

Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an Islamic state governed by an absolute monarchy in tandem with a powerful religious elite. From 2014 to 2017 Saudi anti-terror law defined “the promotion of atheist thought” as an act of terrorism, and the 2017 anti-terror law still continues to suppress many forms of criticism or dissent in extremely broad terms, and is actively intended to prosecute political dissent and religion or belief minorities. Prosecutions for apostasy or promoting atheism have been made in recent years, with individuals facing possible death sentences and serving long jail terms.

The Saudi government has claimed to be making improvements in terms of respecting the civil liberties and human rights of its 33 million population; however most improvements have been minimal, and a highly restrictive regime persists. In 2017 the Crown Prince pledged reforms including to lift the ban on women driving, however many human rights campaigners and prisoners of conscience remain imprisoned years later, with sporadic fresh crackdowns on those consider dissidents or troublemakers, including peaceful protesters and activists for political reform and freedom of expression. Most forms of public religious expression must be consistent with the government’s particular brand of Sunni Islam.

Saudi Arabia is a member of the League of Arab States (LAS), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

Constitution and government	Education and children’s rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
<p><u>State legislation is largely or entirely derived from religious law or by religious authorities</u> <u>Quasi-divine veneration of a ruling elite is enforced, or a single-party regime holds uncontested power, subject to severe punishment</u></p>	<p><u>Religious or ideological indoctrination is utterly pervasive in schools</u> <u>Religious or ideological instruction in a significant number of schools is of a coercive fundamentalist or extremist variety</u></p>	<p><u>Government figures or state agencies openly marginalize, harass, or incite hatred or violence against the non-religious</u> <u>It is illegal to register an explicitly Humanist, atheist, secularist or other non-religious NGO or other human rights organization, or such groups are persecuted by authorities</u></p>	<p><u>Expression of core Humanist principles on democracy, freedom and human rights is brutally repressed</u> <u>‘Apostasy’ or conversion from a specific religion is outlawed and punishable by death</u> <u>‘Blasphemy’ or criticism of religion is outlawed and punishable by death</u> <u>It is illegal to advocate secularism or church-state separation, or such advocacy is suppressed</u> <u>It is illegal or unrecognised to identify as an atheist or as non-religious</u></p>

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<p><u>The non-religious are barred from some government offices (including posts reserved for particular religions or sects)</u></p>	<p><u>Religious or ideological instruction is mandatory in all or most state-funded schools with no secular or humanist alternative</u></p>	<p><u>Systemic religious privilege results in significant social discrimination</u> <u>Government authorities push a socially conservative, religiously or ideologically inspired agenda, without regard to the rights of those with progressive views</u> <u>Prohibitive interreligious social control (including interreligious marriage bans)</u> <u>Religious control over family law or legislation on moral matters</u></p>	
<p><u>There is an established church or state religion</u> <u>State-funding of religious institutions or salaries, or discriminatory tax exemptions</u></p>			

Legend

Constitution and government

The monarchy of the house of Al Saud holds supreme political authority, existing by formal arrangement in tandem with a highly influential clerical bloc (the *Ulema*) lead by the house of Al ash-Sheikh.

This monarchical-religious symbiosis was forged under an oath sworn by both families dating back to 1744, to this day considered the founding basis of the "pact" between both houses. The pact commits the house of Al Saud to "perform jihad against the unbelievers", while "in return" Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (the founder of Wahhabism) would be "leader in religious matters" in perpetuity.

<goo.gl/UF0liF> [A History of Saudi Arabia, Madawi al-Rasheed]

Freedom of religion or belief is extremely oppressed in Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism - commonly described as an "ultra conservative" or "fundamentalist" branch of Sunni Islam - is functionally recognized as the state religion. According to Article 1 of the Basic Law of Saudi Arabia (its equivalent to a constitution), "The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a sovereign Arab Islamic state with Islam as its religion; God's Book and the Sunnah of His Prophet (God's prayers and peace be upon

him) are its constitution.”

The country’s laws are based on Sharia law.

Human rights violations

The Kingdom is one of a small number of countries given the worst-possible rating across all categories Freedom House (2019).

<freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/saudi-arabia>

Saudi Arabia is routinely and severely criticised by many human rights organizations internationally, including for the poor treatment of migrant workers, massive religious and political suppression of freedom of thought, expression, and association, and especially women’s rights, as well as maintaining an unfair and unpredictable justice system that is often utilized to punitively suppress human rights advocacy and to crush any sign of political dissent.

In 2019 a fresh plea was made by 40 civil society NGOs at the United Nations for the international community to hold the Saudi government to account.

<humanists.international/2019/06/humanists-international-joins-40-ngos-urging-un-to-hold-saudi-arabia-to-account/>

In a government reshuffle under King Salman in 2015, the head of the *Mutaween* (religious police), Sheikh Abdul Latif al-Sheikh, considered to be somewhat sympathetic to women’s rights, was replaced by Abdulrahman al-Sanad, who was previously sacked by King Abdullah on grounds of his criticism of intermingling young men and women in co-ed universities. King Salman also appointed as his personal adviser the controversial cleric Saad al-Shethri, known as a hardliner against Christians, Jews, and Shiites. The female Deputy Minister for Education was also removed (see “Education and children’s rights”, below) with no new women being appointed. These moves were widely seen as entrenching or setting back the reform agenda.

<middleeasteye.net/news/new-saudi-king-orders-cabinet-reshuffle-280880866>

<ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/sections/politics/2015/03/03/saudi-arabia-education-minister-says-no-to-sports-for-girls_1dcbf24c-8f27-4270-9e8f-01c56c158cae.html>

Since then, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, designated in June 2017 as the successor to King Salman, has apparently orchestrated a series of arrests in what has been described by the House of Saud as an anti-corruption purge, though many commentators regard it as a crackdown on the Crown Prince’s likely opponents and detractors.

In 2017 the Crown Prince pledged some liberalizing reforms, including an end to the ban on women driving. The driving ban has been lifted, with the first licenses issued to women in 2018. However as of June 2019 major issues for women’s rights remain. Figures suggest that driving schools for women remain few and that relatively few women have been granted licenses. The “guardianship” system is only partially relaxed and remains socially enforced, women must have permission from their “guardian” (usually father or husband) to obtain a passport, and women’s rights activists have been detained. Many activists arrested for campaigning for even those reforms which have taken place remain in jail.

<nytimes.com/2019/06/24/world/middleeast/saudi-driving-ban-anniversary.html>

Geopolitical power

Despite its severe deficit on civil liberties and human rights, Saudi Arabia nevertheless retains a high Human Development Index, largely thanks to its massive oil export industry, and a sizeable

population of expatriate workers. The population includes 2.5 million Bangladeshis who migrated in the main after the war for independence, in which Saudi provided significant support against the Bengali nationalist call for independence.

Saudi Arabia has lukewarm, rocky or outright hostile relations with a number of other Middle Eastern countries, in particular Iran.

Outside the region, its close political allies and major trading partners (often themselves highly dependent on Saudi oil exports) include: China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Pakistan, Singapore, South Korea (with Asia importing 66% of total Saudi oil exports); Canada and the United States (with North America importing 17% of total Saudi oil exports); Belgium, France, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, and United Kingdom (with Europe importing 12% of total Saudi oil exports) (as of 2013 figures).

<atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/sau/>

Early in 2015 the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia along with the GCC countries (except Oman) went to war in Yemen. The air campaign has been widely accused of indiscriminate bombing with significant civilian casualties that may be classifiable as war crimes.

<aljazeera.com/news/2015/10/yemen-151007015252750.html>

<foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/15/u-s-support-for-saudi-strikes-in-yemen-raises-war-crime-concerns/>

The Saudi coalition has been accused of obstructing humanitarian aid, blocking supplies coming in from the Persian Gulf and creating famine and disease. Amnesty International testifies to the use of cluster bombs. The conflict falls along sectarian lines, testing the regional balance of power between Sunnis and Shiites.

<amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2015/10/yemen-call-for-suspension-of-arms-transfers-to-coalition-and-accountability-for-war-crimes/>

Education and children's rights

The problem of propagation of religious hatred in the classroom remains significant in Saudi Arabia. According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, the textbooks used in secondary schools from 2013 to 2014 "continued to teach hatred toward members of other religions and, in some cases, promote violence. For example, some justified violence against apostates and polytheists and labelled Jews and Christians 'enemies.'

<<http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202014%20Annual%20Report%20PDF.pdf>>

Since the first girls' schools were founded in the 1960s, until 2002, girls' education was controlled under the auspices of the Directorate of Girls' Education managed by the religious *Ulama*. Girls' education has been closely linked to the state religion administered by the Wahhabi religious hierarchy:

"The purpose of educating a girl is to bring her up in a proper Islamic way so as to perform her duty in life, be an ideal and successful housewife and a good mother, ready to do things which suit her nature such as teaching, nursing and medical treatment."

— Helen Chapin Metz, ed. *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992

In 2002, in an incident known as the Meccas girls' school fire, the Saudi religious police prevented girls from evacuating their school during a fire, insisting that they must obey the religious dress code. 15 girls were killed in the blaze.

<hrw.org/news/2002/03/14/saudi-arabia-religious-police-role-school-fire-criticized>

As a response, King Abdullah removed Saudi girls' schools from the religious authorities. Since 2002 girls' education has been the responsibility of the Ministry of Education also responsible for boys' education.

In 2009 King Abdullah appointed a female Deputy Minister in charge of girls' schooling, namely Norah Al-Faiz. She was the first woman to chair at ministerial level. However, in 2015 in a government reshuffle, King Salman dismissed Norah Al-Faiz, after her work on the cause of girls' sports programmes in state-run schools prompted opposition by religious conservatives. No women were appointed in the new government setting. The newly appointed Minister of Education Ministry, Azzam Al-Dakhil, vowed not to allow sporting activities for girls in public schools.

Family, community and society

Despite the huge predominance of religion over political and social affairs, and the threat of prosecution for "blasphemy" or "apostasy" (see below) a widely-cited 2012 poll found that nearly 25% of Saudi Arabians interviewed identified as "non-religious", including 5% prepared to described themselves as "A convinced atheist".

<redcresearch.ie/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/RED-C-press-release-Religion-and-Atheism-25-7-12.pdf>

Public non-Muslim places of worship are not allowed, and the right of non-Muslims to practice their religion in private is not fully protected. The intractable connection between state identity, the ruling royal family and the religious establishment results in significant pressure on all citizens to adhere to the official government interpretation of Islam. Rejection of that interpretation is conceived of as rejection of the instruments of the state or sedition.

Religious police

The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV), which enforces public morality and restrictions on public religious manifestations and practice, is known for being especially intolerant of minority religions and disbelief. It is not subject to judicial review and reports directly to the King.

In 2016 following public outcry at incidents of the 'police' acting beyond their remit and subjecting individuals to harassment, detainment, beatings and lashings, their powers were curbed and their presence on the streets was greatly diminished.

A year later, many celebrated the anniversary of their fading. However others reportedly welcomed their gradual return later in 2017, albeit with diminished powers.

<arabnews.com/node/1076321/saudi-arabia>

<bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-06-26/saudi-religious-police-return-just-with-a-little-less-vengeance>

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

Blasphemy and apostasy

"Blasphemy" is conceived as a deviation from Sunni Islam and thus may also be treated as "apostasy". Apostasy is criminalized and mandates a death penalty. The criminal accusation of "apostasy" is sometimes deployed against people (including writers, activists, artists, or lawyers) who show any serious sign of pushing at the outer boundaries of freedom of expression, or who are

critical of the religious authorities, and whose views (rightly or wrongly) are termed “atheist” or as “insulting to religion”. These laws are actively utilized (see Highlighted cases, below).

In 2017 the Ideological Warfare Center, an anti terror unit in Saudi Arabia, cited various Islamic and Quranic scholars who argued that there was no death penalty for those who were deemed apostates under Islamic law. This led to a number of social media users to interpret the IWC’s statement as a sign that the Kingdom was moving towards abolishing the death penalty for apostates. However, an official source from the Saudi Press Agency responded that such rumours are incorrect and threatened to sue anyone propagating them.

<alaraby.co.uk/english/blog/2017/12/9/saudi-anti-terror-authority-argues-no-death-penalty-for-apostates>

<spa.gov.sa/viewstory.php?lang=en&newsid=1693825>

Atheism as “terrorism”

From 2014 to 2017, the Saudi anti-terror law (Article 1) defined as its very first example of terrorism: “Calling for atheist thought in any form, or calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion on which this country is based”.

<independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-declares-all-atheists-are-terrorists-in-new-law-to-crack-down-on-political-dissidents-9228389.html>

This legislation, enacted March 2014, not only expressly framed expression of atheism as terrorism but, along with related royal decrees, created a legal framework that outlaws as terrorism nearly all thought or expression critical of the government and its understanding of

Islam. <ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21585&LangID=E>

<hrw.org/news/2014/03/20/saudi-arabia-new-terrorism-regulations-assault-rights>

In November 2017 a new anti-terror law came into effect, which appears to supercede the 2014 legislation. The “Penal Law for Terrorism and its Financing” 2017 no longer expressly mentions atheism. However the broader issues of vaguely-defined terms and criminalization of criticism of authorities remain firmly in place, with active prosecutions, and the law being used to “justify torture”.

<hrw.org/news/2017/11/23/saudi-arabia-new-counterterrorism-law-enables-abuse>

<alqst.org/eng/new-saudi-terrorism-law-still-deeply-flawed-wide-open-abuse/>

<theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/06/un-accuses-saudi-arabia-of-using-anti-terror-laws-to-justify-torture>

A legal assessment by Professor Michael Newton, Vanderbilt University School of Law, finds that the law includes under its definition of terrorism vaguely-defined acts such as “disrupting public order; harming the security of the community and the stability of the state; risking national unity; disabling the Basic Law or any of its articles; harming the reputation or status of the country; damaging public facilities and natural resources...” Newton notes that the Saudi state, by failing to preclude discriminatory application of the law, falls short of minimum international standards, leaving the door wide open to “prosecutorial targeting based solely on impermissible proxy criteria such as religious or political affiliation.”

Newton underlines that:

“The 2017 anti-terror law’s explicit call for use of the law to punish peaceful religious and political dissidents presents a marked contradiction to both international standards of human rights and the purposes of anti-terrorism legislation.”

Social and political suppression

The punishment for any perceived criticism of the ruling family or the state's interpretation of Islam is harsh and often secret or obscure in nature. Accordingly, many cases and convictions for free thought and expression are not made public which makes it very difficult to accurately report on the full extent of Saudi repression.

Following a 2011 amendment to the country's press law by a royal decree, the press is prohibited from criticizing the government or related officials, with violations potentially resulting in fines or forced closures of the press concerned. Articles deemed offensive to the religious establishment or the ruling authorities are prohibited. Domestic media are controlled by the state. The royal family owns major stakes in news outlets in multiple countries, providing them with a dominant regional influence.

The government has also sought to control online media, blocking access to hundreds of thousands of websites, which it considers immoral or politically sensitive. All websites, blogs and anyone posting news or commentary online are required by law to have a license from the Ministry of Information. Failure to do so, can result in a fine or possible closure of the website concerned.

There have been numerous arrests and convictions for social media comments, postings, and activism by human rights defenders, many falling under a vague "state security" classification precluding them from royal pardons.

<amnestyusa.org/news/news-item/saudi-arabia-must-release-all-prisoners-of-conscience-immediately-and-unconditionally-irrespective-o>

In a case that drew global attention, on 2 October 2018, Jamal Ahmad Khashoggi, a journalist and vocal critic of the Saudi government, disappeared after entering the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. On 6 October, Turkish authorities declared that Khashoggi was killed inside the consulate by a Saudi team of 15 members "sent specifically for murder". For two weeks, Saudi Arabia denied the allegations; during an interview, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman claimed that the journalist left shortly after he arrived. Finally, on 19 October amid global outcry over the case, Saudi authorities stated that Khashoggi had been killed in a "fight" inside the consulate. However, all the evidence suggests that the killing was premeditated and ordered by officials.

<[washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/turkey-concludes-saudi-journalist-khashoggi-killed-by-murder-team-sources-say/2018/10/06/31ee4f86-c8d9-11e8-9c0f-2ffaf6d422aa_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/turkey-concludes-saudi-journalist-khashoggi-killed-by-murder-team-sources-say/2018/10/06/31ee4f86-c8d9-11e8-9c0f-2ffaf6d422aa_story.html)>

Other Human Rights Issues

Saudi Arabia has not ratified the 'International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights' nor the 'International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights', however, it is a party to the United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT).

Excessive police powers without judicial oversight and increasing lack of free expression have been worsened by the Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing (the "terrorism law"), with its vague and overly broad provisions.

The death sentence (usually by beheading and crucifixion) applies not only for the crime of "apostasy" (see above) but also crimes of "witchcraft" and "sorcery".

The rights to freedom of assembly and association are denied in practice. The government frequently detains political activists who stage demonstrations or engage in other civic advocacy.

LGBT people are denied the right to sexual autonomy. Married men are prohibited from engaging in homosexual acts and can be stoned to death for such acts. As can non-Muslims who commit “sodomy” with a Muslim. Other punishments handed out to those found guilty of homosexuality include chemical castrations, imprisonment and execution. In 2014, a Saudi Arabian man was sentenced to three years in jail and 450 lashes after he was caught using Twitter to arrange dates with other men. A court in Medina, convicted him on the charge of “promoting the vice and practice of homosexuality.” The newspaper Al-Watan reported that the man was arrested following an entrapment ploy by the CPVPV.

Some activists continue to protest for equal rights. Despite the Kingdom sometimes saying it has made progress on women’s rights, those protesting have sometimes been met with punitive treatment. In December 2014, Loujain Hathloul and Maysaa Alamoudi were arrested at the border with the United Arab Emirates for driving. Their case was referred to the Specialized Criminal Court, which deals primarily with cases related to state security and terrorism.

There have been several cases reported of women attempting to flee Saudi Arabia, sometimes then facing coercion or threats of enforced deportation.

<humanists.international/blog/rahaf-was-not-the-first-woman-to-flee-sexual-apartheid-and-she-wont-be-the-last/>

Highlighted cases

In a case that gained global attention, on 7 January 2019, **Rahaf Mohammed** (formerly Rahaf Mohammed Mutlaq al-Qunun) raised the alarm via social media that she had been denied an onward flight from Thailand bound for Australia. She was intending on seeking asylum in Australia after receiving death threats from family members for “renouncing Islam” and allegedly fleeing an arranged marriage and threat of violence over matters of “trivial” disobedience. Her passport was seized by a Saudi diplomat and she was threatened with deportation to either family in Kuwait or back to Saudi Arabia. However, she refused to board the flight and barricaded herself into her airport hotel room. Videos from within the hotel room and of her pledge not to leave until she has seen the United Nations refugee agency made international headlines.

Thailand eventually committed not to return Rahaf or anyone to a country where they were at risk of being killed. Mohammed al-Qunun had her passport returned to her and was allowed to board the flight bound for Australia, under UNHCR protection. On 8 January the Australian government stated that they will continue to monitor the case closely, as Mohammed al-Qunun’s allegations are “deeply concerning”, and that they would “consider” granting a humanitarian visa. However, asylum was granted by Canada on 11 January.

<humanists.international/2019/01/those-who-renounce-religion-must-not-be-deported-to-states-that-persecute-apostates/>

In 2017 a death sentence for “atheism” was upheld against **Ahmad Al Shamri**. He was convicted of apostasy in February 2015, having been arrested on charges of ‘atheism and blasphemy’ for allegedly uploading a series of videos on social media in 2014. Shamri, in his 20s, from the town of Hafar al-Batin, made an insanity plea deal. His defence added that Shamri was under the influence of drugs and alcohol at the time of making the videos. However, he lost the appeals court case and the supreme court ruled against him in April 2017.

<iheu.org/man-sentenced-death-atheism-saudi-arabia/>

<independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-man-sentenced-death-atheism-ahmad-al-

shamri-hafar-al-batin-appeal-denied-a7703161.html>

In 2016 an **unnamed then-28-year-old man**, was reportedly sentenced to 10 years in prison and 200 lashes for sending a series of tweets expressing his atheistic views.

<vice.com/en_us/article/xw3mpk/saudi-arabia-sentenced-man-to-10-years-in-prison-and-2000-lashes-for-atheist-tweets>

In November 2015, Palestinian poet and artist **Ashraf Fayadh** was sentenced to death for “apostasy”, a sentence to be carried out by beheading by sword. Fayadh, a member of the British-Saudi art organization Edge of Arabia, was first arrested in August 2013, in connection with his poetry. In a series of trials he has been accused of “spreading atheism”, insulting “the divine self”, insulting the Prophet Muhammad, discrediting the Quran and Hadith, and objecting to concepts of fate as acts of God. Even “having long hair” has been cited against him, as well as supposedly “having relationships” with women and having photographs of them on his mobile phone (the photographs appear to be simple side-by-side photographs with friends and colleagues). Despite having no access to a lawyer and thus violating the right to a fair trial, at the conclusion of the retrial, on 24 November 2015, Fayadh was sentenced to death. He has said he will appeal.

<pen-international.org/11/2015/saudi-arabia-sentences-poet-to-death/>

<arablit.org/2015/01/13/imprisoned-poet-ashraf-fayadhs-frida-kahlos-mustache/>

<esohr.org/en/?p=658>

In December 2013, **Raif Badawi**, a blogger and creator of a “Liberal Saudi” blogging platform, intended to foster debate on religion and politics, was accused of “apostasy” and eventually sentenced to 10 years in prison, 1,000 lashes with a fine of 1 million Saudi riyals for “insulting Islam”. Badawi was first jailed in 2012 for violating Saudi Arabia’s IT law and insulting religious authorities through his online writings and hosting those of others on his website. His sentence at that time was 7 years in prison and 600 lashes. There has been an international outcry over Badawi’s case, with many civil rights groups including IHEU and many states including Canada and the USA, raising his plight at the UN Human Rights Council.

<iheu.org/un-iheu-calls-immediate-release-saudi-prisoners-badawi-fayadh-al-shamri/>

Raif Badawi’s lawyer, **Waleed Abu al-Khair**, was imprisoned for “breaking allegiance with the king,” “making international organizations hostile to the kingdom,” and “setting up an unlicensed organization.”

In 2012, a Saudi journalist and poet, **Hamza Kashghari**, was extradited from Malaysia and imprisoned without trial for twenty months due to a series of tweets considered by the authorities to be insulting toward the Prophet Mohammed.