck was circulated online and showed the monthly salary had been forfeited “due to the Shia prayer call being played on the mobile phone.”

The CPVPV, in coordination with the Information and Communication Technologies Authority, continued to block certain websites as part of a broader policy of censoring online content which reportedly contained “objectionable” content and “ill informed” views of religion. Also, the CPVPV shut down or blocked Twitter accounts for users “committing religious and ethical violations,” and an undisclosed number of social media users were arrested in accordance with the anti-cyber crime law. The government also reportedly located and shut down websites used to recruit jihadis or inspire violence.

The government continued to exclude Shia perspectives from the extensive government-owned religious media and broadcast programming. Shia bookstores were reportedly unwilling or unable to obtain official operating licenses.

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

According to government policy, non-Muslims were prohibited from being buried in the country. There was, however, at least one public, non-Islamic cemetery in

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the country located in Jeddah, though the government did not support it financially. The only other known non-Muslim cemetery was private and only available to employees of the Saudi Arabian Oil Company (also known as Saudi ARAMCO). Diplomatic missions reported that most non-Muslims opted to repatriate their deceased to their home countries whenever financially possible.

The government supported approximately 70 percent of Sunni mosques, while the remaining 30 percent were at private residences or were built and endowed by private persons. The construction of new Sunni mosques required the permission of the MOIA, the local municipality, and the provincial government, which was functionally part of the MOI. The MOIA supervised and financed the construction and maintenance of most Sunni mosques, including the hiring of clerical workers.

The government did not finance the construction or maintenance of Shia mosques, and the process for obtaining a required government license for a Shia mosque remained unclear. Authorities prohibited Shia 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. Reports indicated Ismailis in Najran Province did not face similar obstacles to building and renovating mosques.

Following Da'esh-directed attacks against Shia mosques and gathering places, government security services began to provide protection for many Shia mosques in the Eastern Province. Additionally, media and other sources reported low level coordination between Shia volunteers and government security services to ensure security outside mosques and gathering places during Friday sermons or other large public events.

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. The government continued to distribute revised textbooks, although some intolerant material remained in circulation, including content justifying the execution of “sorcerers” and social exclusion of non-Muslims, as well as statements that Jews, Christians, Shia, and Sufis did not properly adhere to monotheism. Additionally, some teachers reportedly continued to express intolerance of other faiths and alternative viewpoints regarding Islam, while discouraging critical thinking in matters of religion.

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The government continued to consider its legitimacy to rest in part on its custodianship of the two holy mosques in Mecca and Medina and its promotion of Islam. The government's official interpretation of Islam was influenced by the writings and teachings of 18th-century Sunni religious scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who advocated a return to the practices of the early Muslim era, urging Muslims to adhere to a strict interpretation of Islam. Elsewhere, this variant of Islamic practice was often referred to as "Wahhabism," a term not widely used inside the country.

Multiple 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. The government permitted Shia judges in the Eastern Province to use the Jafari School of Islamic jurisprudence to adjudicate cases in family law, inheritance, and endowment management. There continued to be five Shia judges, all government appointed, located in the Eastern Province cities of Qatif and al-Ahsa, where the majority of Shia lived.

Reported instances of prejudice and discrimination against Shia Muslims continued to occur with respect to educational and public-sector employment opportunities. Shia stated they experienced systemic government discrimination in hiring and also frequently stated they were excluded from working in sensitive positions at Saudi Aramco. There was no formal policy concerning the hiring and promotion of Shia in the private sector, but some Shia stated that public universities and employers discriminated against them, occasionally by identifying an applicant for education or employment as Shia simply by inquiring about the applicant's hometown. Many Shia reportedly stated that openly identifying themselves as Shia would negatively affect career advancement.

Although Shia constituted approximately 10 to 15 percent of the total citizen population and at least one-quarter of the Eastern Province's population, representation of Shia Muslims in senior government positions continued to be considerably less than their proportion of the population, including in national security-related positions in the Ministry of Defense, the National Guard, and the MOI. There was only one Shia minister of state on the Council of Ministers, and there were no Shia deputy ministers in the national government. There were also no Shia governors, deputy governors, or ministry branch directors in the Eastern Province. There were five Shia members of the 150-member Consultative Council. In the two major Shia population centers of Qatif and al-Ahsa, five of the

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12 government-appointed municipal council members were Shia, and Shia held 16 of the 30 elected seats on these municipal councils. In predominantly Shia areas, there was significant Shia representation in the ranks of the traffic police, municipal government, and public schools. A very small number of Shia occupied high level positions in government-owned companies and government agencies.

Shia were also reportedly not represented in proportion to their numbers in academic positions in primary, secondary, and higher education. According to a Shia academic, virtually all public school principals remained Sunni, while 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 (formerly known as the King Abdullah Scholarship Program).

The government neither recognized nor financially supported several centers of Shia religious instruction located in the Eastern Province; it did not recognize certificates of educational attainment for their graduates or provide them employment benefits, which the government provided to graduates of Sunni religious training institutions.

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 more specific religious designations such as “Christian.”

Sunni clerics continued to employ anti-Shia rhetoric in Sunni mosques during the year, according to local reports. Despite what were widely seen as largely symbolic efforts by the government to tone down some of the more intolerant language in sermons, there were reports from local groups that Sunni clerics, who received government stipends, used anti-Shia, anti-Christian, and anti-Semitic language in their sermons.

Government officials made statements throughout the year condemning Da’esh-linked terrorist attacks on Shia Muslims and on Shia mosques. Senior leaders – including the king, crown prince, and deputy crown prince – as well as government-supported clerics – denounced the attacks. Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdulaziz Al ash-Sheikh posted videos condemning the attacks, mourning the loss of life, and reiterating the importance of not allowing the attacks to divide society.

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The government did not legally permit non-Muslim clergy to enter the country for the purpose of conducting religious services. Entry restrictions made it difficult for non-Muslims to maintain regular contact with resident clergy. This was reportedly particularly problematic for Catholics and Orthodox Christians, whose religious traditions require they receive sacraments from a priest on a regular basis.

The government's stated policy was 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 name of the offices where grievances could be filed.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Non-State Actors

Local affiliates of Da'esh claimed to have conducted at least five attacks against places of worship during the year, including four Shia targets. On May 22, a suicide bomber attacked the Shia Imam Ali mosque in the village of al-Qadeeh, Qatif Governorate, during Friday prayers. The government reported that at least 21 people were killed and more than 90 injured in the blast, for which Da'esh later claimed responsibility. Following the attack, both the crown prince and the emir (governor) of the Eastern Province made a condolence call on the victims' families. The government stepped up security around potential Shia targets.

On May 29, a suicide bomber killed four people near a Shia mosque in Dammam. The bomber tried to enter the mosque during Friday prayers and detonated his bomb in the parking lot after being stopped by security guards; Da'esh claimed responsibility.

On August 6, an attacker carried out a suicide bombing at a mosque in the southwestern city of Abha, killing 17 people; Da'esh claimed responsibility.

On October 16, a shooter opened fire on Shia Muslims attending a religious ceremony at a religious center in Saihat, a suburb of Qatif, killing five and injuring four. Da'esh claimed responsibility for the attack. Security forces said the attack was made by "Saudi nationals."

On October 26, a suicide bomber murdered two people and wounded 26 in the Shia Ismaili al-Mashhad Mosque in the southern city of Najran. The bomber, a national who recently returned from fighting for Da'esh in Syria, was blocked from

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entering the center of the mosque by a 95-year-old man, which limited the death toll.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

So-called religious vigilantes and/or “volunteers” unaffiliated with the CPVPV sometimes harassed and assaulted citizens and foreigners. At the Riyadh International Book Fair in March, a group of *muhtasibeen* – essentially religious men who voluntarily enforce public standards of morality according to sharia – disrupted a public lecture which, among other points, criticized Da’esh for its destruction of world heritage sites and antiquities in Iraq. A member of the *muhtasibeen* said it was the responsibility of all Muslims to destroy such monuments. A physical confrontation between the lecturer and *muhtasibeen* ensued, with security forces and official religious police from the CPVPV joining the fray. Amid escalating tension, lecture attendees dispersed, and the *muhtasibeen* effectively ended the lecture by initiating an impromptu call to prayer in front of the lecture stage.

Instances of prejudice and discrimination against Shia Muslims continued to occur with respect to private sector employment. Social media provided an outlet for citizens to discuss current events and religious issues, which sometimes included making disparaging remarks about members of various religious groups or “sects”. In addition, terms like “rejectionists” that Shia considered insulting were commonly found in public discourse.

NGOs reported that Nakhawala Shia faced more discriminatory practices in comparison to Twelvers in the Eastern Province. Discrimination in employment and education was based on the Nakhawala surname “al-Nakhly,” which roughly translates as “farmers” and identifies their minority status and group.

Editorial cartoons continued to exhibit anti-Semitism characterized by the use of stereotypical images of Jews along with Jewish symbols, particularly at times of heightened political tension with Israel. For example, in March a cartoon showed the Star of David caging a peace dove, and in January a cartoon showed an orthodox Jew armed with a weaponized menorah riding an elephant to conquer the al-Aqsa Mosque.

Twitter and other forms of social media remained key forums for discussing current events and religious issues, as public gatherings to discuss such matters

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were rare. For example, following the February announcement of a death sentence in an apostasy case in the General Court of Hafr al-Batin, some Twitter users in the country expressed support for the sentence, and Sheikh Mohammed al-Nashaar tweeted, “He insulted God, tore the Quran, and you still defend him?” Other users noted the man’s relative youth and asked why he would not be rehabilitated rather than executed. In January a prominent cleric issued a fatwa forbidding the building of snowmen on the grounds they were “un-Islamic.” Asked on a religious website if it were permissible for fathers to build snowmen for their children after a snowstorm in the country’s north, Sheikh Mohammed Saleh al-Munajjid replied that “it is not permitted to make a statue out of snow, even by way of play and fun.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy and consulate officials at all levels continued to press 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. During the year, the Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to raise and discuss violations of religious freedom and the legal status of those detained with officials from a variety of government entities, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Interior, Human Rights Commission, and King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue. Embassy officials again provided an overview to the government on the contents of the 2014 International Religious Freedom Report and facilitated meetings between religious freedom and civil society organizations and the government.

Embassy and consulate officials also nominated and sponsored dozens of individuals to participate in exchange programs to the United States focused on such topics as interfaith dialogue, countering radical ideologies, and the role of faith in service.

Embassy and consulate officials continued to meet with members of religious minorities, including Shia Muslims and citizens who no longer considered themselves Muslims, as well as with non-Muslim foreign residents, to discuss religious freedom concerns.

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 February 29, 2016, the

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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.