



SAUDI ARABIA: Country Dossier

May 2018



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

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World Watch List 2018

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2017	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2016	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2015	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2014
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.6	94	92	92	92	90
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	89	88	81	78
3	Somalia	16.0	16.2	16.1	16.3	16.4	10.4	91	91	87	90	80
4	Sudan	14.2	14.5	14.3	15.6	16.0	12.0	87	87	84	80	73
5	Pakistan	14.4	13.5	13.8	15.0	13.1	16.7	86	88	87	79	77
6	Eritrea	15.2	14.5	15.8	16.1	15.2	9.4	86	82	89	79	72
7	Libya	15.2	15.3	14.2	15.7	15.5	10.4	86	78	79	76	71
8	Iraq	14.7	14.7	14.9	14.9	15.1	11.3	86	86	90	86	78
9	Yemen	16.7	16.6	16.4	16.5	16.7	2.6	85	85	78	73	74
10	Iran	14.0	14.1	14.5	15.8	16.4	10.0	85	85	83	80	77
11	India	12.6	12.7	13.2	14.7	12.9	14.4	81	73	68	62	55
12	Saudi Arabia	14.9	13.7	14.2	15.5	16.4	4.1	79	76	76	77	78
13	Maldives	15.2	15.5	13.5	15.8	16.7	1.1	78	76	76	78	77
14	Nigeria	11.8	11.5	13.1	12.1	12.1	16.5	77	78	78	78	70
15	Syria	14.4	14.3	14.1	14.5	14.7	3.7	76	86	87	83	79
16	Uzbekistan	15.5	12.1	13.0	13.1	16.0	3.5	73	71	70	69	68
17	Egypt	11.3	12.8	12.2	11.7	9.5	12.4	70	65	64	61	61
18	Vietnam	12.4	8.4	12.7	14.2	13.8	7.4	69	71	66	68	65
19	Turkmenistan	15.2	10.3	12.9	12.8	15.2	1.9	68	67	66	63	62
20	Laos	12.9	8.6	13.6	13.9	14.9	3.5	67	64	58	58	62
21	Jordan	13.2	13.3	11.5	10.9	13.0	4.3	66	63	59	56	56
22	Tajikistan	13.3	11.3	11.8	11.8	12.9	4.3	65	58	58	50	47
23	Malaysia	12.0	14.9	12.8	12.4	9.3	3.9	65	60	58	55	49
24	Myanmar	11.6	11.1	13.2	10.4	11.0	7.8	65	62	62	60	59
25	Nepal	12.6	11.9	10.7	11.5	12.4	4.6	64		(not in WWL)		
26	Brunei	14.3	14.2	10.7	10.2	13.5	0.9	64	64	61	58	57
27	Qatar	13.4	12.9	11.7	11.3	14.1	0.0	63	66	65	64	63
28	Kazakhstan	12.8	10.0	10.2	12.2	13.7	3.7	63	56	55	51	49
29	Ethiopia	9.8	10.0	10.8	10.9	10.5	10.4	62	64	67	61	65
30	Tunisia	11.9	13.2	10.6	10.7	12.0	3.9	62	61	58	55	55
31	Turkey	12.5	9.7	9.8	11.7	9.6	8.7	62	57	55	52	(not in WWL)
32	Kenya	12.0	10.9	10.0	7.9	11.7	9.4	62	68	68	63	48
33	Bhutan	11.9	11.6	12.4	11.4	13.1	1.1	62	61	56	56	54
34	Kuwait	13.4	12.6	11.6	10.9	12.3	0.4	61	57	56	49	50
35	Central African Republic	9.0	8.1	10.1	8.9	8.8	16.1	61	58	59	67	67
36	Palestinian Territories	12.1	12.8	10.7	10.5	12.6	1.1	60	64	62	58	53
37	Mali	11.4	9.6	11.2	8.1	9.2	9.6	59	59	55	52	54
38	Indonesia	10.3	11.0	11.5	10.0	9.3	6.9	59	55	55	50	46
39	Mexico	8.3	7.6	12.1	10.7	9.7	10.4	59	57	56	55	(not in WWL)
40	United Arab Emirates	13.6	12.2	10.0	10.4	11.8	0.2	58	55	55	49	51
41	Bangladesh	10.4	8.8	11.4	9.6	7.5	10.0	58	63	57	51	46
42	Algeria	12.3	13.1	7.5	10.4	12.4	2.0	58	58	56	55	54
43	China	9.2	7.2	8.0	10.7	13.3	9.1	57	57	57	57	51
44	Sri Lanka	11.1	7.6	10.5	11.3	10.1	6.9	57	55	(not in WWL)	51	55
45	Azerbaijan	13.1	9.1	9.3	11.1	12.4	2.4	57	(not in WWL)	57	50	(not in WWL)
46	Oman	12.1	12.2	9.9	9.4	12.6	1.1	57	53	53	55	56
47	Mauritania	11.5	11.3	11.1	12.2	11.0	0.0	57	55	(not in WWL)	50	51
48	Bahrain	12.9	13.1	10.2	9.9	10.3	0.2	57	54	54	(not in WWL)	48
49	Colombia	7.9	7.6	11.9	8.6	8.5	11.9	56	53	55	55	56
50	Djibouti	12.2	12.2	10.3	9.9	11.7	0.0	56	57	58	60	46

WWL 2018 Persecution Watch Countries¹

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
51	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.4	13.9	0.4	56
52	Kyrgyzstan	11.7	9.5	10.0	8.1	11.6	2.8	54
53	Tanzania	10.1	10.3	10.1	9.5	9.0	3.9	53
54	Russian Federation	11.1	8.4	10.1	8.9	10.7	2.0	51
55	Morocco	10.4	11.5	7.6	8.8	12.0	0.6	51
56	Cuba	8.5	4.9	10.7	10.4	12.2	2.4	49
57	Uganda	10.9	8.7	9.5	8.7	4.8	3.9	46
58	Niger	9.9	9.7	9.0	7.0	7.1	2.6	45

¹ These countries reached a score of 41 points or more but did not receive enough points to be included in the WWL Top 50.

SAUDI ARABIA – Country Dossier (May 2018)

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Introduction

This country report is a collation of documents based around [Open Doors World Watch List \(WWL\)](#)¹ including statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations, and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database ([WCD](#))². Further news and analysis is supplied by [World Watch Monitor](#)³ and WWR staff.

SAUDI ARABIA		
World Watch List	Score	Rank
WWL 2018	79	12
WWL 2017	76	14
WWL 2016	76	14
WWL 2015	77	12
WWL 2014	78	6

¹ See: <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/>

² WCD website: <http://www.brill.com/publications/online-resources/world-christian-database>

³ See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

WWL 2018: Keys to understanding SAUDI ARABIA

Link for general background information:

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14702705>

Recent country history

Founded in 1932, Saudi Arabia has been transformed from an under-developed desert kingdom into one of the richest nations in the region thanks to the exploitation of its extensive oil reserves starting in the 1950s. The oil industry drew large numbers of migrant workers to the country, including Christians. From 2005 to 2015, King Abdullah gradually modernized the country. The Arab Spring uprisings which spread in 2011 had little effect on Saudi Arabia. There were some calls for political reform and some small scale protests, especially 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 or implemented, such as easing certain restrictions on women. The country's first elections for municipal councilors 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 Houthis and replaced by the former president. The ongoing war in Yemen has resulted in a high number of civilian casualties and a humanitarian crisis, leading to worldwide criticism.

In 2016, Saudi Arabia launched an ambitious set of socio economic reforms, amongst others aimed at reducing its dependency on oil, known as "Saudi Vision 2030". The plan focuses not only on the Saudi economy but also mentions the importance of creating "a vibrant society" and of "living by Islamic values".

The religious landscape

The desert kingdom controls the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina (birth and resting place of Mohammed, the 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. Saudi Arabia finances huge missionary efforts beyond its own borders through the Islamic missionary organization "Muslim World League" based in Mecca. Islamic proselytizing literature and missionaries are being sent abroad and the construction of Wahhabi mosques is being financed through oil dollars. Also, the country sponsors academic institutions on the condition that centers for Islamic Studies are 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, South East

Asia and even Western Europe. Also, religious hatred against Jews and Christians still features in Saudi school textbooks, in spite of promised reforms.

The political landscape

The country is an absolute monarchy and its royal ruling family – the House of Saud – includes approximately 7,000 members, of whom about 200 have political influence, holding key positions for many years. Political parties are not allowed. 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. As geopolitical intelligence firm [Stratfor](#) puts it: “The relationship between the House of Saud and the religious leadership is a critical pillar of Saudi rule because it gives the government religious legitimacy and authority and allows it to balance an oftentimes conflicting domestic and foreign policy agenda.” However, the religious authorities are losing credibility among the population. Whereas they had previously banned satellite TV, Internet, camera phones as well as 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.

The socio-economic landscape

Saudi Arabia holds some 16% of the world’s known petroleum reserves and the petroleum sector accounts for the majority of export earnings and government revenues (87% and 90% respectively). 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 2017.⁴ 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 lack of economic diversity combined with a large number of foreign migrants (roughly 90%) working in the private sector has led to mounting youth unemployment and discontent among Saudis and a growing gap between rich and poor. The government has started measures to create more jobs for Saudis which involves 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 hard for them to hire foreign workers. In the long run, this could affect the number of expatriate and migrant workers entering the country – including the number of Christians.

⁴ See: <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/19/politics/jared-kushner-saudi-arms-deal-lockheed-martin/index.html>, last accessed 1 July 2017.

Concluding remarks

In only a matter of decades, Saudi Arabia has developed into one of largest exporters of petroleum worldwide. As the oil prices dropped in 2016, Saudi Arabia decided to implement austerity measures and cut bonuses and special allowances for civil servants and military personnel. After the oil prices rose again, these benefits were reinstated in April 2017. The Saudi kingdom is depending very much on the petroleum industry and is trying to diversify its economy and creating more jobs for Saudis, as set out in its ambitious plan of socio-economic reforms ‘Saudi Vision 2030’. This strategy document also clearly underlines the Saudi kingdom’s proud Islamic identity and leading role in the Muslim world.

Saudi Arabia is going through considerable social change. The Internet is playing an important role in this development, which could also lead to increased opportunities for online Christian ministry. On the other hand, the number of Christians entering the country may well fall in the long run as a result of the “Saudization” of the work force.

WWL 2018: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2017	Christians	Chr%
32,743,000	1,406,000	4.3

Source: WCD, May 2017

How did the Christians get there?

Centuries ago, Saudi Arabia had considerable numbers of Jews and synagogues, Christians (probably mostly Nestorians) and church buildings. Even today, there are ruins of a church – presumably Nestorian – near Jubail in Eastern Province. It dates from the 4th century and is said to be the world’s oldest church. There are different 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 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 the Gospel to the Himyarite king of South Arabia, who as a result converted. Both traditions indicate that churches were built especially – but not exclusively - in South Arabia, where ultimately most Christians would be. After the arrival of Nestorianism, Christianity continued to grow in the 4th century and even flourished in the 5th century. For hundreds of years, Christian merchants and tribes were living in and travelling through the vast plains of the Arabian Peninsula. This would all change with the conquest of Islam (7th - 10th centuries), when Jews and Christians converted to Islam either voluntarily or under duress, with many others being 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 and it became hard to imagine that any other religion could ever coexist with Islam in its birthplace. 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 churches are allowed. The churches also played an important role in providing medical care and schools, especially in the pre-petroleum era. The oil-boom of the 1970s led to an enormous expansion in local development, infrastructure and labor force, with more foreign workers arriving from Asia, Africa, other parts of the Middle East and the West. It is estimated that there are now more than 15 million foreign workers in the Gulf.

What church networks exist today?

Orthodox	Catholic	Protestant	Independent	Unaffiliated	Double-aff	Evangelical	Renewalist
50,800	1,244,000	35,200	57,000	19,300	0	27,800	229,000

Source: WCD, May 2017

Public Christian worship is forbidden in Saudi Arabia and its citizens are officially only allowed to adhere to Islam. The roughly 1.4 million Christians in Saudi Arabia are mostly foreign workers of Asian, African or Western origin. The main denomination by far is the Roman Catholic Church, followed by independent and Orthodox congregations. Traditional Protestants only have a small presence. The majority of Christian migrant workers are Catholics from the Philippines and India. Church-buildings do not exist in Saudi Arabia, so all expatriate Christians have to meet secretly in small groups, otherwise they run a high risk of being arrested.

Religious context (selection)

Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Ethno-religionist	Jewish	Bahai	Atheist & others ⁶
1,406,000	30,164,000	663,000	110,000	61,400	-	6,300	238,300

Also to note: Chinese folk: 29,400 and Sikh: 64,800

Source: WCD, May 2017

⁵ **Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelicals:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalists:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal movements.

⁶ This category includes Atheists, Agnostics and New religionists.

The 92.2% Muslim desert kingdom is defined by Wahhabism, a purist and strict interpretation of Sunni Islam. In spite of the fairly large numbers of expatriate and migrant workers of various faiths it is forbidden to openly practice other religions. Saudi Arabia controls the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina, which are the birth and resting places of Mohammed, the prophet of Islam, and hosts millions of Hadj visitors every year. Non-Muslims are not allowed to enter Mecca.

There is a significant Shiite minority which is located mostly in the Eastern Province and suffers prejudice and discrimination in respect to public services and equitable representation in government, educational and public-sector employment opportunities, and judicial matters. Shiite clerics and activists who advocate for equal treatment of Shiite Muslims risk arrest and even execution on charges of violent opposition to the government.⁷

Notes on the current situation

According to observers in the region, the indigenous Christian presence in Saudi Arabia is growing. They are not only growing in number, but also in boldness to share the Gospel. As a result, it is likely that Saudi Christians will experience more persecution in the future.

WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018 Points: 79 / Position: 12

WWL 2017 Points: 76 / Position: 14

WWL 2016 Points: 76 / Position: 14

Where persecution comes from

Generally speaking, anti-Christian feelings (and feelings against anything perceived as non-Muslim) are common among Saudi citizens. Converts from Islam to Christianity mostly suffer pressure from their extended family, which can even include death threats. Government officials create and maintain a strict Islamic system that treats Christians as second class people and denies places of worship to any other religion than Islam. Islamic leaders also try impose strict Islamic law on all people who come to Saudi Arabia, including Christians. They are most often a problem to converts who are still considered to be Muslims.

⁷ US State Department, [International Religious Freedom Report for 2015](#), accessed on 6 July 2017.

How Christians are suffering

Most Christians in Saudi Arabia are expatriates or migrants who 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 migrant 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. Nevertheless, the small number of Saudi Christians has been increasing and they are also becoming bolder, sharing their Christian faith with others on the Internet and Christian satellite TV channels. This public sharing has often led to serious repercussions either from the family or authorities.

Examples

- Many converts are under strong pressure from their families and are fearful of their violent reaction if their new faith would become known. Converts run a high risk of being sentenced to death for apostasy, however as far as is known there were none officially executed for this reason in recent years. Nevertheless, the risk of extra-judicial killings cannot be excluded in an attempt to save the honor of the family.
- Several expatriate Christians were arrested and briefly detained in a small number of raids on fellowship meetings. Some local believers were arrested and falsely accused of having links with extremist groups.
- Three house churches were reportedly closed, some after being raided by the police.
- Christians - both Saudis and foreigners - risk imprisonment, physical abuse and serious threats because of their faith. Several were forced to leave the country because of their faith or faith-related activities.
- Rape and sexual harassment remain a huge problem and Christians working as housemaids in Saudi homes are particularly vulnerable.

WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics

Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

WWL 2018 Points: 79 / Position: 12

WWL 2017 Points: 76 / Position: 14

WWL 2016 Points: 76 / Position: 14

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Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 79 points, Saudi Arabia ranks 12 on WWL 2018. The increase of three points compared to WWL 2017 is mostly explained by an increase in the number of violent incidents against Christians which include a higher number of Christians arrested, house churches closed and Christians fleeing the country. The overall score for pressure on Christians remains more or less constant in Saudi Arabia, one of the world's few countries where church buildings are forbidden.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Saudi Arabia ⁸	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	Very strong
Religious nationalism	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	Very strong
Denominational protectionism	Not at all

⁸ The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	Not at all

Islamic oppression (Very strong):

The desert kingdom is defined by Wahhabism, a purist and strict interpretation of Islam. It is forbidden to openly practice other religions. Saudi Arabia controls the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina, which are the birth and burial places of Mohammed, the prophet of Islam. The Saudi government is combating Islamic militancy on a national level because it can be a threat to the reign of the royal family. However, private Saudi funds do support Islamic militant groups outside the country and are one of the main sources of Sunni armed conflict in the world, e.g. in Iraq and Syria. Saudi Arabia's legal system is based on Islamic law (Sharia). Apostasy – conversion to another religion – is punishable by death if the accused does not recant.

Ethnic antagonism (Very strong - blended with Islamic oppression):

Typical for this persecution engine is how it results in pressure being exerted to enforce on communities and households the continuing influence of age-old indigenous customs established by tribes or ethnic people groups. In the case of Saudi Arabia, ethnic antagonism is clearly mixed with Islam. This particularly affects Christians from a Muslim background.

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 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. The top two authorities of the land have implemented many changes that have affected 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.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Saudi Arabia	Level of influence
Government officials at any level from local to national	Very strong
Ethnic group leaders	Strong

Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Strong
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Not at all
Violent religious groups	Weak
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Strong
Own (extended) family	Very strong
Political parties at any level from local to national	Not at all
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Not at all
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Very weak

The following drivers of persecution are active on a medium, strong or very strong level in Saudi Arabia: government officials at any level from local to national, ethnic group leaders, non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national, normal citizens and family including extended family. Converts from Islam to Christianity are mostly suffering from pressure from their family and extended family, which can even include death threats, honor killings and permanent in-house detention. Government officials create and maintain a strict Islamic system that treats Christians as second class people and denies places of worship to any other religion than Islam. Islamic leaders also try to impose strict Islamic law on all people who come to Saudi Arabia, including Christians. Islamic leaders are also a problem to converts (who are still considered to be Muslims) as well as to low-paid foreign Christian workers who are continuously pressured to convert to Islam, particularly the ones living isolated from other Christians serving in Saudi homes. Finally “normal citizens” are especially a source of pressure for converts, since there are anti-Christian and anti-non-Islamic feelings among Saudi citizens in general.

Context

In only a matter of decades, Saudi Arabia has developed into one of largest exporters of petroleum worldwide. It is this development that has drawn large numbers of foreign workers to the country, including Christians. This economic 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 2017.⁹

⁹ See: <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/19/politics/jared-kushner-saudi-arms-deal-lockheed-martin/index.html>, last accessed 15 September 2017.

Since 2015, Saudi Arabia has been leading military intervention in Yemen's civil war, reportedly in efforts to stabilize the Yemeni government, but considering the Saudi Arabian airstrikes on airports, ports, hospitals, schools, funerals (all causing the largest humanitarian catastrophe in the world today), it is more likely to be an effort to avert any possibility of its southern neighbor becoming Shiite-controlled.

In order to reduce its dependency on the petroleum industry, the Saudi kingdom is trying to diversify its economy and creating more jobs for Saudis, as set out in its ambitious plan for socio-economic reform entitled "Saudi Vision 2030". Announced in April 2016, this strategy document also clearly underlines the Saudi kingdom's proud Islamic identity and leading role in the Muslim world. Saudi Arabia is going through considerable social change. The Internet is playing an important role in this development, which could also lead to increased opportunities for online Christian ministry. Nevertheless, this development is likely to be coupled with higher levels of internet monitoring. In another effort to compensate the disappointing economy and to compensate the costs of war with Yemen, Saudi Arabia has increased visa fees for spouses and children of foreign workers. As this is becoming too costly, many low-paid Christian workers are leaving, which is affecting the church. Several church leaders are reporting that 20-25% of their congregation have already left the country. This will have a negative impact on the Christian community in the country, causing a growing lack of church leaders and members. On the other hand, the number of converts with a Muslim or Hindu background seem to increase. However, this does not compensate the number of Christians leaving.

The increased role of the internet, social media and satellite TV has radically changed Saudi youth culture. As a result the gap between Saudi's large youth population and the ageing monarch is growing. The majority of the population is under thirty and they (especially women) are longing for more freedom without being restricted by the religious police. The decision to open election ballots for women (a legacy of late King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud) and to [allow women drivers](#)¹⁰ is a step forward in that respect. There is also a considerable degree of youth unemployment, partly caused by the weak education system and a lack of work zeal. These factors lead to widespread social discontent which can drive young people toward radical Islam. This is aggravated by a clearly divided society - the wealth of the elite versus the poverty of the masses. On the other hand, social discontent is not new - and has been bought off with large sums of money, for instance in the form of allocations for housing finance. Social dissatisfaction has been in existence for at least twenty years (including the civil disobedience of women driving, for instance). Moreover, the internet revolution has also reached Islamic leaders: Several imams have twitter accounts and have a large following. The number of Christian converts from Islam (and other religions) is increasing, along with their boldness in sharing their new faith.

Another major religious minority facing discrimination and persecution in Saudi Arabia are Shiite Muslims. Regarded as heretics by Saudi rulers for most of Saudi history up until today, Shiites are discriminated against in the justice system, education, government positions and

¹⁰ See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-women-driving/rain-begins-with-a-single-drop-saudi-women-rejoice-at-end-of-driving-ban-idUSKCN1C217F>, last accessed 30 September 2017.

religious activities. On the Shiite wish lists are 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.

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 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. 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.

Historical Christian communities:

Indigenous historical Christian communities do not exist in Saudi Arabia.

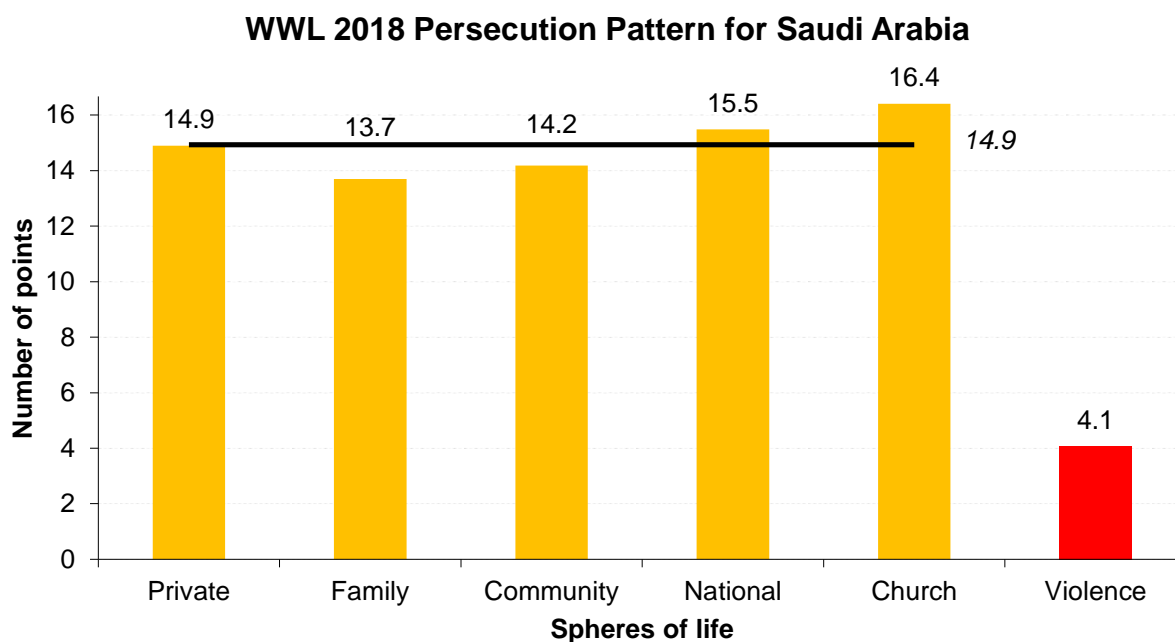
Communities of covert converts to Christianity:

Converts are mainly from a Muslim background. There are few Saudi converts in the country and they often live out their Christian faith in deepest secrecy. Many of them responded to Christian programs via satellite TV or became Christians after experiencing how God revealed Himself in a vision or a dream. Muslims have testified to joining the Hajj - the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca – with a sincere desire to obey God and have received a divine vision showing them that they need Jesus. 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 in Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, the small number of Saudi converts has been increasing and they are also becoming bolder, sharing their Christian faith with others on the Internet and Christian satellite TV channels. This public sharing has often led to serious repercussions either from the family or authorities.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

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

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The WWL 2018 Persecution pattern for Saudi Arabia shows:

- The average pressure on Christians remains stable at virtually the same extreme level (14.9 points) as in WWL 2017.
- The scores for pressure in all *Spheres of life* are at extreme levels, except for the score in the *Family sphere* which is at a very high level bordering on extreme. The *Family sphere* score is lowest due to expatriate and migrant Christians experiencing hardly any or less pressure than indigenous converts from Islam in this *Sphere of life*. The reason for this is that the families of migrant Christians are often not with them in Saudi Arabia.
- 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 *Ethnic antagonism* 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 rose from 1.7 in WWL 2017 to 4.1 as more reports of violence were registered. A higher number of Christians being arrested, Christian gatherings raided and Christians forced to flee the country for faith related reasons were reported. Christians in the country are usually very careful how they act in order to avoid harsh consequences and this helps keep the violence score down.

Private sphere:

Christians with a Muslim background cannot openly practice their faith. Giving any indication of their new faith to those around them can have serious consequences. Many expatriate Christians from the West have relatively more freedom to practice their faith privately and on their own compounds, as long as they do not evangelize Muslims. Asian and African Christians have to act carefully and persecution depends on the attitude and religion of fellow low-paid workers who live in the same "labor camps". Especially vulnerable are the Christian maids living in Saudi houses who are without any contact with other Christians and face constant abuse and pressure to become Muslim.

Family sphere:

All Saudis are considered Muslims. For a Muslim family, it is a great disgrace when one of its members leaves Islam. Converts run the great risk of honor-killing or physical violence if their families or communities discover their faith. A number have fled the country because of this. Open Christian weddings cannot be celebrated in Saudi Arabia and Christians with a Muslim background must marry according to Islamic rites. They cannot have their children registered as Christians or give them obviously Christian names. In school, children of converts are obliged to attend Islamic classes. In the case of divorces, custody of children and inheritance issues, converts are often disadvantaged.

Community sphere:

All Christians are more or less put under pressure to renounce their faith through all kinds of discrimination. Converts to Christianity will experience harassment and discrimination in their workplace if their new faith is known. Sentiments against adherents of other religions are strong throughout Saudi society. Asian and African workers, including Christians, have been exposed to verbal, physical and sexual abuse from employers. International schools are banned from using non-Islamic holidays, such as Christmas and New Year, for school vacation. Schools violating this ban risk losing their permits.

National sphere:

There are no provisions for religious freedom in the kingdom's constitution or basic laws. The legal system is based on Sharia law and conversion to any religion other than Islam is punishable by death. Muslims have more rights than followers of other religions. Converts in particular face serious pressure in dealing with the authorities if their Christian faith is known. Foreign Christians will face problems in this sphere of life if they are active in proselytizing Muslims, which can lead to imprisonment and deportation.

Church sphere:

There are no church buildings at all in Saudi Arabia and Christian services take place at secret places. Although the government recognizes the right of non-Muslims to worship in private, the religious police (Muttawa) often do not respect this right. Christian services are seriously restricted by the strict gender segregation, prohibiting men and women from different families to worship in the same room. Christians who engage in such activities risk arrest, intimate body searches in life-threatening conditions, imprisonment, lashing, deportation, and torture. 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. Proselytism of Muslims, Bible training, publishing and importing Bibles (and other Christian materials) in Arabic are all illegal.

Violence:

There were more reports on anti-Christian violence, leading to a higher score for violence and a higher total score than in the WWL 2017 reporting period. Three house-churches were closed, some after being raided by the police. A dozen Christians were arrested, the majority of them while being present at a church meeting. Several others were Christians with a Muslim background who were falsely accused of having links with extremist groups. They were all released during the WWL 2018 reporting period.

A slightly higher number of Christians were forced to leave the country for faith related reasons than in the WWL 2017 reporting period. Most of these were Christians with a Muslim background who had received death threats. A few were also some of the arrested migrant Christians as their residence permits were not extended after their arrest. As in previous years, rape and sexual harassment remain a huge problem in Saudi Arabia. Asian and African Christians, mainly housemaids working in Saudi homes, are very vulnerable in this respect. According to country researchers ‘thousands and thousands’ of house maids are suffering from physical and sexual abuse. More research needs to be done into this topic.

Many converts are under strong pressure from their families or others and are fearful of their violent reaction if their new faith would become known. Although converts run a high risk of being sentenced to death for apostasy, as far as is known there were no official executions for this reason in recent times. Nevertheless, the risk of extra-judicial killings cannot be excluded in an attempt to save the honor of the family.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:

In a country where all citizens are considered to be Muslim, female Christians with a Muslim background are especially vulnerable. If their conversion gets known, they risk violence, house-arrest and forced marriage. In the strict Islamic Saudi society, women are closely monitored. They need to mind the family’s reputation - any undesired behavior can harm their family’s honor, which is considered a mortal sin. Leaving Islam is one of the biggest crimes a Muslim can commit. Saudi’s legal system is based on Sharia Law and apostasy carries the death sentence. If married, a female convert risks divorce and losing custody of her children. This means loss of a social safety net and protection. Considering this, it comes as no surprise that many female converts ultimately leave the country, for their own safety.

Asian and African workers are known to suffer from physical and sexual abuse by their employers. Christian and other non-Islamic workers are additionally vulnerable in this respect. Among them, women are even more at risk of abuse. This is very much connected to the subordinate position of women in Saudi society and their unprotected status as women alone (working outside their house). For instance, Saudi women are not allowed to leave home without the companion of a male relative.

Male:

Deviations from standard behavior is quickly noticed and male converts to Christianity will experience pressure exerted by family and society.

Future outlook

In its annual forecast, the Economist Intelligence Unit¹¹, expects crown prince Mohammed bin Salman to ‘continue to tighten his grip on power, evidenced recently by the mass arrest of senior royal family members. Saudi Arabia's rivalry with Iran will dominate foreign policy, while jihadi terrorist attacks are likely to reoccur during the forecast period. Fiscal austerity will persist, but, even with oil prices slowly recovering, the government will continue to contract substantial new debt.’

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has loosened social restrictions affecting the youth. As such, cinemas will be opened for the first time in 35 years and women will be 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 compromise with the large group of Saudi youth who long for more freedom. Also, since King Salman took over, the powers of the religious police were reduced. 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”.¹² Local migrant Christians are hopeful that this would ultimately lead to more tolerance towards other religions, especially if he takes over as king soon. However, it is also the same Crown Prince who started the war against Yemen which has led to the world’s biggest humanitarian crisis at the current time and has added to the persecution of local Christians.

Forced by the continuous decline of the price of oil, Saudi Arabia is looking towards other means of income generation. They are now also eyeing local and international tourism which could also play a role in the opening up of the country and making it more tolerant. Nevertheless, ultra-conservative Islam is still very 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.

On an international level, the struggle for power in the region with Iran – mostly in Yemen and Syria - is expected to dominate Saudi foreign agenda. As a result of this struggle and of the government’s confrontation with Islamic militant cells, the government might be inclined to pay less attention to Christian activities. Overall, the expectation is that the severe religious restrictions, which typically result from the persecution engine *Islamic oppression* blended with *ethnic antagonism* in its fully developed form, will continue to lead to severe pressure for religious minorities (including Christians) in 2018.

¹¹ See: <http://country.eiu.com/saudi-arabia>, last accessed 13 December 2017.

¹² See: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/saudi-crown-prince-promises-return-moderate-islam-171024182102549.html>, last accessed 13 December 2017.

Policy considerations

Open Doors recommends:

- The international community should engage with the Saudi government to call for provisions in the Constitution and basic laws to protect religious minorities and decriminalize conversions.
- The country's legislation and Constitution severely restrict Christian gatherings and the distribution of religious literature, in contrary to the principles of the ICCPR. Therefore, the international community should press the Saudi government to grant religious freedom to its citizens.
- The international community should press Saudi Arabia to fully investigate and punish verbal, physical and sexual abuse by employers of their domestic workers from South East Asia and Africa. Some of these are Christians and face extra vulnerability.
- Companies working with the Saudi government should take all available opportunities to discuss the status of Christians in the kingdom.
- The Saudi government should put in place a mechanism to hold the religious police accountable for violations of freedom of religion.

WWR in-depth reports

There are currently no in-depth reports on Saudi Arabia available at:
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

Open Doors article(s) from the region

There are currently no Open Doors articles on Saudi Arabia available at:
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

World Watch Monitor news articles

Up-to-date articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/saudi-arabia/>

- [Saudi Arabia told: ‘Christians are not second-class citizens’](#)
27 April 2018
A senior Vatican official told Saudi officials during a visit last week that Christians must not be treated as second-class citizens.
- [‘No better time’ for growth of Christianity in Saudi Arabia](#)
12 April 2018
Emad Al Abdy, one of the leaders of the Saudi Christian Association, believes “there is no better time than now” for growth of Christianity in Saudi Arabia, despite the pressure on Christians.
- [Saudi school textbooks still ‘promote hatred toward religious minorities’ – USCIRF](#)
27 March 2018
School textbooks in Saudi Arabia still include content “promoting violence and hatred toward religious minorities.
- [Saudi Arabia to ban ‘extremist ideologies’ from schools and universities](#)
23 March 2018
Saudi Arabia has pledged to ban the “extremist ideologies” espoused by the Muslim Brotherhood from school curricula and books, and to dismiss staff who support the group’s views.
- [Saudi Prince ‘commits’ to interfaith dialogue](#)
9 March 2018
As part of his first public trip abroad as the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia visited the UK and had a private meeting with Archbishop of Canterbury in London. As part of his reforms to modernise his country, the prince has promised to promote interfaith dialogue.
- [Saudi Crown Prince makes ‘unprecedented’ visit to Coptic Pope](#)
6 March 2018
On his first public trip abroad as the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman) visited close ally Egypt on 5 March 2018 and met the leader of the Coptic Church.

- [Saudi Arabia is modernising, but will this mean greater freedom for religious minorities?](#)
23 February 2018
The political landscape in the strict Islamic Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is changing, and quickly. A charismatic crown prince seems determined to modernise his country and even speaks of a shift towards a more “moderate” Islam.
- [A merry Saudi Christmas and the flight from Egypt](#)
25 December 2017
There are estimated to be between 1.5 and 2m Christians among the migrant workers across Saudi Arabia who in 2013 numbered an estimated 9 million, more than half the workforce.
- [How serious is Saudi Arabia about religious freedom?](#)
22 November 2017
Speaking at a conference for investors in Riyadh last month the 32-year-old Crown Prince said the conservative version of Islam practised in Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism, only arose after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. “We were not like this in the past,” he said.
- [Saudi Arabia to reopen ancient church as ‘gift’ to visiting Lebanese Patriarch](#)
16 November 2017
Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman, has reportedly announced plans to restore and re-open a 900-year-old church as a “gift” to the Lebanese Patriarch.
- [Saudi Arabia pledges to scrutinise hadiths to ‘eliminate’ extremism](#)
19 October 2017
Saudi’s King Salman has ordered an international council of senior Islamic scholars to monitor preachers and jurists’ use of Prophet Muhammad’s *hadiths* (sayings) “to prevent them being used to justify violence or extremism”.
- [Saudi Arabia clerics ‘guilty of hate speech’ against religious minorities](#)
3 October 2017
“Saudi Arabia has permitted government-appointed religious scholars and clerics to refer to religious minorities in derogatory terms or demonise them in official documents and religious rulings that influence government decision-making,” says a new report by Human Rights Watch.
- [Saudi schoolbooks ‘teach students to hate those of other faiths’](#)
18 September 2017
Students in Saudi Arabia’s schools receive religious education that “contains hateful and incendiary language” towards other Islamic traditions than Sunni Islam, and severe criticism of Jews, Christians and people of other faiths, according to Human Rights Watch.

- [US government warned of persistent ‘ideology of hatred’ in Saudi textbooks](#)
 28 July 2017
 An American expert has accused Saudi Arabia of “obfuscation” and of breaking its promises to reform textbooks that pump out an “ideology of hatred” that threatens security worldwide.
- [Saudi intellectual urges Muslim nations to treat Christians as equal citizens](#)
 28 July 2017
 The official designation of Christians as “protected people” in Islamic law is out of step with the modern concept of citizenship and should be abandoned, a Saudi intellectual has argued.
- [How Saudi Arabia promotes extremist Islam](#)
 2 May 2017
 For over 50 years now, the Gulf kingdom has been striving to spread Wahhabism. This sectarian doctrine fuels Sunni extremism by supporting the construction of hundreds of mosques, schools or Islamist cultural centres throughout the world.
- [Sheikh blames Saudi Arabia for global rise of Islamist terrorism](#)
 25 November 2016
 A leading Islamic scholar has described attacks on Christians by violent Islamic extremists as “heart-breaking” and condemned Islamic extremism as being “exactly the opposite” of what Islam teaches.

Recent country developments

Up-to-date articles are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Saudi+Arabia> (password: freedom).

- [Saudi Arabia/Egypt: Crown prince visits Coptic church](#)
 4 April 2018
 On his first public trip abroad as heir to the throne of Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has visited Egypt. His stay included a meeting with Coptic Pope Tawadros II at Cairo’s largest Coptic Orthodox church, a revolutionary step for a Saudi royal.
- [Saudi Arabia: Hate-speech against religious minorities continues](#)
 21 October 2017
 Religious minorities such as Shia, Christians and Jews continue to suffer from official hate-speech in Saudi Arabia, as Human Rights Watch reported.

- [Indonesia/Saudi Arabia: Saudi Arabia's investment in largest Muslim country to increase](#)
27 September 2017
The state-owned Saudi Fund for Development will be pouring 14 billion US dollars of social aid (which includes funding for businesses, education and religion) into the world's largest Muslim country.
- [Maldives/Saudi Arabia: Huge investments indicate ever closer ties with Saudi Arabia](#)
3 April 2017
There are reportedly plans for Maldives to sell the Faafu atoll for a sum of US\$10 billion dollars so that Saudi Arabia can develop it into the equivalent of the French Riviera.

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