

World
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Saudi Arabia: Country Dossier

December 2020



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Introduction

World Watch List 2021

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	94	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.2	94	93	94	93	89
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.3	9.8	92	92	91	91	91
4	Libya	15.6	15.4	15.9	16.3	16.3	12.4	92	90	87	86	78
5	Pakistan	13.9	14.2	15.1	14.9	13.5	16.7	88	88	87	86	88
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	11.1	88	87	86	86	82
7	Yemen	16.6	16.6	16.5	16.7	16.7	3.9	87	85	86	85	85
8	Iran	14.5	14.5	13.9	15.7	16.5	10.6	86	85	85	85	85
9	Nigeria	13.3	13.2	13.9	14.1	14.1	16.7	85	80	80	77	78
10	India	13.0	12.9	13.5	14.9	13.7	15.4	83	83	83	81	73
11	Iraq	13.6	14.6	14.2	14.8	13.8	11.5	82	76	79	86	86
12	Syria	13.3	13.9	13.5	14.5	14.0	12.0	81	82	82	76	86
13	Sudan	13.4	13.4	13.7	13.6	15.7	9.1	79	85	87	87	87
14	Saudi Arabia	15.1	13.9	14.4	15.8	16.6	2.2	78	79	77	79	76
15	Maldives	15.4	15.5	13.9	15.8	16.6	0.4	77	78	78	78	76
16	Egypt	12.5	13.2	11.5	12.7	11.0	14.1	75	76	76	70	65
17	China	12.6	9.7	12.0	13.2	15.4	11.1	74	70	65	57	57
18	Myanmar	11.9	12.0	13.1	12.9	12.3	11.9	74	73	71	65	62
19	Vietnam	12.1	8.8	12.7	14.0	14.5	10.0	72	72	70	69	71
20	Mauritania	14.3	14.0	13.5	14.1	13.6	1.9	71	68	67	57	55
21	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	1.3	71	73	74	73	71
22	Laos	12.1	10.2	13.6	13.5	14.3	6.9	71	72	71	67	64
23	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.5	70	70	69	68	67
24	Algeria	13.9	13.9	11.5	13.1	13.4	3.9	70	73	70	58	58
25	Turkey	12.5	11.5	10.8	13.3	11.6	9.3	69	63	66	62	57
26	Tunisia	12.0	13.1	10.4	11.5	13.2	7.4	67	64	63	62	61
27	Morocco	12.6	13.5	11.2	12.4	14.1	3.7	67	66	63	51	49
28	Mali	9.4	8.2	12.7	10.3	11.5	15.4	67	66	68	59	59
29	Qatar	14.0	13.9	10.8	13.1	14.1	1.5	67	66	62	63	66
30	Colombia	11.4	8.8	12.4	11.0	9.7	13.9	67	62	58	56	53
31	Bangladesh	11.5	10.3	13.0	11.3	10.1	10.6	67	63	58	58	63
32	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.0	9.4	11.8	14.3	67	66	48	-	-
33	Tajikistan	14.0	12.3	11.9	12.5	13.2	2.2	66	65	65	65	58
34	Nepal	12.4	9.7	9.9	13.0	12.3	8.5	66	64	64	64	53
35	CAR	9.0	8.6	13.1	9.6	9.9	15.6	66	68	70	61	58
36	Ethiopia	9.9	8.5	10.7	10.3	10.8	14.4	65	63	65	62	64
37	Mexico	10.3	8.1	12.4	10.7	10.3	12.6	64	60	61	59	57
38	Jordan	13.1	13.9	11.4	11.6	12.4	2.0	64	64	65	66	63
39	Brunei	13.9	14.6	10.7	10.9	13.5	0.7	64	63	63	64	64
40	DRC	8.0	7.9	11.2	9.4	11.6	16.1	64	56	55	33	-
41	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	11.0	12.5	13.4	2.4	64	64	63	63	56
42	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.0	12.3	15.7	64	60	54	38	-
43	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	11.9	12.7	13.8	0.0	64	61	64	62	61
44	Oman	13.2	13.5	10.3	12.5	13.0	0.9	63	62	59	57	53
45	Mozambique	9.3	7.6	11.3	7.9	11.1	16.1	63	43	43	-	-
46	Malaysia	12.1	14.3	12.9	11.5	10.0	2.4	63	62	60	65	60
47	Indonesia	11.5	11.4	12.4	10.7	9.3	7.8	63	60	65	59	55
48	Kuwait	13.2	13.5	9.9	12.2	13.2	1.1	63	62	60	61	57
49	Kenya	11.7	9.2	10.5	8.0	10.3	12.8	62	61	61	62	68
50	Comoros	12.5	11.1	11.4	11.3	14.2	1.9	62	57	56	56	56

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
51	Cuba	10.9	7.7	11.8	12.9	13.4	5.4	62	52	49	49	47
52	Sri Lanka	12.2	9.1	11.7	12.2	9.7	7.0	62	65	58	57	55
53	UAE	13.4	13.3	9.7	12.0	12.4	1.1	62	60	58	58	55
54	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.6	10.6	62	60	52	45	47
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.2	10.4	12.0	1.3	58	57	56	54	48
56	Palestinian Territories	12.5	13.3	9.1	10.4	11.7	0.9	58	60	57	60	64
57	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	10.2	58	55	52	53	59
58	Russian Federation	12.3	8.0	10.2	10.5	12.1	3.9	57	60	60	51	46
59	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.0	56	56	56	56	57
60	Bahrain	12.1	12.5	9.1	10.7	10.5	0.9	56	55	55	57	54
61	Azerbaijan	12.8	9.8	9.4	11.1	12.6	0.0	56	57	57	57	52
62	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	3.7	53	56	48	40	-
63	Nicaragua	6.9	4.6	9.9	11.3	10.0	8.1	51	41	41	-	-
64	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.9	48	48	43	-	-
65	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	12.0	47	48	47	46	53
66	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	5.9	47	45	46	-	-
67	Honduras	6.8	5.0	10.6	7.6	9.0	7.6	46	39	38	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	10.1	11.4	7.2	46	43	42	-	-
69	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.0	43	44	44	-	-
70	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	0.6	43	43	43	-	-
71	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	9.8	0.7	43	41	42	-	-
72	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	8.1	42	42	41	-	-
73	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.3	42	42	43	-	-
74	El Salvador	6.6	4.9	9.8	4.2	8.7	7.8	42	38	30	-	-

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.
- The WWL 2021 reporting period was 01 October 2019 - 30 September 2020.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

In the WWL 2021 reporting period, travel restrictions and other measures introduced by the governments of various countries to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic did cause delays and create the need for restructuring grass-roots research in some cases. Through the agile cooperation of Open Doors field networks, research analysts, external experts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that the WWL 2021 scoring, analysis and documentation has maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

External Links - Introduction

- Sources and definitions: World Watch List Documentation - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>

WWL 2021 Short country profile / Saudi Arabia

Brief country details

In the table below, the number of Christians shown is an Open Doors (OD) estimate.

Saudi Arabia: Population (2020 UN estimate)	Christians	Chr%
34,710,000	1,200,000	OD estimate

Saudi Arabia: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	78	14
WWL 2020	79	13
WWL 2019	77	15
WWL 2018	79	12
WWL 2017	76	14

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Saudi Arabia: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Islamic oppression	Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Government officials, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Violent religious groups
Clan oppression	Ethnic group leaders, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Non-Christian religious leaders, Government officials
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

Most Christians in Saudi Arabia are living and working temporarily in the country. The majority of expatriate Christians come from low and middle income countries, such as India, the Philippines and Africa, but there are also some from the Western world. Besides being exploited and poorly paid, Asian and African workers are regularly exposed to verbal and physical abuse because of their ethnicity and low status, but their Christian faith can also play a role in this. Expatriate Christians are severely restricted in sharing their Christian faith with Muslims and in gathering for worship, which entails the risk of detention and deportation.

The few Saudi Christians from a Muslim background face even more pressure, especially from their families. Expatriate Muslims converting to the Christian faith also face strong persecution, probably similar to the levels they would have experienced in their home country. Due to the extremely high pressure, expatriate Christians tend to be silent about their faith and most expatriate and Saudi converts from Islam are forced to live their faith in secrecy or hiding. Nevertheless, the small number of Saudi Christians has been slowly increasing and they are also becoming bolder, sharing their Christian faith with others on the Internet and Christian satellite TV channels. Such public action has led to serious repercussions from Saudi families and authorities.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Saudi Arabia has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. [Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#) (CAT)
2. [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW)
3. [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC)

Saudi Arabia is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Female converts to Christianity face violence and severe deprivation of their fundamental rights due to the existence of the male guardianship system (CEDAW Arts. 2 and 5)
- If discovered, Female Christian converts are incarcerated in their home or their freedom of movement severely restricted by their own families (CEDAW Art. 15)
- Female Christian converts are forcibly married to Muslim men to force them recant their new faith or if already married, they risk divorce and losing custody of their children (CEDAW Art. 16);
- Christian converts cannot raise their children according to their religious beliefs (CRC Art. 14).

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

See above.

Specific examples of positive developments

- During the WWL 2021 reporting period, the government "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. Unlicensed imams, however, continued to employ intolerant views in internet postings or unsanctioned sermons in areas without government monitoring". ([US Department of State 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom](#))
- At the beginning of 2020, "the King Faisal Center in Riyadh displayed a first edition King James Bible, and the government allowed a group of Evangelical Christian leaders to visit several significant Christian and Jewish sites". ([USCIRF 2020](#))
- "At the Organization of Islamic Cooperation's 14th summit in May [2019], Muslim clerics from 139 countries convened by the Muslim World League signed the Mecca Declaration, which rejects extremism and religious intolerance. The Saudi government lifted several religious restrictions on women's rights and passed a parliamentary bill restricting child marriages." ([USCIRF 2020](#))

External Links - Short country profile

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Specific examples of positive developments: US Department of State 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/saudi-arabia/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: USCIRF - <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Saudi%20Arabia.pdf>
- Specific examples of positive developments: USCIRF - <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Saudi%20Arabia.pdf>

WWL 2021: Keys to understanding / Saudi Arabia

Link for general background information

- [Saudi Arabia country profile - BBC News](#)

Recent history

Founded in 1932, Saudi Arabia has been transformed from an under-developed tribal kingdom into one of the richest and most modern nations in the region thanks to the exploitation of its extensive oil reserves. The oil industry grew in the 1950s and drew large numbers of migrant workers to the country, including Christians.

The Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 had little effect in Saudi Arabia. There were some calls for political reform and some small-scale protests, particularly by the Shiite minority in the Eastern Province. The government banned all protests; raised public sector salaries and provided increased benefits for the religious authorities and for low-paid workers. A few minor reforms were promised and implemented, such as easing certain restrictions on women. The country's first elections for municipal councillors were held in 2005 and 2011; women were allowed to vote and stand as candidates for the first time in December 2015. After the death of King Abdullah in January 2015, Salman bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud became king and, two months later, Saudi Arabia started a military campaign together with ten other countries to restore the government of Yemen which had been expelled by the Shiite Houthis. The ongoing war in Yemen has resulted in a high number of civilian casualties and a humanitarian crisis, leading to worldwide criticism.

The current king, Salman, is ageing just like the other rulers of the government and they have [reportedly](#) (The Economist, 14 November 2017) struggled with the task of running a modern state, where over 59% of the 34 million citizens are under 30 years of age. The king addressed this problem by appointing his favorite son (according to [analysts](#), The Economist, 14 November 2017), Mohammed bin Salman as crown prince in 2017. Prince Mohammed - also known as MBS - casts himself as a youthful reformer but is transforming Saudi Arabia into a truly absolute monarchy. The crown prince's actions so far have been an anti-corruption sweep, a costly war in Yemen and the blockade of neighboring Qatar. In addition, significant changes have been implemented such as giving approval for women to drive, travel without a male escort, and being allowed to mix with men that are not relatives. Besides that, the religious police have virtually disappeared from the streets, and entertainment in the form of music and cinema is becoming more common. Tourist visas are also now available which contribute to a feeling of increased freedom. These changes have made MBS popular among Saudi youth; however, his involvement in the killing of Mohammed Khashoggi and Saudi Arabia's role in the war in Yemen have been met with widespread criticism from Western countries. In general, there seems to be more openness in society to expressing and exploring new ideas, or ideas different to the traditional ideas of Islam. This makes people seek more and one of the options being explored is the Christian faith. There are also reports that several among the younger generation would not be against allowing churches in Saudi Arabia.

Political and legal landscape

The country is an authoritarian state and absolute monarchy. Its royal family – the House of Saud – includes approximately 15,000 members, of whom about 200 have political influence and have held key positions for many years. King Salman is both chief of state and head of government. Political parties are not allowed and there are no national democratic elections to choose political leaders. Every four years the king appoints a Council of Ministers that functions as a cabinet and includes many royal family members. The [EIU](#) (Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2019) therefore classifies the government of Saudi Arabia as 'authoritarian'.

The relationship between the religious establishment and the House of Saud is uneasy and determined by conflicting and complying interests. However, both power elements are important to successfully unite the traditionally tribal Saudi society. However, the religious authorities are losing credibility among the population. Whereas they had previously banned

satellite TV, Internet, camera phones and travelling abroad, now they are using these technological advances themselves. On the one hand, they have gained in popularity by using these means (e.g. social media), on the other hand it has led to criticism of their being inconsistent. Additionally, the unpopular religious police were stripped of their power to arrest from 2016 onwards, possibly in an attempt to please citizens.

The recent changes and reforms implemented by MBS are welcomed by the youth, but have caused dissatisfaction with the religious establishment. More changes are likely to come due to a combination of the authoritarian style of the king and MBS, the call for change by the younger generation and the need for reforms from an economic perspective. This is likely to further reduce the partnership between the religious authorities and the government.

The [2020 Freedom of Thought Index](#) (Humanists International, last accessed 11 December 2020) ranks the government and Constitution of Saudi Arabia (as well as: Education and children's rights; Society and community; and Expression and advocacy of humanist values) in the category 'grave violations' which leads to the Saudi kingdom holding the lowest position in the 2020 Freedom of Thought Index. By leaving Islam, Saudi Christians are punishable under the apostasy law, which carries the death penalty. However, courts have not carried out a death sentence for apostasy in recent years.

Religious landscape

Saudi Arabia: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	1,200,000	3.5
Muslim	32,236,203	92.9
Hindu	707,676	2.0
Buddhist	123,074	0.4
Ethno-religionist	69,229	0.2
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	7,179	0.0
Atheist	11,282	0.0
Agnostic	230,764	0.7
Other (includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian)	123,792	0.4

Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020). (Adapted according to OD-estimate)

The desert kingdom controls the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina (the traditional birth and burial place of Mohammed, the main prophet of Islam) and is defined by Wahhabism, a purist and strict interpretation of Islam. Other religions are not allowed to be practiced openly. A Shiite minority of 8% exists and suffers discrimination. There are more than 1.2 million Christians in Saudi Arabia. However, these are not Saudi Arabian citizens but mostly expatriate Asians working temporarily in the country. There are also Christians from other parts of the world. No official churches are allowed in Saudi Arabia of any Christian denomination. The small number of Saudi Arabian Christians meet in secret, but a larger number have no Christian community to participate in. For some this is due to fear, but for others it is because they do not know there are other Christians besides expatriates (with whom it would not be wise to mix for reasons of security).

Saudi Arabia finances missionary efforts beyond its own borders through the Islamic missionary organization "Muslim World League" based in Mecca. Islamic proselytizing literature and missionaries are sent abroad and the construction of Wahhabi mosques in various countries is being financed through oil dollars. Also, the country sponsors academic institutions on condition that centers for Islamic Studies are also built. Apart from numerous copies of the Quran, large amounts of literature promoting hatred against non-Muslims are also shipped abroad every year, for instance to countries in Africa, Southeast Asia and Western Europe.

Religious hatred against followers of other religions than Sunni Islam still features in Saudi school textbooks, in spite of promised reforms. However, a [comprehensive review of Saudi textbooks](#) since 2016 by the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Education in School Textbooks (IMPACT-se, March 2020), shows that some progress has been made: "Hostility towards Christians has been softened in some regards. References to Christianity as a colonial force and as 'an invalid and perverted religion' have been removed from the latest Saudi curriculum. Unlike previous curricula, terrorism perpetrated by Muslims is specifically and sharply criticized." However, not all is well: In the latest textbooks, non-Muslims (including Christians and Jews) "are still demonized, described as infidels and enemies of Islam and all Muslims", and Shiite Muslims are similarly condemned.

Economic landscape

According to [UNDP 2019 report](#) (page 300 onwards):

- **Human Development Index (HDI):** Saudi Arabia ranks 36 with a HDI of 0.857 and is thus in the category of countries with a very high human development (e.g. with good education, long life expectancy and high income per capita)
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 75 years
- **Expected years of schooling (2018):** Male - 17.6 years; Female -15.8 years
- **Gross national income (GNI) per capita:** \$49,338
- **Unemployment rate:** 6.77% (12% when including Saudi citizens only, [Bloomberg](#), 15 June 2020); 25.8% for youth ([UN Global Human Development Indicators 2019](#)).

According to [World Bank's April 2020 update](#):

- "The contracting oil sector led to sluggish growth in 2019, despite strong performance of non-oil sectors. The outlook for 2020 remains very weak in the wake of COVID-19 and oil supply shocks. Medium-term fiscal balances are estimated to continue in deficit—risking the ability in realizing Vision 2030 fiscal targets. Vision 2030 related reforms are critical for diversification and progress was made on business environment reforms. COVID-19 response includes preservation of gains made in job creation for nationals in the private sector."
- "Saudi Arabian nationals are being incentivized to fill the gap left by expatriate exodus, but a key challenge will be to make private sector opportunities appealing enough for nationals, coupled with better management of foreign labor admission and mobility."

Saudi Arabia ranks as the largest exporter of petroleum and plays a leading role in OPEC. It holds some 16% of the world's known petroleum reserves and the petroleum sector accounts for the majority of export earnings and budget revenues (roughly 90% and 87% respectively, [CIA World Factbook 2020](#)) and roughly 42% of GDP. This success has created an economic interdependence with the West, since this is where the main consumer demand is found. This has led to strong political and military relationships, with a series of US military bases being allowed to continue operating in the country and a huge [arms deal](#) being signed in May 2017 (CNN, 20 May 2017). Since 2015, Saudi Arabia has been leading military intervention in Yemen's civil war in an effort to stabilize the Yemeni government and avert any possibility of its southern neighbor becoming Shiite-controlled.

The majority of employed Saudi citizens work in the public sector, and a central Vision 2030 goal is to reduce this to 20% by 2030. Conversely, Saudis are underrepresented in most private-sector industries, with a few notable exceptions such as agriculture, mining, finance, real estate and utilities. Saudi employment in the private sector is hampered by high wage requirements and mismatched career expectations since private-sector employment usually provides lower wages and less job security than the public sector. The focus on public-sector employment is also a legacy of the previous rapid expansion of the civil service; job seekers were left with the impression that they could rely on the government for employment. Women are particularly underrepresented in the private sector.

The lack of economic diversity combined with sustained population growth and large number of foreign workers in the private sector has led to mounting youth unemployment (25.8%, [UN Global Human Development Indicators 2019](#)). Other factors are the inferior education system, weak professional networks for youth, lack of information on availability of jobs and an underdeveloped work ethic due to generous financial allocations by the government. These factors have led to widespread social discontent and a growing gap between rich and poor which can drive young people towards radical Islamic influences. To combat this, the government has started measures to create more jobs for Saudis which involve job quotas for Saudi nationals and raising the salaries of Saudis. Also, companies that adhere to the quotas are granted benefits in applying for visas; others are limited in this respect, making it very expensive for them to hire workers from abroad. This is affecting the number of foreign workers entering the country – including the number of Christians.

Many expatriates left the country in 2019, including a large number of Asian Christians, due to the introduction of a new tax which makes it less attractive for expatriates to live and work in Saudi Arabia. As a result of COVID-19 and its impact on the economy, the number of expatriates in Saudi Arabia looks set to diminish further in 2020, among them many Christians. A total of at least 1.2 million expatriate workers are expected to leave in 2020 according to Riyadh-based investment company Jadwa ([Middle East Eye](#), 17 June 2020).

In its annual forecast, the [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) (last accessed on 14 July 2020), expects that the Saudi government "will face a difficult balancing act in attempting to contain mounting fiscal pressures caused by the coronavirus pandemic and plunging oil prices, while offering support to citizens and businesses hurt by the resulting economic dislocation. The economy will contract by 5.2% in 2020, reflecting the severe impact of the pandemic, flagging demand for oil and the hit to the non-oil sector. Real GDP will move back into positive territory from 2021 assuming a recovery of global economy."

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook](#) (May 2020):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Arab 90%, Afro-Asian 10%
- **Main language:** Arabic (official)
- **Urban population:** 84.3% of total population (2020)
- **Literacy rate:** 78% (2015)

According to [UN Global Human Development Indicators](#) (2019):

- **Population and median age:** 33.7 million / 31.8 years
- **HDI score and ranking:** Saudi Arabia's HDI has steadily increased from 1990 onwards, reaching 0.857 in 2018, putting the country in the very high human development category at rank 36. The UN Development Programme summarizes the main areas which improved as follows: "Between 1990 and 2018, Saudi Arabia's life expectancy at birth increased by 5.9 years, mean years of schooling increased by 4.0 years and expected years of schooling increased by 6.2 years. Saudi Arabia's GNI per capita increased by about 11.6 percent between 1990 and 2018."
- **Gender inequality:**
- **Youth unemployment rate (female to male ratio):** 2.12
- **Women with account at financial institution or with mobile money-service provider (% of female population ages 15 and older):** 58.2
- **Share of seats in parliament (% held by women):** 19.9

Saudi Arabia's social and cultural outlook is changing. The increased role of the Internet, social media and satellite TV has radically influenced Saudi youth culture. The majority of the population is under thirty and they (especially women) are longing for more freedom without being restricted by the religious police. Social reforms introduced by the young crown prince who was appointed in 2017, are a step forward in that respect. He has [allowed women drivers](#)

and various forms of entertainment (Reuters, 27 September 2017). At the end of 2018, a series of concerts were organized alongside the Formula E race in Riyadh. For the first time, dancing was allowed with no gender segregation and about 1,000 foreign tourists were allowed into the country with a special visa to attend these events. Since September 2019, about 50 countries can obtain tourist visas. Yet as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, international tourism has come to a standstill. The Mecca pilgrimage was cancelled, a loss of about 20% of Saudi's revenues beyond the oil sector ([Qantara.de](https://www.qantara.de), 20 May 2020).

Internet and social media are also impacting the situation of women in the Wahhabi kingdom. Never before have they stood up for their rights on this scale. Saudi women are starting to study and travel abroad and sharing their experiences on social media, which is exceptional for a country where until August 2019, women needed the permission of a male family member to travel. Due to the economic situation, women are also needed for joining the workforce. As a result, gender segregation is gradually disappearing. Time will tell how far women can go in this still very conservative Islamic society.

At the same time, there is still hardly any freedom of speech. According to Freedom Houses report [Freedom in the World 2020](#), "the climate for free expression has deteriorated sharply since 2018, with the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi and the arrests of even mild critics of government policy, such as high-profile women's rights activists, serving as warnings to ordinary Saudis to avoid public dissent." Social dissatisfaction has been in existence for at least twenty years and has been bought off with large sums of money, for example in the form of allocations for housing finance. However, the economic backlash of the COVID-19 crisis means that new austerity measures are inevitable. Plans to cut civil servant allowances and triple sales tax could stir popular discontent. Changes in the social and cultural landscape have also resulted in more open condemnation of conservative opinions on social media. However, criticism of the government and authorities still comes with high risk. Also, for former Muslims to talk openly about their conversion to Christianity is still not possible without facing the same levels of persecution as in previous years. But there is hope that over time even this will become more possible.

Technological landscape

According to [World Internet Stats](#) (accessed June 2020):

- **Internet usage:** 91.5% penetration - survey date: December 2019
- **Facebook usage:** 68.1% penetration – survey date: February 2020

According to [World Bank's Country profile](#) (2018):

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 122.6 per hundred people

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (updated May 2020):

- "Saudi Arabia offers one of the most progressive telecoms markets in the Middle East and is well positioned to capitalise on the potential opportunities offered by 5G. Mobile penetration is considered high in and the market is heavily saturated, with a large number of mobile broadband users."

“The outbreak of the COVID-19 virus has resulted in more workers, students and citizens being based at home and the telecoms operators are expecting more demand for their services. The operators have demonstrated a sense of social responsibility during the COVID-19 crisis by launching various initiatives to support society in terms of education, enterprise, and healthcare.”

The use of the Internet is widespread in Saudi Arabia, making it the largest ICT market in the Middle East. Social media like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp are very popular, especially among [young people](#) (Arab Youth Survey 2019). Saudi Arabia has the world's highest annual growth rate of social media users.

Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net Report 2019](#) measures the level of internet and digital media freedom in 65 countries. This report labelled Saudi Arabia 'not free', listing it as the third least-free country in the Middle East and North Africa region. Restrictions have included the blocking of social media or communications platforms; the blocking of political, social or religious content; the manipulation of online discussions by pro-government commentators; arrests and/or physical attacks or killings of bloggers or ICT users; imprisonment or prolonged detention for uploading political or social content; and technical attacks against government critics or human rights organizations.

Saudi Arabia is among a growing list of countries that have "expanded their efforts to manipulate the online environment and influence foreign political outcomes" during 2019. According to Freedom House's report, [Freedom in the World 2020](#), the Saudi government "has developed an extensive system of social media surveillance and regulation, and it invests considerable resources in automated 'bot' and other accounts to influence and at times distort the social media environment." Surveillance is thus extensive inside the desert kingdom, but even Saudis living abroad are not safe from government spying and intimidation.

Security situation

In terms of criminality, Saudi Arabia is a relatively safe country. Violations of law carry harsh punishments according to strict Sharia law, resulting in a very low crime rate. An example of this is the cutting-off of hands in cases of theft. Also, Saudi law allows for capital punishment for many crimes, such as murder, drug trafficking and possession, adultery, apostasy, homosexuality, rape and in some cases burglary, robbery and arson. Although the country is relatively safe, travel in the regions bordering Yemen and Iraq has serious security risks. Ever since Saudi Arabia initiated the coalition military action in Yemen, Saudi national infrastructure, in particular aviation interests, have been targeted from Yemen by missiles, drones and water borne IEDs. Saudi air-defense systems intercepted and destroyed most of these. However, the attack on oil and gas installations in Abqaiq in September 2019, highlighted the vulnerability of the country. Iran was blamed for this attack which further increased tensions between the two countries, resulting in more Western nations sending in troops to defend oil supply routes.

The Saudi government is combating Islamic militancy on a national level because it is considered a threat to the reign of the royal family. However, private Saudi funds do support Islamic militant groups outside the country and are hence one of the main sources of Sunni-armed conflict in the world, e.g. in Syria and elsewhere. Threats to national security come mostly from Islamic

militant groups, such as al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Saudi branch of the Islamic State group (IS). All of these groups oppose the Saudi Islamic monarchy for being insufficiently Islamic, aim to overthrow it and want to eradicate all Western influence in the kingdom. Only IS maintains a recruitment presence in Saudi Arabia and has bombed Shia mosques including other Shia targets and carried out deadly strikes against Saudi security personnel. The primary target for groups affiliated with al-Qaeda are government and military positions. [IS does not seem to differentiate](#) between targets and has also encouraged attacks against Shiite, Sufi and Christian civilians as well as their places of worship (Institute for National Security Studies, Memorandum 193, July 2019).

Finally, according to UK Government Travel Advice (accessed 18 August 2020), [posts](#) on jihadist websites and social media have encouraged attacks against "British, Western and other interests, including teachers, schools, oil workers, residential compounds, military, transport and aviation interests, as well as crowded places, including restaurants, hotels, shopping centres and mosques."

As there are no visible churches in Saudi Arabia and Christians mostly gather in private residences in compounds, Christian church services are less likely to be targeted by radical Islamic activity. Nevertheless, Western compounds in general could become targets. In the past, Saudi religious police have raided Christian meetings and arrested Christians who attended them. With the curbing of the influence of the religious police, these raids have occurred less often during the past few years.

Trends analysis

1) Saudi Arabia is trying to diversify its economy

In only a matter of decades, Saudi Arabia developed into one of largest exporters of petroleum worldwide. The Saudi kingdom is very much dependent on the petroleum industry and is trying to diversify its economy and create more jobs for Saudis, as set out in its ambitious plan of socio-economic reforms entitled 'Saudi Vision 2030'. This strategy document also clearly underlines the Saudi kingdom's proud Islamic identity and its claim to a leading role in the Muslim world. In general the country is trying to re-shape its global image and is aiming to stimulate tourism.

2) There is less public enforcement of Islam

In tandem with the above-mentioned trend, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman has expressed his desire to return the kingdom to a more "[moderate](#)" form of Islam (Al-Jazeera, 25 October 2017), introducing reforms such as allowing women to drive and permitting certain forms of entertainment. With the curbing of the religious police's powers, there is less public enforcement of Islam as compared to previous years which has led to relatively more freedom for both expatriates and Saudi citizens. According to observers in Saudi Arabia, these freedoms have made people feel more free to explore other ideas, ideologies and faiths. However, they are still very much under the influence of the values and beliefs of their tribe and community.

3) Saudi Arabia is going through considerable and rapid social change

The Internet is playing an important role in the rapid social change currently underway. This also leads to increased opportunities for online Christian ministry. Internet speed has increased, leading to high levels of social media usage. Because of this, more Saudis are searching online for faith-related material. However, these increased freedoms can also provide another context for pressure, as individual "vigilantes" can respond to them on social media, and the government can also monitor them.

The country is aiming to both stimulate tourism and maintain its influence on worldwide Islam. Although there have been some positive steps, it is too early to assume that this will lead to a broader acceptance of different religions. The social changes could very well face serious opposition from conservative circles.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Link for general background information: Saudi Arabia country profile - BBC News - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14702705>
- Recent history: reportedly - <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2017/11/14/the-rise-of-muhammad-bin-salman>
- Recent history: analysts - <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2017/11/14/the-rise-of-muhammad-bin-salman>
- Political and legal landscape: EIU - <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>
- Political and legal landscape: 2020 Freedom of Thought Index - <https://demens.nu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/FOT-2020-Key-Countries-Edition.pdf>
- Religious landscape description: comprehensive review of Saudi textbooks - https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/KSAs-Winding-Road-to-New-Identity_2016-19-Curriculum_Final-.pdf
- Economic landscape: UNDP 2019 report - <http://www.hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf>
- Economic landscape: Bloomberg - <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-15/expat-exodus-to-curb-unemployment-among-saudis-at-time-of-crisis>
- Economic landscape: UN Global Human Development Indicators 2019 - <http://hdr.undp.org/en/indicators/110906>
- Economic landscape: World Bank's April 2020 update - <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/223911554825481995/mpo-sau.pdf>
- Economic landscape: CIA World Factbook 2020 - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html>
- Economic landscape: arms deal - <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/19/politics/jared-kushner-saudi-arms-deal-lockheed-martin/index.html>
- Economic landscape: UN Global Human Development Indicators 2019 - <http://hdr.undp.org/en/indicators/110906>
- Economic landscape: Middle East Eye - <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/one-million-foreign-workers-expected-leave-saudi-arabia-end-2020-report>
- Economic landscape: Economist Intelligence Unit - <http://country.eiu.com/Saudi%20Arabia>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Factbook - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/attachments/summaries/SA-summary.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: UN Global Human Development Indicators - <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/SAU>
- Social and cultural landscape: allowed women drivers - <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-women-driving/rain-begins-with-a-single-drop-saudi-women-rejoice-at-end-of-driving-ban-idUSKCN1C217F>
- Social and cultural landscape: Qantara.de - <https://en.qantara.de/content/impact-of-covid-19-on-saudi-arabia-shaking-the-house-of-saud-to-the-core>
- Social and cultural landscape: Freedom in the World 2020 - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/saudi-arabia/freedom-world/2020>

- Technological landscape: World Internet Stats - <https://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#sa>
- Technological landscape: World Bank's Country profile - https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&id=b450fd57&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=SAU
- Technological landscape: BuddeComm Research - <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Saudi-Arabia-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses>
- Technological landscape: young people - https://www.arabyouthsurvey.com/about_the_survey.html
- Technological landscape: Freedom on the Net Report 2019 - https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/11042019_Report_FH_FOTN_2019_final_Public_Download.pdf
- Technological landscape: Freedom in the World 2020 - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/saudi-arabia/freedom-world/2020>
- Security situation: IS does not seem to differentiate - https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Memo193_e.pdf
- Security situation: posts - <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/saudi-arabia/terrorism>
- Trends analysis: moderate - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/saudi-crown-prince-promises-return-moderate-islam-171024182102549.html>

WWL 2021: Church information / Saudi Arabia

Christian origins

There are various traditions about how Christianity came to the Arabian Peninsula. According to one tradition, a merchant from Najran (on the southern tip of Saudi Arabia) converted to Christianity during one of his trips to modern day Iraq and formed a house church at the beginning of the 5th century. Another tradition concerns an envoy of the Roman emperor, Constantius, who preached to the Himyarite king of South Arabia, who as a result converted to Christianity. Both traditions indicate that churches were built in South Arabia centuries before the advent of Islam. After the arrival of Nestorianism, Christianity continued to grow in the 4th century and even flourished in the 5th century.

By the end of the 6th and 7th century, Saudi Arabia had considerable numbers of Jews and synagogues, Christians (probably mostly Nestorians) and church buildings. They were mostly living in what is today the Western Province around the cities of Medina, Khaybar and Tayma. Even today, there are ruins of a church near Jubail in Eastern Province. It dates from the 4th century and is one of the oldest church sites in the world.

For hundreds of years, Christian merchants and tribes were living in and travelling through the vast plains of the Arabian Peninsula. This all changed with the arrival of Islam (7th - 10th centuries), when Jews and Christians converted to Islam either voluntarily or under duress, with many others being killed or driven from their homes.

In the course of the next few centuries, the Arabian Peninsula became overwhelmingly Islamic and Christianity lost significance. The historical role of Christianity in the region was forgotten for almost 13 centuries. This changed in the 19th century after Britain concluded protection treaties in the eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula; Christian expatriate workers started to enter Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE. Along with them came church buildings in the Gulf states - with the exception of Saudi Arabia, where still no church buildings are allowed.

Church spectrum today

No accurate breakdown of church groups can be published. WCD statistics show the dominant expatriate Christian denomination to be Roman Catholic (over 90%).

WWL 2021: Persecution Dynamics / Saudi Arabia

Reporting period

1 October 2019 - 30 September 2020

Position on the World Watch List

Saudi Arabia: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	78	14
WWL 2020	79	13
WWL 2019	77	15
WWL 2018	79	12
WWL 2017	76	14

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods

Saudi Arabia drops one point (and as a consequence one rank) compared to WWL 2020. This was due partly to a slightly lower number of reported violent incidents against Christians and partly to the fact that there were some scoring adjustments based on new information. The average score for pressure remained at an extreme level in Saudi Arabia (15.2 points), one of the world's few countries where church buildings are still forbidden. The score for violence was low at just 2.2 points.

Persecution engines

Saudi Arabia: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all

Clan oppression	CO	Very strong
Christian Denominational protectionism	CDP	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Islamic oppression (Very strong):

The desert kingdom is defined by Wahhabism and controls the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The Quran and Sunna (literally "Traditions") are declared to be the Constitution of Saudi Arabia, interpreted according to the strict Hanbali school by religious elders. Saudi Arabia's legal system is based on Islamic law (Sharia). On this basis, only the officially recognized Wahhabi Islam is permitted to be practised publicly and it is forbidden to openly practise any other religion. All Saudi citizens are assumed to be Muslim and expatriates of other faiths can only practise their faith privately. The death penalty for apostasy from Islam is in force, though there have been no known examples of judicial executions for apostasy in recent years.

Clan oppression (Very strong - blended with Islamic oppression):

Even though Saudi Arabia claims to be a modern nation, very strong *Clan oppression* remains throughout the country. The age-old norms and values from their traditional belief system continue to be enforced influencing the people living within the country. There are strong tribal and clan prejudices that affect marriages, employment, where you can rent or buy a home, and various other social situations. Clans can be identified by their last surname so if a person's surname reflects a lower tribe or clan, they could be denied employment or given a less desirable position. For those Saudis who do not have a tribal affiliation, there is disdain for them from those who uphold a traditional tribal mentality. *Clan oppression* is clearly mixed with Islam and particularly affects Christians with a Muslim background. Those in more traditional tribes have a harder time breaking out of those norms. For Saudi Christians who are disowned by their family, they will be disowned by the tribe and their community as well.

Dictatorial paranoia (Strong):

The Saudi monarchy has supreme power and absolute authority. As such, the monarch can implement any law he desires as long as this complies with Sharia and the Quran. In an unexpected move, King Salman promoted his son to the position of Crown Prince in June 2017. According to observers it was a move to preserve the monarchical ascendancy of the family rather than a focused vision for the country. A key objective of the rulers (especially the king and

crown prince) is to maintain the status quo by asserting their own power and by carefully controlling any currents that may be considered dissident or likely to inflame social tensions. The top two authorities of the land have implemented many changes that have affected mostly Saudis but also expatriates in general, including Christians (although Christians are not thereby being specifically targeted). An example of this is the increase in visa fees for all dependents of expatriates resulting in more expatriate Christians leaving for economic reasons, thus decreasing the Christian presence and potential opportunities for being a Christian witness.

Drivers of persecution

Saudi Arabia: Drivers of Persecution per engine										
	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC	
	VERY STRONG	-	-	VERY STRONG	-	-	-	STRONG	-	
Government officials	Very strong	-	-	Strong	-	-	-	Very strong	-	
Ethnic group leaders	Very strong	-	-	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	
Non-Christian religious leaders	Very strong	-	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Violent religious groups	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Very strong	-	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	
One's own (extended) family	Very strong	-	-	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	
Political parties	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Islamic oppression

- **Government officials (Very strong):**

Saudi Arabia likes to be seen as the defender of Islam with a one hundred percent Muslim citizenship. Persecution will be applied to anyone who harms this image. The maintenance and implementation of highly oppressive laws restricting religious freedom by the state authorities are strong sources of persecution. However, the state often plays an otherwise passive role, content to rely upon the strong societal pressures to ensure that Christians and other religious minorities remain in check. This applies to:

i) expatriate Christians (for the many groups that gather regularly for private worship, the key threat comes from neighbors and wider communities - state agencies would typically only intervene in response to community demands); and

ii) for converts to Christianity (especially Saudi nationals), the authorities can and do take severe action, but often in practice this is at the instigation or request of family or community members.

The religious police used to have the role of enforcing religious rules. They would punish those who did not dress appropriately (for instance, men in shorts or women with hair not well-covered) and put pressure on those who remained outside of the mosque at prayer times. The power of this religious police has diminished notably during the past few years.

- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Very strong):**

Often these are prominent leaders (e.g. imams, university professors, medical doctors or others in high standing in the community), who would take it as their task to keep their community from bad influences. To some extent, this functions like a tribal system in a community where actual tribal influence is low (for example in the cities). The fear of hostile pronouncements or actions by Islamic leaders contributes to the very high degree of caution Christians feel compelled to exercise. Although there are not many cases in which religious leaders are known to have instigated specific episodes of persecution in the WWL 2021 reporting period, the high degree of hostility (especially towards converts) and the significant levels of authority and influence mean that religious leaders contribute significantly to the pressure felt by Christians. For example, these leaders keep calling for radical observance of Wahhabi rules, including the call to put pressure on anyone disobeying the teachings of this strict form of Islam.

- **Ordinary citizens (Very strong):**

Generally speaking, there is a pronounced anti-Christian (and anti anything non-Islamic) attitude in society. Although broader society does not constitute a major direct threat, it can often be a trigger for state or family intervention. For example, if neighbors complain about expatriate Christians meeting for fellowship causing excessive noise or inconsiderate parking, the authorities may feel compelled to take action. Similarly, if work colleagues or

neighbors became suspicious of a possible conversion to Christianity, it is likely that they would inform the convert's family who might then take severe action. This threat from broader society applies equally within the context of the Internet and social media.

- **Family (Very strong):**

It is felt as a great dishonor if a Saudi family member becomes a Christian; the shame needs to be eradicated from the family. Honor killings are still allowed in Saudi Arabia and a family member can be killed to protect or restore the honor of the family. Family hostility (and the fear of provoking violent reactions from immediate or extended family) is the main pressure faced by Saudi Christians. (This mostly affects Saudi converts since most expatriate converts will not have their families with them. However, the level of persecution the latter face from society in general is comparable to that experienced by Saudi Christians.) A history of documented persecution of Saudi Christians from family members has included (but is not limited to) death, attempted electrocution, imprisonment, beatings, arrests, house arrest, locked in their room, verbal beratement, freezing of bank accounts, confiscation of passports, forced divorce, forced marriage, loss of parental rights, burning of cars, and threats aimed at family members.

- **Ethnic group leaders (Very strong):**

Tribal leaders enforce Islam as part of their tribe's age-old values. Tribe and family leaders are a source of persecution for Christians as these leaders use whatever means necessary to maintain the honor of their tribe. Each tribe has its own way of dealing with disturbances. When the conversion of one of their members becomes public, they are usually willing to go to great lengths to bring him or her back to the ancestral faith of the tribe (Islam). This includes forcing a convert's dismissal from work, divorce, return from abroad, forced marriages, etc. Certain tribes contribute to the constitution of the "Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice" (CPVPV - or simply 'Islamic religious police'). These tribes pride themselves on notifying chief CPVPV officials or the local imams of people who deviate from Islamic practices, especially reporting anyone suspected of converting to Christianity. Although the CPVPV has lost some of its governmental authority, Saudis generally fear any such reporting. There are also threats of reporting to monitor others.

- **Violent religious groups (Strong):**

These are independent groups with no respect for tribes or government, which are trying to radicalize society, such as the Islamic State group (IS). Al-Qaeda are active in Yemen and it is assumed that they also pose a threat in Saudi Arabia. These mostly Sunni groups have a strong group culture; they try to convert Shia Muslims and expatriates and are active in influencing the communities around them. If local groups hear of converts, they will go to any lengths to persecute them. Saudi Christians, in particular, know that if these groups were to take action against an 'apostate', they could probably do so with impunity.

Generally, the government is effective in keeping violent religious groups in check that would pose a threat to the rulers and as such to national stability. There is therefore no constant threat from violent religious groups. However, there are uncertainties and ambiguities in Saudi relations with some religious groups that have perpetrated violence acts in the wider region. Although the activity of such groups is likely to be limited, the high degree of hostility such groups have towards converts (in particular) and expatriate Christians means that they are still a threat to Christian life.

Drivers of Clan oppression (blended with Islamic oppression)

- ***Ethnic group leaders (Very strong):***
Each tribe has their own way of dealing with disturbances. When a tribal member's Christian faith becomes public, other members usually resort to any means to force a return to Islam.
- ***Family (Very strong):***
Leaving Islam is a great violation of family and tribal honor and is likely to lead to violent reactions from direct or extended family of a convert.
- ***Government officials (Strong):***
Government authorities usually prefer not to interfere in matters of faith, but will do so if tribal leaders give their consent. Also, they are not likely to intervene if tribal leaders react violently against one of their members who has converted to Christianity.
- ***Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):***
Religious or community leaders take it as their responsibility to keep their community free from Christian and other undesirable influences. This resembles a tribal system and operates particularly in places (for example in cities) where actual tribes are not so influential.
- ***Ordinary citizens (Strong):***
In tribal society it is dangerous to go against traditional opinions and ways of life. There is the constant threat from the broader community that they will inform an 'apostate's' family if they find out about his/her conversion to Christianity.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- ***Government officials (Very strong):***
The Saudi rulers, especially the king and crown prince, will do their utmost to maintain the status quo by asserting their own power and by carefully controlling any currents that may be considered dissident or likely to inflame social tensions. Especially Saudi converts to Christianity dishonor the country's proud reputation as the custodian of the two holy mosques and their existence is denied. State officials often act against Christians in reaction to requests by family or community members.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

The level of persecution in Saudi Arabia is generally the same all over the country, although social control is likely to be higher in rural areas. A possible exception are Western expatriate compounds where there is less control and pressure to adhere to strict Islamic norms.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

Most Christians in Saudi Arabia are expatriates who temporarily live and work in the country. These are Christians both from the Western world, the Middle East and from low and middle-income regions such as India, the Philippines and Africa. Besides being exploited and poorly paid, Asian and African workers are regularly exposed to verbal and physical abuse because of their ethnicity and low status, as well as facing constant pressure to convert to Islam. Most expatriate Christians are Roman Catholic. Travel for Catholic and Orthodox priests is limited, which is problematic for Catholic and Orthodox Christians because their religious traditions require the regular reception of sacraments from a priest. Expatriate Christians are severely limited in sharing their Christian faith with Muslims and in meeting for worship, which has previously led to detention and deportation. Church buildings are not legally permitted, but major Christian worship services are reportedly being held regularly without substantial interference from government officials or the religious police.

Historical Christian communities:

Indigenous historical Christian communities do not exist in Saudi Arabia.

Converts to Christianity:

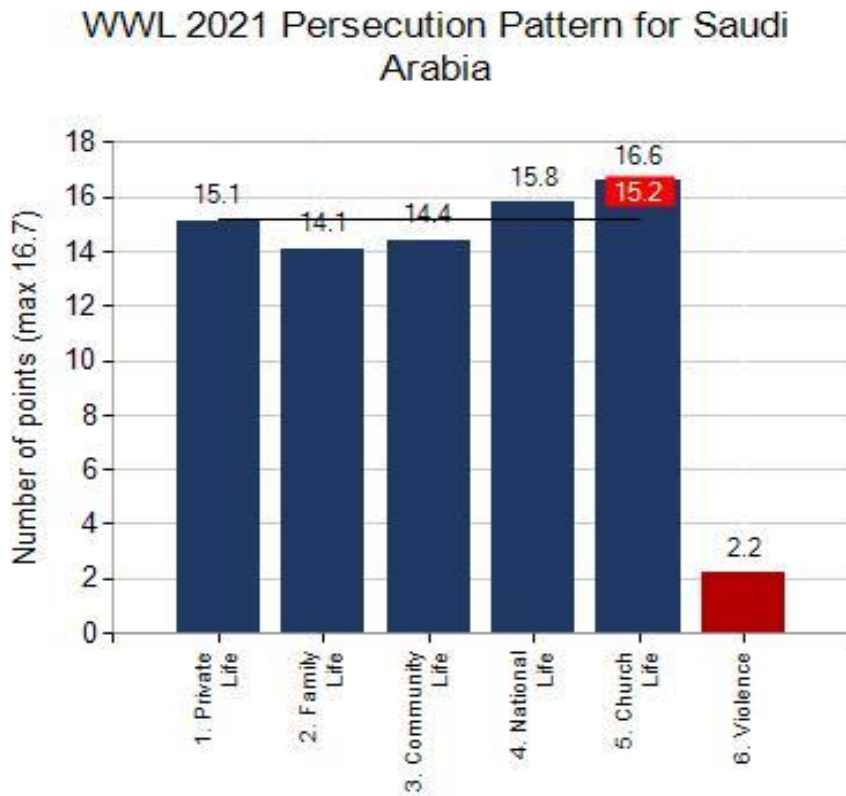
Converts are mainly from a Muslim background and are especially found among Arab migrants. Often they are disappointed with the radicalization of Islamic society. If these expatriate converts were previously known as Muslims and are part of micro home-country communities, they usually face the same levels of persecution that they would in their home country (or more severe). Therefore, most live as secret Christians in order to avoid job loss and physical and mentally abuse.

There are relatively few Saudi converts in the country and they generally live out their Christian faith in deepest secrecy. Many of them responded to Christian programs via satellite TV or became Christians through visions or dreams, sometimes experienced during the *Hajj* - the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca. The Internet also plays a role as this allows access to Christian materials. This is limited, however, since the use of the Internet is strictly regulated by the authorities. Nevertheless, the small number of Saudi converts has been increasing and they are also becoming bolder and some have been talking about Christian faith on the Internet and Christian satellite TV channels. However, such publicity has often led to serious repercussions either from their families or the authorities.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

Indigenous non-traditional Christian communities do not exist in Saudi Arabia.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2021 Persecution pattern for Saudi Arabia shows:

- The average pressure on Christians remains at an extreme level (15.2 points) in WWL 2021, the same as in WWL 2020.
- The scores for pressure in all *spheres of life* are at extreme levels. Pressure is most extreme in the *Church, National and Private spheres of life* which is typical for a situation in which *Islamic oppression* is the main Persecution engine (combined with *Dictatorial paranoia*).
- Pressure resulting from the Persecution engine *Islamic oppression* blended with *Clan oppression* is present mostly in the *Private, Family and Community spheres* and is exerted especially on Christians with a Muslim background by the social environment.
- The score for violence went down very slightly to 2.2 points in WWL 2021, 0.2 points lower than in WWL 2020.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2021 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <http://openodoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (4.00 points)

It can be risky for all categories of Christians to write about their faith on social media, as this would be perceived to be evangelizing nationals which is prohibited for non-Sunni Islamic faiths. For expatriate Christians this could have consequences for their employment situation. The repercussions are likely to be especially severe for Christian converts from Islam, as this would provide evidence of their apostasy.

Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (4.00 points)

It would be a provocation to use Christian images or symbols publicly. Western expatriate Christians avoid doing this as it can lead to anger from the local community and possible expulsion. For Saudi or other Christians from a Muslim background, the display of Christian symbols would be tantamount to admitting apostasy, and so could trigger severe reactions from state, community and family.

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.75 points)

Since the main source of pressure for Christian converts from Islam is from family and community, most exercise extreme caution in discussing issues of faith with others, including wider family and community members. It is pressure from extended family that leads to violent acts by someone within the family. The only exception is when friends are Christians, but even then they would hold such conversations in a secret place. Expatriates need to be careful not to be perceived as evangelizing Muslims.

Block 1.10: Christians have been isolated from other family members or other like-minded Christians (e.g. house arrest). (3.50 points)

For Saudi converts, this is a significant threat if their faith becomes known. Ostracism or isolation from family members would be routine (and would constitute a comparatively mild response given the acceptability of more violent measures). Isolation from other Christians is often effectively self-imposed because of a hesitancy regarding their trustworthiness and a fear of repercussions if wider circles come to know of a convert's new faith. Christian house-maids and foreign workers in - what are locally known as - "labor camps" are also often isolated from meeting other Christians due to working conditions.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.3: Christians have been hindered in celebrating a Christian wedding for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)

There is no scope for formalizing a non-Islamic marriage in Saudi Arabia, and no public non-Islamic religious practice is permitted. Any Christian wedding ceremony inside Saudi Arabia would therefore have to be undertaken in private and could not be officially registered with the

Saudi authorities. Christians with a Muslim background must marry according to Islamic rites and Christians marrying Muslims need to convert to Islam.

Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (4.00 points)

Saudi Christians or other Christians from a Muslim background cannot be baptized openly. If a baptism becomes known to the authorities or within the community, repercussions are likely to be severe as the baptism is clear evidence of apostasy. The public baptism of an expatriate Christian would be deemed to contravene the prohibition on public practice of non-Islamic religion and could be expected to lead to the swift deportation of the expatriates involved.

Block 2.5: Burials of Christians have been hindered or coercively performed with non-Christian rites. (4.00 points)

In general, there is no scope for non-Islamic burial, as this would involve non-Islamic religious practise which is prohibited in the Wahhabi kingdom. Any Saudi or other Muslim-background Christian would be considered Muslim upon death and would be buried according to Islamic rites. For expatriate Christians, bodies are usually repatriated to their home country following death. For exceptional cases and emergency use, there is an unofficial non-Muslim burial facility hidden to the public.

Block 2.12: Christian spouses of non-Christians have been excluded from the right or opportunity to claim custody of the children in divorce cases. (4.00 points)

In Saudi Arabia, custody of the children belongs to the extended family and tribe not their parents. A Saudi Christian (if known as a Christian by the family or tribe) would be excluded from the lives of the children. In the case of a divorce, a Saudi Christian would not be granted custody of the children. Migrant female Christians who marry Saudis (Christian men are not allowed to marry Saudi women) do not have the right by Saudi law to the custody of the children on grounds of ensuring that the children receive a Muslim upbringing.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.1: Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (e.g. for not meeting majority religion or traditional dress codes, beard codes etc.). (4.00 points)

Christian converts from Islam are threatened if their faith is known. Islam is very present in daily life and this leads to several restrictions and limitations. Women are required to wear an *abaya* and a head cover. Christians and all other expatriates follow this dress code as required by Islam in order to avoid harassment or obstruction. This is no longer required by law, but is still the normal practice. Women can now choose a variety of colors for their *abay*. Male Saudi dress-code is also enforced at Saudi schools and places of prayer.

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (3.75 points)

The monitoring of converts whose Christian faith has become known is very common and is carried out by the local community in particular. Expatriates are monitored by society mainly with regards to respecting social norms. Employers and others in the same ethnic/nationality groups monitor migrants; arguably this is part of ensuring communal harmony and mutual support for living within Saudi culture. Phone calls, e-mails and social media are all monitored.

Block 3.6: Christians have been hindered in participating in communal institutions, forums, etc., for faith-related reasons. (3.75 points)

There is absolutely no room for any openly Christian (or other non-Muslim) form of representation. There are no non-Islamic communal institutions in Saudi Arabia. In principle this pressure could also apply to a Christian from a Muslim background, though in practice a convert would be highly unlikely to seek to be actively involved in communal institutions if their faith was known, as this would be asking for trouble.

Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.75 points)

If the new faith of a Christian convert from Islam is known, he or she is very likely to lose their job. For expatriates, their faith needs to be recorded as a part of their application process and any mention of Christian faith may result in them not being hired. Christians who are active in living out their faith in a way that affects others may lose their jobs.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (4.00 points)

Freedom of religion is neither protected nor provided for under Saudi law. The Basic System of the Consultative Council enshrines Islam as the state religion and Sharia as the basis for legislation. The Quran and Sunna (Traditions) are declared to be the Constitution of Saudi Arabia. Only Wahhabi Islam may be practised publicly. Shia mosques are permitted but are greatly restricted, in practice. All Saudi citizens are declared by the state to be Muslims.

Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (4.00 points)

Blasphemy, defamation of religions and non-Islamic proselytizing are prohibited, as is any public expression of non-Islamic worship. Expressing critical opinions publicly is hardly possible for anyone and expatriate Christians doing this run the risk of losing their labor contract or being expelled from the country. Most Christians (both Saudi and foreign) take great care to avoid provocation; they exercise precautionary 'self-censorship', avoiding in particular any direct preaching or criticism of Islam.

Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (4.00 points)

There are no political parties in Saudi Arabia. Christians (and in particular those with a Muslim background) would be very unlikely to apply for establishing an NGO or party with an overtly Christian identity, since they know that any such organization would be bound to be hindered.

Block 4.12: Christians, churches or Christian organizations have been hindered in publicly displaying religious symbols. (4.00 points)

Saudi Arabia permits no public display of non-Islamic religion, such as Christian symbols. For instance, businesses do not allow Christmas celebrations and Christmas decorations are confiscated at the border. Logos of companies are also checked for any non-Muslim religious imagery.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (4.00 points)

The ban on any form of public expression of non-Islamic worship constitutes a permanent obstruction for churches. Of the thousands of informal fellowships for expatriates that meet in private places, there is evidence of routine monitoring by the authorities, even though most act discreetly to avoid drawing attention to their activities. Christian services are seriously restricted by the strict gender segregation, which prohibits men and women from different families from worshipping in the same room. As the law is not formally codified, the legal status of private religious practice remains vague and is based mainly on official announcements in the media. Any regular gatherings of Saudi Christians are not possible due to the fear of monitoring.

Block 5.3: Christian communities have been hindered in building or renovating church buildings or in claiming historical religious premises and places of worship which had been taken from them earlier. (4.00 points)

The ban on any form of public expression of non-Islamic worship means that no church building can be constructed or rented for use as a church.

Block 5.13: Churches have been hindered in importing Christian materials from abroad. (4.00 points)

The importation of non-Islamic religious materials in Arabic into Saudi Arabia is prohibited.

Block 5.16: Churches, Christian organizations, institutions or groups have been prevented from using mass media to present their faith (e.g. via local or national radio, TV, Internet, social media, cell phones). (4.00 points)

Public expression of any other religion than Islam is prohibited. No Christian organizations are allowed. Media, including the Internet, are routinely screened for political, pornographic and religious material deemed offensive or against Islam.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given. (A symbolic number of 10 could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100 could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1000 could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain.) In cases where it is clear that (many) more Christians are affected, but a concrete number could be given according to the number of incidents reported, the number given has to be understood as being an absolutely minimum figure. The symbol “x” denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security considerations.

Saudi Arabia: Violence Block question	WWL 2021	WWL 2020
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2 How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	x	x
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	x	x
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	0	0
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	1000	1000
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	100	100
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	x	x
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0

6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	x	x

Please note the use of the symbol "x" in the table above: Due to security concerns, it was decided not to publish all available details of arrests and attacks in this document.

In the WWL 2021 reporting period, reports of anti-Christian violence were comparable to those in WWL 2020, leading to the same total score for violence. In general, Christians in the country are very careful how they act in order to avoid harsh consequences and this keeps the violence score down.

- **Christians attacked:** There are more than 1.2 million foreign Christians living in Saudi Arabia of whom large numbers are employed as domestic staff. As in previous WWL reporting periods, rape and sexual harassment remain a huge problem in Saudi Arabia. Asian and African Christians, mainly house-maids working in Saudi homes, are very vulnerable and are often badly treated with motives including negative attitudes towards race and faith. Verifiable statistics are scarce because of the social taboo and lack of legal protection and justice. In the table above, a conservative estimate has been made for the number of Christian house-maids being (sexually) abused because of their faith in the WWL 2021 reporting period.

5 Year trends

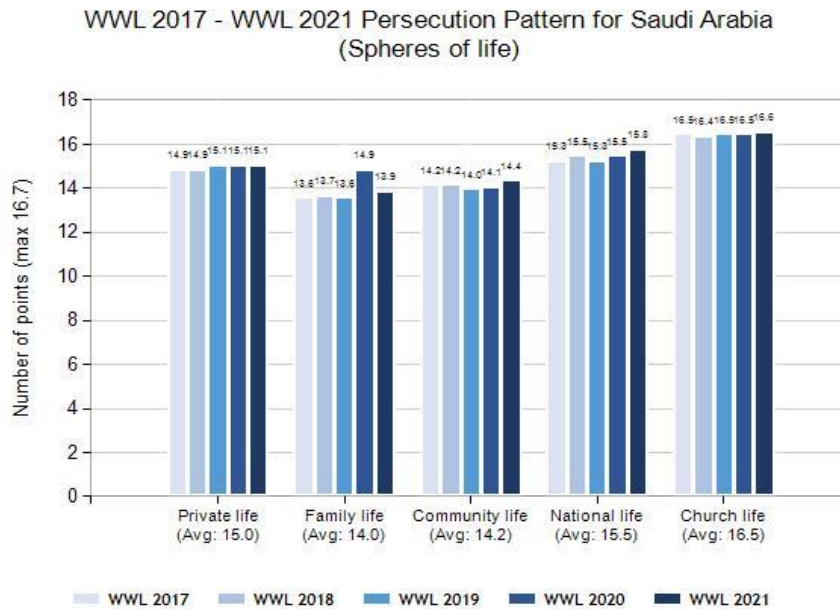
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Saudi Arabia: WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2021	15.2
2020	15.2
2019	14.9
2018	14.9
2017	14.9

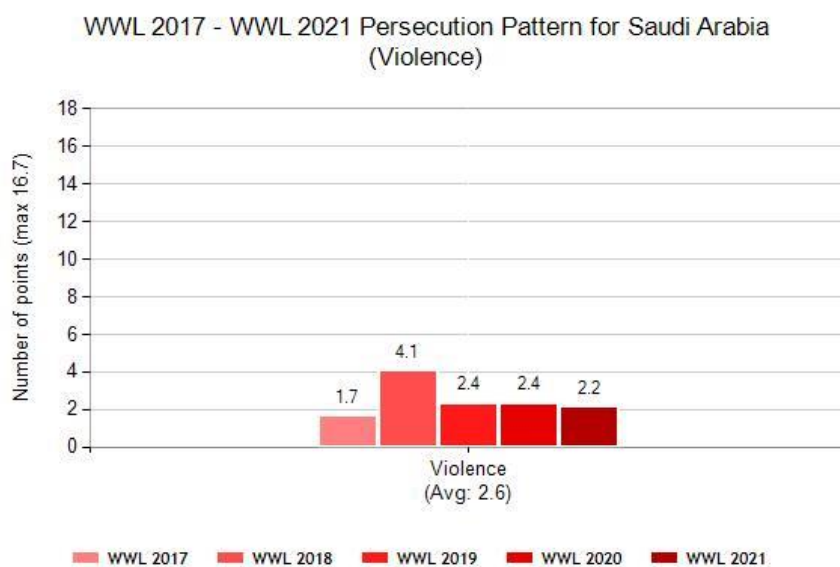
The average pressure over the five *spheres of life* has been extremely high and stable for the past five reporting periods, with scores keeping to the range of 14.9 - 15.2 points. The slight increase after WWL 2019 was due to the availability of more information from inside the country.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



Pressure in all *spheres of life* has been stable and most often at an extremely high or at a very high level bordering on extreme since WWL 2017 (and indeed in earlier WWL reporting periods).

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



As with the pressure on Christians, the score for violence is also very stable. Only in WWL 2018 did the score go above 4.0 points. For all other reporting periods, the score has not been above 2.4 points.

Gender-specific religious persecution Female

Female Pressure Points
Denied access to social community/networks
Denied/restricted healthcare
Forced divorce
Forced marriage
Incarceration by family (house arrest)
Travel bans/restrictions on movement
Violence – physical
Violence – psychological
Violence – sexual
Violence – Verbal

In Saudi Arabia, the official religion and law is Islamic, and [all citizens are expected to be Muslims](#) (US Department of State, “2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Saudi Arabia”). It is the country that, according to Georgetown, “retains its dubious status as the country with the most extensive legal discrimination against women” (Georgetown, “Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20, p.39). Women are subordinate to men, and under constant monitoring.

Leaving Islam is one of the biggest sins a Muslim can commit; female Christians with a Muslim background are exposed to considerable pressure sparked by their faith but compounded by their gender. For Saudi female converts from Islam, pressure is most commonly exerted by family and community. Upon discovery of their conversion, they risk physical violence, verbal harassment, and being forcibly married to conservative Muslims as a ‘corrective’ measure (sometimes as a second wife). Within such marriages, women are likely to suffer from sexual and psychological abuse. Whilst boys are more likely to be expelled from the home, girls are more likely to be locked in under strict house arrest, have their phones removed and be isolated from the outside world. Converts who are already married risk being divorced and losing custody of their children.

Outside the context of marriages, sources report that instances of rape and sexual assault are commonplace across Saudi Arabia for the thousands of non-Saudi (especially Asian and African) house maids across the country who are Christian (or non-Islamic), a position in which they are commonly abused and virtually treated as slaves. This reflects the subordinate position of women in Saudi society and their unprotected status when on their own (e.g. when working outside their home).

Given these pressures - and the ultimate threat of honor killings - it comes as no surprise that many women choose to become secret believers. Fleeing is rarely an option, as despite [2019](#) legislation allowing women to travel without a chaperone, the movement of women remains heavily controlled by men who can easily withhold her money and possessions (HRW, 22 August 2019).

In some instances, the low status of women in Saudi society can result in an easing of pressures compared to men. As a country expert explained: “Women are already oppressed and often disregarded as unimportant. This could lead to more freedom and less persecution simply because the family doesn’t care. Some families will let it go simply because the woman isn’t valuable.” This however compounds psychological trauma and feelings of isolation and rejection.

Gender-specific religious persecution Male

Male Pressure Points
Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Forced out of home – expulsion
Forced to flee town/country
Imprisonment by government
Violence – death
Violence – physical
Violence – psychological
Violence – Verbal

The male-dominated nature of public society in Saudi means that Saudi Christian men pay a considerable price if their faith becomes known. Saudi Arabia’s strict Islamic society means that any deviation from standard behavior is quickly observed. A country expert observed: “They will lose everything - life, family, reputation, position as a son, job, and financial support.”

Male converts face pressure from their family unit, as well as from wider society. They risk being publicly shamed, beaten, imprisoned, thrown out of their home, emotionally abused and threatened. They may be denied financial support, then offered material incentives to return to Islam and revoke the shame brought upon the family. Alternatively they might be taken to a Sheikh who will pressure them to recant. If it becomes clear that a convert will not change, however, the threat of death is all too tangible.

Compounding the psychological trauma, families commonly cover up why they are mistreating their male family member. A country expert explained that one Christian “was disowned by his family who then lied to others about why [he was disowned] which further shamed him. They even posted lies about him on social media.”

If converts are detained or imprisoned, their families will be affected by such absence on an economic level, since men are by and large the providers in Saudi families. In light of these pressures and the potentially crippling impact they could have on their families, most converts choose to live as secret believers. This extends as far as not even telling their own children about their faith, for fear that extended family members or school staff could discover that they have left Islam.

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the [US State Department’s IRF 2019 report](#) (pages 90-96):

A major religious minority facing discrimination and persecution in Saudi Arabia are Shiite Muslims who are located mostly in the Eastern Province. Regarded as heretics by Saudi rulers for most of Saudi history up until today, Shiites are discriminated against in the justice system, education, public-sector employment opportunities, government posts and religious activities. Shiites seek greater political participation and more religious tolerance. Following sectarian tensions in the region, including the war against the Iran-backed rebels in Yemen, the Shiites’ hope for tolerance and pluralism is fading.

Shiite clerics and activists who advocate for equal treatment of Shiite Muslims risk arrest and even execution on charges of opposing the government. Examples:

- "In April 2019, Saudi Arabia executed 37 people, 32 of whom were Shi’a Muslims, on charges including 'provoking sectarian strife', 'spreading chaos', and 'disturbing security'. Those beheaded included prominent Shi’a Muslim cleric Sheikh Mohammed al-Atiya, who was charged with attempting to 'spread the Shi’a confession', and Abdulkareem al-Hawaj, a Shi’a Muslim arrested after participating in a protest at the age of 16". ([USCIRF 2020](#))
- "On November 13, 2019 rights groups announced that Hussein al-Ribh, a 38-year-old Shia activist who was in detention since 2017, died in Dammam Prison. Some Shia activists outside the country stated that authorities tortured al-Ribh while he was detained."
- "In April 2019 the government executed 37 citizens for 'terrorism crimes', the largest mass execution since 2016. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), at least 33 of the 37 were from the country’s minority Shia community and had been convicted following what they stated were unfair trials for various alleged crimes, including protest-related offenses." ([US State Department’s IRF 2019 report](#))

- "[I]n August, Sheikh Saleh Abdulaziz al-Dhamiri died due to a heart condition while held in solitary confinement in Tarafia Prison." ([US State Department's IRF 2019 report](#))
- "Authorities detained Thumar al-Marzouqi, Mohammed al-Sadiq, and Bader al-Ibrahim, three Shia Muslims who have written in the past on the discrimination faced by Shia Muslims, in April 2019 with no official charges filed; they remained in detention at year's end." ([US State Department's IRF 2019 report](#))

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Islamic oppression, blended with Clan oppression

"Vision 2030" plans have been influenced i) by the demands made by the younger generation; ii) by the need to move away from dependency on the oil industry; and iii) by the shifts in regional and global political alliances. The plans are not new, but if the crown prince is given the ability to execute them, significant changes could take place in society, leading to more openness and a move to a more moderate form of Islam. Social and economic reforms are likely to have continuing impact, particularly if they are driven by the large youth demographic and the technological advancement, since Saudis are among the world's most prolific social media users. As such, the overall expectation is that some parts of Saudi society may begin to feel more freedom to show tolerance towards non-Muslims.

Nevertheless, ultra-conservative Islam is still very much alive and active in Saudi Arabia and will not allow any changes in society to be too comprehensive. Reforms could in fact cause polarization in society leading to an increase in the targeting and persecution of minorities (including Christians) by ultra-conservative elements, such as Islamic leaders and tribal leaders. Due to the challenges of bringing more conservative elements on board with the reform program (and a potential backlash by conservatives), the king and crown prince might feel compelled to assert or re-assert their strict Islamic credentials. This could lead to expatriate Christians experiencing a greater tightening of control.

Also, observers warn that if the number of Saudi Christians is growing and openness towards Christianity is increasing, this could cause an increase in the number of incidents of persecution against converts in the not too distant future. In conclusion, the severe religious restrictions which typically result from the Persecution engine *Islamic oppression* blended with *Clan oppression* which in its fully developed form, are likely to continue to lead to severe pressure on religious minorities (including Christians) in 2021 and beyond.

Dictatorial paranoia

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has loosened social restrictions affecting the youth. As such, cinemas were opened for the first time in 35 years and women were allowed to drive as of June 2018. This apparent shift towards younger, more tolerant leadership and away from traditional roots is possibly an effort to take the large number of Saudi youth seriously who long for more freedom. Also, the powers of the religious police were reduced and it is especially this entity that was active in raiding Christian migrant house-church fellowships. Moreover, the crown prince [stated](#) in October 2017 that the kingdom needed to "return" to a "moderate Islam

that is open to all religions and to the world". He hosted and visited representatives of the Vatican, Coptic, Anglican and Evangelical churches, which indicates a new openness to direct inter-faith engagement. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) says the crown prince is strengthening his position and may [officially take over power](#) in 2021 (EIU, last accessed 10 December 2020).

Although foreign Christians working in Saudi Arabia are hopeful that the developments mentioned above will ultimately lead to more tolerance towards other religions, the inter-religious discussions have not yet led to any substantive improvement in the treatment of expatriate Christians and have not indicated any intent to increase the religious freedom of Saudi Christians. Commentators warn that these reforms are mostly 'cosmetic', and it is also the same crown prince who started the war against Yemen which has led to the world's most serious humanitarian crisis at the current time (and also to an increased persecution of Christians in Yemen). Furthermore, the breaking of diplomatic relations with Canada in August 2018 after Canada raised human rights concerns, shows how the Saudi regime is determined to continue its agenda without outside interference.

Under the influence of more conservative elements in the kingdom, both the king and crown prince could choose to put more emphasis on the Islamic character of the country (see paragraph on *Islamic oppression* above). This could work out in such a way that the one persecution engine (*Dictatorial paranoia*) would strengthen the other (*Islamic oppression*), which could lead to higher pressure on Christians.

Finally, the "Saudization" of the work force may also lead to a fall in the number of migrant Christians entering the country.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: all citizens are expected to be Muslims - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/saudi-arabia/%22%20/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: 2019 legislation - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/08/22/saudi-arabia-travel-restrictions-saudi-women-lifted>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: US State Department's IRF 2019 report - <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: USCIRF - <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Saudi%20Arabia.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: US State Department's IRF 2019 report - <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: US State Department's IRF 2019 report - <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: US State Department's IRF 2019 report - <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>
- Future outlook: stated - <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/saudi-crown-prince-promises-return-moderate-islam-171024182102549.html>
- Future outlook: officially take over power - <http://country.eiu.com/saudi-arabia>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on World Watch Research's Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) and on the World Watch Monitor website:

- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Saudi Arabia>
- <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/Saudi Arabia>

External Links - Further useful reports

- Further useful reports: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Saudi Arabia> - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Saudi%20Arabia>
- Further useful reports: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/Saudi Arabia> - <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/Saudi%20Arabia>