

# SAUDI ARABIA 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

According to the 1992 Basic Law of Governance, the kingdom's official religion is Islam and the constitution is the Quran and Sunna (traditions and practices based on the life of the Prophet Muhammad). The legal system is based on sharia as interpreted within the Hanbali School of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence. Freedom of religion is not provided under the law and the government does not recognize the freedom to practice publicly any non-Muslim religion. The law criminalizes "the promotion of atheistic ideologies in any form," "any attempt to cast doubt on the fundamentals of Islam," publications that "contradict the provisions of Islamic law," and other acts deemed contrary to sharia, including non-Islamic public worship, public display of non-Islamic religious symbols, conversion by a Muslim to another religion, and proselytizing by a non-Muslim. Shia clerics and activists who advocated for equal treatment of Shia Muslims were arrested, and the Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr was executed after being convicted on a number of charges including inciting terrorism and sedition. The government convicted and imprisoned individuals on charges of apostasy, blasphemy, violating Islamic values and moral standards, insulting Islam, black magic, and sorcery. The government sometimes harassed, detained, arrested, and occasionally deported some foreign residents who participated in private non-Islamic religious activities, citing prohibitions on gender mixing, noise disturbances, and immigration violations. A pattern of prejudice and discrimination against Shia Muslims continued to occur with respect to access to public services and equitable representation in government, educational and public-sector employment opportunities, and judicial matters. The government continued to censor or block some content in the media, including social media and the internet. The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV, understood by some outside the country as the "religious police") monitored social behavior in order to enforce laws and regulations protecting "public morals." The Riyadh police detained a woman for "violations of general morals" after she posted on social media pictures of herself in public without a hijab or abaya and after she discussed sexual relations with unrelated men. On April 10, the cabinet approved a royal decree stripping the CPVPV of its authority to pursue suspects, arrest or detain them, or ask for their identification. In March at the Riyadh International Book Fair and in December at the Jeddah Book Fair some exhibitors displayed anti-Semitic and misogynistic books.

There were attacks during the year targeting Shia worshipers. On July 4, there were two attacks, one in Medina against the Prophet's Mosque, a holy site for both Sunnis and Shia, and the other in Qatif. On January 29, suicide attackers killed four and wounded 18 in an attack on Shia al-Ridha Mosque in al-Ahsa province. The government, which provides security at both Sunni and Shia places of worship, condemned and investigated the attacks. No group claimed responsibility.

A pattern of societal prejudice and discrimination against Shia Muslims continued regarding private sector employment. Social media provided an outlet to discuss current events and religious issues, which sometimes included making disparaging remarks about members of religious groups.

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

Since 2004, Saudi Arabia has been designated as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Most recently, on October 31, 2016, the Secretary of State re-designated Saudi Arabia as a CPC, and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompany designation as required in the important national interest of the United States pursuant to section 407 of the Act.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 28.1 million (July 2016 estimate), including more than eight million foreign residents. Between 85 and 90 percent of the approximately 20 million citizens are Sunni Muslims who predominantly adhere to the Hanbali School of Islamic jurisprudence.

Shia Muslims constitute 10 to 15 percent of the citizen population. Approximately 80 percent of Shia are “Twelvers” (followers of Muhammad ibn Hasan al-Mahdi, whom they recognize as the Twelfth Imam) and are primarily located in the Eastern Province. Nakhawala, or “Medina Shia,” are also Twelvers and reside in small numbers in the western Hejaz region. Estimates place their numbers at approximately 1,000. Twelver Shia adhere to the Jafari School of jurisprudence. Most of the remaining Shia are Sulaimani Ismailis, also known as “Seveners” (those who branched off from the Twelvers to follow Isma’il ibn Jafar as the Seventh Imam). Seveners number approximately 700,000 and reside primarily in Najran Province, where they are the majority of the province’s inhabitants. Another branch of Sevenser Shia, the Bohra Ismailis, number approximately 1,000, the majority of whom are South Asian expatriates who reside in the western Hejaz region. Pockets of Zaydis, another offshoot of Shia Islam, number approximately 20,000 and reside primarily in the provinces of Jizan and Najran along the border with Yemen.

Foreign embassies indicate the foreign population in the country, including many undocumented migrants, may exceed 10 million, most of whom are Muslim. According to a 2010 survey by the Pew Research Center, out of the country’s total population (including foreigners), there were approximately 25.5 million Muslims, 1.2 million Christians (including Eastern Orthodox, Protestants, and Roman Catholics); 310,000 Hindus; 180,000 religiously unaffiliated (including atheists, agnostics, and people who did not identify with any particular religion); 90,000 Buddhists; 70,000 followers of folk religions; and 70,000 followers of other religions.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The Basic Law of Governance establishes the country as a sovereign Arab Islamic state in which Islam is the official religion. The Basic Law says sharia is the “foundation of the Kingdom” and states the country’s constitution is the Quran and the Sunna (traditions and practices based on the life of the Prophet Muhammad). The Basic Law contains no legal recognition or protection of freedom of religion. Conversion from Islam to another religion is grounds for the charge of apostasy, a crime which is legally punishable by death, although courts have not carried out a death sentence for apostasy in recent years.

Blasphemy against Islam is a crime that may also legally be punished by death but in practice courts have not sentenced individuals to death for blasphemy in recent years. Common penalties for blasphemy are lengthy prison sentences and lashings, often after detentions without trial, or so-called “protective custody.” Criticism of Islam, including expression deemed offensive to Muslims, is forbidden on the grounds of preserving social stability.

The implementation regulations for the counterterrorism law criminalize “calling for atheist thought in any form, or calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion.” The right to access legal representation for those accused of violating the counterterrorism law is limited to an unspecified period before the matter goes to court with the timeframe determined by the investigative entity. There is no right to access government-held evidence.

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

In September the Ministry of Islamic Affairs (MOIA) announced new restrictions on Saudi-based clerics traveling abroad for proselytization activities, requiring they first obtain the permission of the MOIA. The stated purpose of the strictures is to limit the ability of religious scholars with credentials considered questionable to travel, and to prevent the appearance of interference, or actual interference, by Saudi-based clerics in the domestic affairs of other states.

Public school students at all levels receive mandatory religious instruction based on Sunni Islam according to the Hanbali School of jurisprudence. The country’s private schools are not permitted to deviate from the official, government-approved religious curriculum. Private international schools within the country are required to teach Saudi students an Islamic studies course, while non-Saudi students receive a course on Islamic civilization in place of the curriculum designed for Saudi students; both courses amount to one hour of instruction per week. Private international schools may also teach courses on other religions or civilizations.

The CPVPV is a semi-autonomous government agency with authority to monitor social behavior and enforce moral standards consistent with the government’s policy and in coordination with law enforcement authorities. CPVPV field officers

do not wear uniforms but are required to wear identification badges and legally can only act in their official capacity when accompanied by regular police. The CPVPV reports to the king through the Council of Ministers, and the Ministry of Interior (MOI) oversees its operations on the king's behalf. On April 10, the Council of Ministers approved a royal decree stripping the CPVPV of its authority to pursue suspects, arrest or detain them, or ask for their identification. The decree also limits its activities to providing counseling and reporting individuals suspected of violating the law to the police authorities.

The purview of the CPVPV includes combating public socializing and private contact between unrelated men and women (gender mixing); practicing or displaying emblems of non-Islamic faiths or failing to respect Islam; "immodest" dress, especially for women; displaying or selling media contrary to Islam, including pornography; producing, distributing, or consuming alcohol; venerating places or celebrating events inconsistent with approved Islamic practices; practicing "sorcery" or "black magic;" and committing, facilitating, or promoting acts, publications, or thoughts considered lewd or morally degenerate, including adultery, homosexuality, and gambling.

The judicial system is based on laws derived from the Quran and the Sunna, fatwas (legal opinions or interpretations) issued by the 21-person Council of Senior Scholars (CSS, or *ulema*) that reports to the king, and other royal laws (*nithamat*) and ordinances (*marsumat*). The Basic Law states governance is based on justice, *shura* (consultation), and equality according to sharia and further identifies the Quran and the Sunna as the sources for fatwas. The law specifies a hierarchical organization and composition of the CSS, the Research Administration, and the Office of the Mufti, together with their functions. The Basic Law recognizes the CSS, supported by the Board of Research and Religious Rulings, as the supreme authority on religious matters. The CSS is headed by the grand mufti and is composed of Sunni religious scholars and jurists, 18 of whom are from the Hanbali School of jurisprudence, with one representative of each of the other Sunni Schools (Maliki, Hanafi, and Shafi'i). There are no Shia members. Scholars are chosen at the king's discretion and serve renewable four-year terms, with most members serving for life.

Judges in Islamic law are not bound by the legal principle of precedent and, in the absence of a uniform criminal code, rulings can diverge widely. Appeals may be made to the appellate and supreme courts. Government universities provide training in all four Sunni schools (*maddhab*) of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), with a focus on the Hanbali School.

The calculation of accidental death or injury compensation differs according to the religious affiliation of the plaintiff. In the event a court renders a judgment in favor of a plaintiff who is a Jewish or Christian male, the plaintiff is entitled to receive only 50 percent of the compensation a Muslim male would receive; all other non-Muslims are entitled to receive one-sixteenth the amount a male Muslim would receive.

Judges have been observed to discount the testimony of Muslims whom they deemed deficient in their knowledge of Islam, and to favor the testimony of Muslims over the testimony of non-Muslims. Under the government's interpretation of the Quran, courts may place the value of a woman's testimony at half that of a man's.

The Basic Law requires the state to protect human rights in accordance with sharia. The Human Rights Commission (HRC), a government entity, is tasked with protecting, enhancing, and ensuring implementation of international human rights standards "in light of the provisions of sharia," and regularly follows up on citizen complaints. There are no formal requirements regarding the composition of the HRC; during the year the commission had approximately 28 members from various parts of the kingdom, including two Shia members.

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

### **Government Practices**

The government imprisoned individuals accused of apostasy and blasphemy, violating Islamic values and moral standards, insulting Islam, black magic, and sorcery. Authorities arrested Shia clerics and activists who advocated for equal treatment of Shia Muslims, and one Shia cleric was executed after being convicted of numerous charges including inciting terrorism and sedition. There were no reports of executions carried out for either apostasy or blasphemy during the year. Many foreign residents worshiped privately within their homes or in other small gatherings, but authorities raided some private, non-Muslim religious meetings and arrested, detained, or deported participants. The government continued to censor and block content in the media, including social media and the internet. It continued to employ religious police to enforce "public morals". Authorities continued to engage in instances of prejudicial treatment and discrimination against Shia Muslims with respect to access to public services, equitable

representation in government, educational and public-sector employment opportunities, and judicial matters.

On January 2, authorities executed prominent Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr after he was convicted in 2014 on charges of inciting terrorism and sedition, interfering in the affairs of another country, disobeying the nation's rulers, attacking security personnel during his arrest, and meeting with wanted criminals. International human rights organizations said al-Nimr was executed because of his sermons criticizing Saudi authorities and his trial before the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) lacked transparency and did not adhere to minimum fair trial standards.

Up to 26 Shia men faced the possibility of execution for their roles in protests in the Qatif area of the Eastern Province in 2011 and 2012. They were convicted of attacking security forces, among other crimes. Three of the men, Ali al-Nimr (Nimr al-Nimr's nephew), Dawood al-Marhoon, and Abdullah al-Zaher, who were minors at the time of the acts for which they were convicted, were allegedly tortured by authorities during their detention in order to obtain a confession. Their death sentences were upheld on appeal and, at the end of the year, they were awaiting implementation of their sentences. Many Shia and international human rights groups considered the death sentences as motivated by sectarian hostility toward Shia Muslims, particularly as the public prosecutor in each case asked that the defendant be executed and his corpse publicly displayed.

In February an appeals court remanded a death sentence from the Abha General Court for Ashraf Fayadh, a resident of Palestinian origin, whom the general court had found guilty of apostasy, spreading atheism, threatening the morals of Saudi society, and having illicit relations with women. Instead of the death sentence Fayadh was sentenced to eight years in prison and 800 lashes. He is also to repent in official media.

In March the SCC in Riyadh found journalist Alaa Brinji guilty of a variety of charges, including "ridiculing Islamic religious figures," based on tweets on his Twitter account, and sentenced him to five years in prison and an eight-year travel ban. He was not convicted of apostasy due to lack of evidence, according to Amnesty International.

There were numerous reports of government authorities calling for the prosecution of atheists and sorcerers. During the year, there were at least two cases reported in the media of courts prosecuting accused atheists.

In July local media reported that authorities arrested and investigated a man employed as a lab technician at King Fahad Central Hospital in Jizan for calling for atheism on Twitter.

In February the Medina Criminal Court sentenced a 28-year-old man to 10 years in prison, 2,000 lashes, and a fine of 20,000 riyals (\$5,330) for expressing his atheism on Twitter, according to local newspaper Al Watan. According to the report, the man made over 600 tweets and refused to repent, saying he was entitled to his opinion.

In August the SCC in Riyadh sentenced an Egyptian national to six years in prison on charges of attempting to disturb the public order, violating labor laws, and communicating with a sorcerer to bewitch his employer, according to media reports.

In December Saudi *al-Hayat* newspaper reported that the CPVPV's annual report mentioned "the Anti-Witchcraft Unit received 949 arrest warrants, resulting in the arrest of 25 magicians within a year."

In June and July local media reported Medina police arrested at least seven people in two separate incidents on charges that included sorcery such as black magic, trickery, folk medicine, curses, and casting of spells. Medina police chief Major General Abdul Hadi al-Shahrani said in June "the authorities in Medina conduct regular inspections to apprehend illegal workers to curb crimes such as thefts, sorcery, employing illegal workers, brewing liquor and to prevent them from becoming involved in nefarious activities."

In November local media reported that police in al-Ais arrested a Sudanese resident in a metal workshop after receiving reports of witchcraft from the CPVPV; police reportedly found more than 70 items including papers and talismans used for practicing sorcery and witchcraft. As of the end of the year the man remained in custody, according to press reports.

In November local media reported on a woman in her 60s who was arrested in Taif city by police for practicing magic inside her home. The arrest resulted from a tip reported to the anti-witchcraft unit of the CPVPV.

In July local media reported police in Taif arrested 35 African and Yemeni women for begging inside a mosque; some of them reportedly possessed "talismans and magic rings."



In February Emirati media reported 30 members of the CPVPV's anti-witchcraft unit received specialized training during a five-day course on combating magic.

Authorities have arrested more than 1,000 Eastern Province Shia since 2011 in connection with public protests demanding greater rights for Shia. Shia Muslim groups that track arrests and convictions of Shia reported more than 300 persons remained in detention in prisons throughout Eastern Province and others remained subject to travel bans. Most were held on charges involving nonviolent offenses, including participating in or publicizing protests on social media, inciting unrest in the country, and insulting the king.

The government continued not to recognize the freedom to practice any non-Muslim religions publicly. According to civil society sources and media reports, non-Muslims and many foreign and Saudi Muslims whose religious practices differed from the form of Sunni Islam promoted by the government could only practice their religion in private and remained vulnerable to discrimination, harassment, detention, and, for noncitizens, deportation.

Saudi authorities reportedly raided a Christian house in Aziziyah during a private celebration for the Assumption of Our Lady, according to multiple media reports. 27 Lebanese Maronite Christians were arrested and deported for participating in "un-Islamic prayer" and possession of the "Gospel," according to multiple media reports.

Mosques continued to be the only legally permissible public places of worship. The government continued to address ideology it deemed "extremist" by scrutinizing clerics and teachers closely and dismissing those found promoting views it deemed intolerant, extreme, or advocating violence abroad, including in Syria and Iraq. For example, in December local newspaper *Okaz* cited Grand Mufti Abdulaziz al-Sheikh as saying that imams "should also comply fully with the instructions of the ministry [of Islamic Affairs] which should advise and direct them on all important issues." The newspaper also cited lawyer Dr. Ibrahim al-Abadi as saying that calling for opposing ideologies is "a major crime." The MOIA continued to use ministry inspectors, regional branch inspectors, field teams, citizen feedback, and the media to monitor and address any violations of the ministry's instructions and regulations in mosques.

Practices diverging from the official interpretation of Islam, such as public celebrations of Mawlid al-Nabi (the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad) and visits to the tombs of renowned Muslims, were forbidden.

Authorities indicated they considered members of the Ahmadiyya community to be Muslims, but the group's legal status in the country remained unclear, and the mainly foreign resident Ahmadis reportedly hid their faith to avoid scrutiny, arrest, or deportation.

Authorities permitted large-scale public commemorations of Ashura and other Shia holidays in Qatif, Eastern Province, where the population is almost completely Shia Muslim. As a result of several 2015 ISIS-inspired or directed attacks on Shia gathering places in the Eastern Province, there was a significant deployment of government security services in the Qatif area during the Ashura commemoration.

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

The government reported that individuals who experienced infringements on their ability to worship privately could address their grievances to the MOI, HRC, the National Society for Human Rights (a quasi-governmental organization), and, when appropriate, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Religious groups reported, however, that officials typically charged those arrested during private worship services with gender-mixing, playing music, or other infractions not explicitly related to religious observance. There were no known reports of individuals contacting these or other governmental agencies for redress when their ability to worship privately was infringed.

According to government policy, non-Muslims were prohibited from being buried in the country. There was, however, at least one public, non-Islamic cemetery in the country located in Jeddah, though the government did not support it financially. The only other known non-Muslim cemetery was private and only available to employees of the Saudi Arabian Oil Company (also known as Saudi Aramco). Diplomatic missions reported most non-Muslims opted to repatriate their deceased to their home countries whenever financially possible.

Shia mosques were generally required to use the Sunni call to prayer, including in mixed neighborhoods of both Sunni and Shia residents. In some predominantly Shia areas of al-Ahsa Governorate, authorities allowed Shia mosques to use the

Shia call to prayer. In smaller Shia villages where there was virtually no CPVPV presence, reports indicated it was common for Shia businesses to close for three prayer times (not five times as Sunnis do), or not at all.

The government continued to set policy aimed at enforcing Islamic norms; for example, the government threatened to expel foreigners who did not refrain from eating, drinking, or smoking in public during Ramadan, and it prohibited parents from giving their children any of a list of 50 names deemed blasphemous, non-Arabic, or non-Islamic, according to media reports.

The CPVPV continued to monitor social behavior and promote official standards of morality. Since April, instances of CPVPV field officers who approached and harassed individuals reportedly decreased in most urban areas.

The CPVPV was considered to be less prevalent and aggressive in public places in Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam.

On December 12, Riyadh police detained a woman for “violations of general morals” after she posted pictures of herself in public without a hijab or abaya on social media and discussed sexual relations with men outside her family.

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

The government continued a multi-year project, begun in 2007, to revise textbooks, curricula, and teaching methods with the stated aim of removing content disparaging religions other than Islam. The project continued as part of the government’s Vision 2030 announced in April. The government continued to distribute revised textbooks, although some intolerant material remained in circulation, particularly at the high school level, including content justifying the execution of “sorcerers” and social exclusion of non-Muslims, as well as statements that Jews, Christians, Shia, and Sufis did not properly adhere to monotheism. Additionally, some teachers reportedly continued to express intolerance of other faiths and of alternative viewpoints regarding Islam, while discouraging critical thinking in matters of religion.

Shia were reportedly not represented in proportion to their numbers in academic positions in primary, secondary, and higher education and virtually all public school principals remained Sunni, while some teachers were Shia. In Najran, which has a high concentration of Ismaeli Shia, some Shia principals were hired but Najran University's administration allegedly continued to discriminate in the hiring of Shia professors, according to a Shia academics. Along with Sunni students, Shia students received government scholarships to study in universities abroad under the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Program for Foreign Scholarship.

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

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

The CPVPV, in coordination with the Information and Communication Technologies Authority, continued to block certain websites as part of a broader policy of censoring online content which reportedly contained "objectionable" content and "ill informed" views of religion. The CPVPV shut down or blocked Twitter accounts for users "committing religious and ethical violations," and an undisclosed number of social media users were arrested in accordance with the anticyber crimes law. Saudi Twitter users, for example, created the hashtag Arrest of Atheist Mazen al-Hamzi to discuss local media reports of an individual who was arrested and whose accounts were suspended after the individual allegedly posted tweets expressing atheism. According to *al-Hayat* newspaper on December 19, the CPVPV's 2015-16 annual report said its Cyber Crimes Unit had received 4,850 reports of users "committing religious and ethical violations, of which 1,372 were related to pornography, 544 to religion, and 10 to gambling. The government also reportedly located and shut down websites used to recruit jihadis or inspire violence.

The government financially supported approximately 70 percent of Sunni mosques, while the remaining 30 percent were at private residences or were built and endowed by private persons. The construction of new mosques required the permission of the MOIA, the local municipality, and the provincial government, who allocated space and issued building permits. The MOIA supervised and

financed the construction and maintenance of most Sunni mosques, including the hiring of clerical workers.

Shia Muslims managed their own mosques under the supervision of Shia scholars. Most existing Shia mosques in Eastern Province did not seek official operating licenses, as doing so would require asking the government to extend its explicit endorsement of these mosques. The government did not finance the construction or maintenance of Shia mosques. Authorities prohibited Shia outside of the Eastern Province from building Shia-specific mosques. Construction of Shia mosques required government approval, and Shia communities were required to receive permission from their neighbors to start construction on mosques. Reports indicated Ismaili Shia in Najran Province did not face similar obstacles to building and renovating mosques.

Following attacks against Shia mosques and gathering places, government security services continued to provide protection for many Shia mosques and gathering places in Eastern Province. Additionally, media and other sources reported coordination between Shia volunteers and government security services to ensure security outside mosques and gathering places during Friday sermons or other large public events.

Multiple reports from Shia groups cited discrimination in the judicial system as the catalyst for lengthy prison sentences handed down to Shia Muslims for engaging in political expression or organizing peaceful demonstrations. The government permitted Shia judges in the Eastern Province to use the Jafari School of Islamic jurisprudence to adjudicate cases in family law, inheritance, and endowment management. There were five Shia judges, all government appointed, located in Eastern Province cities of Qatif and al-Ahsa, where the majority of Shia lived.

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

Although Shia constituted approximately 10 to 15 percent of the total citizen population and at least one-quarter of the Eastern Province's population, representation of Shia Muslims in senior government positions continued to be much below their proportion of the population, including in national security-related positions in the Ministry of Defense, the National Guard, and the MOI. There was only one Shia minister in the national government. There were no Shia governors, deputy governors, or ministry branch directors in the Eastern Province. There were five Shia members of the 150-member Shura Council. In the two major Shia population centers of Qatif and al-Ahsa, five of the 12 government-appointed municipal council members were Shia, and Shia held 16 of the 30 elected seats on these municipal councils. In predominantly Shia areas, there was some Shia representation in the ranks of the traffic police, municipal government, and public schools. A very small number of Shia occupied high level positions in government-owned companies and government agencies.

Sunni clerics continued to employ anti-Shia rhetoric in Sunni mosques during the year, according to local reports. The MOIA maintained active oversight of the country's religious establishment and restricted the inclusion of content in Friday sermons that it considered sectarian or political, promoting hatred or racism, or including commentary on foreign policy. Despite these efforts by the government to tone down some of the more intolerant language in sermons, there were reports from local groups that some Sunni clerics, who received government stipends, used anti-Shia, anti-Christian, and anti-Semitic language in their sermons, as well as in other public statements. In a May interview on the Saudi Al-Majd TV channel, for example, one cleric referred to Jews as "enemies of (Islam). In fact they are at the top of the list."

Government officials made statements throughout the year condemning terrorist attacks on Shia Muslims and on Shia mosques. Senior leaders – including the king, crown prince, and deputy crown prince – as well as government-supported clerics – denounced the attacks.

The government required noncitizen legal residents to carry an identity card containing a religious designation of "Muslim" or "non-Muslim." Some residency cards, including some issued during the year, indicated more specific religious designations such as "Christian."

The government did not formally permit non-Muslim clergy to enter the country for the purpose of conducting religious services. Entry restrictions made it difficult for non-Muslims to maintain regular contact with resident clergy. This was

reportedly particularly problematic for Catholics and Orthodox Christians, whose religious traditions require they receive sacraments from a priest on a regular basis.

The Riyadh International Book Fair in March, inaugurated by the king and the Minister of Culture, and the Jeddah Book Fair in December sold numerous anti-Semitic books. The book fair also contained some misogynistic material including author Mansour Abdel Hakim's *Women Who Deserve to go to Hell*, a religious guide for women that issues warnings and punishments for those who divert from the path of Islam.

The government's stated policy was for its diplomatic and consular missions abroad to inform foreign workers applying for visas that they had the right to worship privately and to possess personal religious materials. The government also provided the names of offices where grievances could be filed.

### **Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors**

At least two attacks occurred during the year that targeted places of worship. A suicide bomber detonated himself on July 4, the last day of Ramadan, killing four security personnel at the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, a holy site for both Sunnis and Shia. Also on July 4, two suicide bombers attacked a Shia mosque, the Faraj Al-Omran Mosque in Qatif, Eastern Province, killing only themselves. On January 29, suicide attackers killed four and wounded 18 in an attack on Shia al-Ridha Mosque in al-Ahsa Province. The government, which provides security at both Sunni and Shia places of worship, condemned and investigated the attacks.

One Shia judge was kidnapped in December, likely by Shia militants angered at his collaboration with the Saudi government. At year's end, his status remained unknown.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

So-called religious vigilantes and/or "volunteers" unaffiliated with the CPVPV sometimes harassed and assaulted citizens and foreigners. At an international cultural fair in Taif, a volunteer religious "policewoman" (*muhtasiba*) forcibly removed the wires of an amplifier broadcasting musical poems. The incident sparked debate on social media throughout the country. Many responded defending the woman for preventing the broadcast of music, considered a vice by some Muslims. In response to the incident, local media reported Grand Mufti Abdulaziz ibn Abdullah Al al-Sheikh said, "Imam Al-Nawawi [an influential

medieval Salafi scholar] stated the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice was not exclusive to the *ashab al-welayat* [the guardians] but is permissible for individual Muslims.”

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

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

While discussion of sensitive topics on social media was frequent, according to Freedom House, “self-censorship [on social media] remained prevalent when discussing topics such as politics, religion, or the royal family.” For example, one local news website reported the Ministry of Culture and Information banned the book *Journey to a Land Not Ruled By Allah* by Saudi author Ibrahim al-Tamimi at the Riyadh book fair after conservatives called for the ban using a Twitter hashtag, Campaign Against Atheist Accounts, to discuss atheist accounts on social media. One user tweeted: “The pornographic and atheist accounts under Saudi names are definitely not Saudi, they must be third parties trying to destroy our beliefs and most of these users are supporting the call to end male guardianship.”

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

Embassy and consulate officials at all levels continued to press the government to respect religious freedom, eliminate discriminatory enforcement of laws against religious minorities, and promote respect and tolerance for minority religious practices and beliefs. During the year, the Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to raise and discuss reports of abuses and violations of religious freedom and the legal status of those detained with officials from a variety of government entities, including the MFA, MOI, Human Rights Commission, and King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue. Embassy and consulate general officials also engaged with the MFA Director General of the Mecca branch about taking steps to ensure anti-Semitic material was not included in book fairs sponsored by the government. Before the Jeddah International Book Fair, embassy and



consulate general officials approached the Ministry of Culture and Information and expressed concerns about possible anti-Semitic and hate literature at the event. Embassy officials again facilitated meetings between foreign religious freedom and civil society organizations and the government.

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

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

Since 2004, Saudi Arabia has been designated as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Most recently, on October 31, 2016, the Secretary of State re-designated Saudi Arabia as a CPC, and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompany designation as required in the important national interest of the United States pursuant to section 407 of the Act.