

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

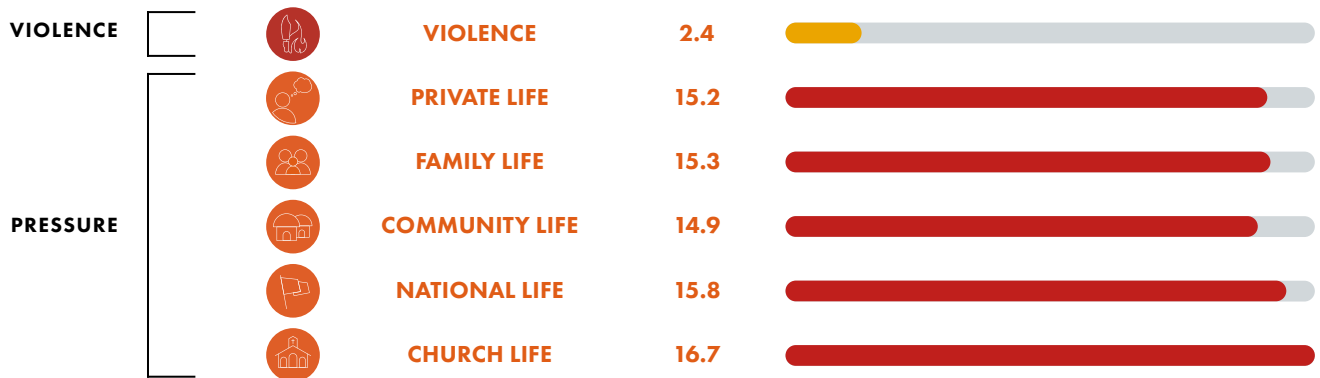
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
13

Saudi Arabia



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

Most Christians in Saudi Arabia are expatriates who come from low and middle income countries in Asia and Africa, and some from Western countries. Besides being exploited and poorly paid, they regularly face verbal and physical abuse because of their ethnicity and low status, and their Christian faith can add an extra layer of vulnerability.

Expatriate Christians are severely restricted in talking about their faith with Muslims. Doing so carries the risk of detention and deportation. Expatriate Muslims converting to Christianity face violations similar to the levels they would have experienced in their home countries, since they tend to live in communities with others from their home nations.

The few Saudi Christian converts from a Muslim background face high levels of pressure, especially from their families, and they generally keep their faith secret. Nevertheless, the small number of Saudi Christians has been slowly increasing, and they are also becoming bolder, sharing their Christian faith with others on the internet and Christian satellite TV channels. Such public action has led to serious repercussions from Saudi families and authorities.

Quick facts

LEADER

King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud

POPULATION

35,845,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

2,165,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Absolute Monarchy



Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	2,165,000	6.0
Muslims	32,381,000	90.3
Hindus	726,000	2.0
Agnostics	239,000	0.7

Source²

Extensive oil reserves have transformed Saudi Arabia into one of the richest and most modern nations in the region. The country is an absolute monarchy; political parties are not allowed and there are no national democratic elections. Salman bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud became king in 2015 and, two months later, Saudi Arabia started a military campaign with 10 other

countries to restore the government of Yemen which had been expelled by the Shiite Houthis. The ongoing war in Yemen has resulted in thousands of civilian casualties and a humanitarian crisis, leading to worldwide criticism. Some reforms in Saudi Arabia in recent years have included giving women approval to drive and travel without a male escort, as well as significantly reducing the number of religious police on the streets.

Saudi Arabia contains the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina (the traditional birth and burial places of Mohammed) and subscribes to Wahhabism, a strict interpretation of Islam. Other religions are not allowed to be practiced openly. A Shiite minority of 10% exists and suffers discrimination. There are more than 1.2 million Christians who are mostly expatriate Asians working temporarily in the country. By leaving Islam, Saudi Christians are punishable under the apostasy law, which carries the death penalty. However, courts have not carried out a death sentence for apostasy in recent years. Hatred against followers of religions other than Sunni Islam still features in school textbooks, in spite of promised reforms.

¹ Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

² Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

How the situation varies by region

As most Christians in Saudi Arabia are expatriate workers, they live and work in all parts of the country depending on where they are employed. The pressure Christians face is generally the same all over the country, although social control is likely to be higher in rural areas. This particularly affects Christian converts from a Muslim background.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriate Christians (mostly Roman Catholic) come from Africa, Asia and the West and come to Saudi Arabia for employment. Migrants from low-income countries face abuse on account of their ethnicity and low status, as well as constant pressure to convert to Islam.

No Christian expatriates are permitted to share their faith with Muslims. Church buildings are not legally permitted, but major Christian worship services are reportedly held regularly without substantial interference from government officials or the religious police.

The community of expatriate Christians also includes Christian converts from a Muslim background, especially Arab and Asian migrants. These believers face similar violations as back in their home country, as they are normally part of micro home-country communities.

Historical Christian communities

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

Converts to Christianity

The few Saudi Christian converts from a Muslim background keep their faith secret. They learn about Christianity through TV programs or the internet, although this is strictly regulated by the authorities.

Non-traditional Christian communities

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression:

Saudi Arabia is defined by Wahhabism. The Quran and Sunna (literally “Traditions”) are declared to be the Constitution and the legal system is based on Sharia law. Only Wahhabi Islam may be practiced publicly, and all Saudi citizens are assumed to be Muslim. The death penalty for apostasy is in force, though there have been no known examples of judicial executions for apostasy in recent years.

Clan oppression:

Tribe and clan affects Arab society e.g. in marriages, employment and in renting or buying property. Clans can be identified by their surname, which reflects their tribal status. There is general disdain for those who do not have a tribal affiliation, especially non-Muslim expatriates. Clan oppression is clearly connected to Islam and particularly affects Christians with a Muslim background. Leaving Islam is a great violation of family and tribal honor and is likely to lead to violent reactions from direct or extended family of a convert.

Dictatorial paranoia:

The Saudi monarchy is absolute, and the ruling family carefully controls any possible dissension. In particular, the king and crown prince will do their utmost to maintain the status quo. As Saudi converts to Christianity are seen as dishonoring the country’s proud reputation as custodian of the two holy mosques, their existence is denied. State officials often act against Christians in response to requests from family or community members. Saudi rulers have also implemented changes that have affected expatriates, such as increasing visa fees for their dependents.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Saudi women are constantly monitored. For female converts from Islam, pressure is mostly exerted by family and community. They risk physical violence, verbal harassment, house arrest and being forcibly married to conservative Muslims as a “corrective” measure. Already married converts risk being divorced and losing custody of their children. Given these pressures, and the ultimate threat of honor killings, many women choose to become secret believers. Furthermore, sources report that thousands of female domestic workers across the country who are Christian (or non-Islamic) face abuse on a regular basis.

- Denied access to social community / networks
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Travel bans / restrictions on movement
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

MEN

The male-dominated nature of public society means that men pay a considerable price if their faith becomes known. Saudi Arabia’s strict Islamic society means that any deviation from standard behavior is quickly observed. Converts risk being publicly shamed, beaten, imprisoned, thrown out of their home and emotionally abused. Alternatively, they might be taken to a Sheikh to be ‘re-educated’. If it becomes clear that a convert will not change, the

threat of death is all too tangible. In light of these pressures, many choose to live as secret believers.

- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Imprisonment by the government
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	13	80
2022	11	81
2021	14	78
2020	13	79
2019	15	77

Saudi Arabia scores one point less compared to WWL 2022: scoring 80 instead of 81 points. This was mostly due to a slight decrease in the score for violent incidents. For example, in WWL2023, unlike in WWL2022, no arrests or sentences of Christians were reported. In addition, we received no reports of forced marriages of Christians nor of Christians’ houses or property being attacked. However, Saudi Arabia still scores high on physical violence against believers, as well as on the number of believers forced to leave their homes. Pressure on Christians in the different spheres of life remains at an extreme level. It is one of the few countries in the world in which church buildings are still forbidden.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

For security reasons no details can be provided here.

Private life

Saudi Arabia's anti-proselytism laws restrict Christians from sharing their beliefs. For Saudi converts from a Muslim background, this often means they cannot talk about their faith, not even with their relatives. For expatriate Christians, this could have consequences for their employment situation. The repercussions are likely to be especially severe for Christian converts from Islam, as apostasy can be punished by imprisonment or the death penalty.

Family life

Non-Islamic religious practice is not allowed, so Christians may not meet for worship or carry out baptisms and weddings. Christian marriages cannot be officially registered with the state. If Saudi parents are discovered to be Christian converts, they may lose custody of their children.

Under Saudi law, migrant female Christians who marry Saudi men (Christian men are not allowed to marry Saudi women) do not have the right to custody of the children on the grounds of ensuring that the children receive a Muslim upbringing.

Community life

Christian converts from a Muslim background are threatened if their faith becomes known, and they are very likely to lose their jobs. The monitoring of known converts is very common and is carried out by the local community. For expatriates, religion is recorded as part of their application process, and any mention of Christianity may result in them not being hired. This mainly concerns migrants from low-income countries, and for that reason some of them register as Muslims.

National life

Blasphemy, defamation of religions and non-Islamic proselytizing are prohibited, as is any public expression of non-Islamic worship. Most Christians (both Saudi and foreign) take great care to avoid provocation; they exercise precautionary "self-censorship", avoiding in particular any direct preaching or criticism of Islam. Businesses do not allow Christmas celebrations and Christmas decorations are confiscated at the border. Logos of companies are also checked for any non-Muslim religious imagery.

Church life

The ban on any form of non-Islamic worship means that no church building can be constructed or rented for use as a church. Of the thousands of informal fellowships for expatriates that meet in private places, there is evidence of routine monitoring by the authorities. Christian services are also restricted by the strict gender segregation, which prohibits men and women from different families from worshiping in the same room. The importation of non-Islamic religious materials in Arabic into Saudi Arabia is prohibited. Media, including the internet, are routinely screened for political, pornographic and religious material deemed offensive or against Islam.



International obligations & rights violated

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

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

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

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



Situation of other religious minorities

Shiite Muslims, located mainly in the Eastern Province, face discrimination and persecution. Regarded as heretics by Saudi rulers, Shiites are discriminated against in the justice system, in education, employment opportunities and government posts. Shiites seek greater political participation and more religious tolerance, but Shiite clerics and activists advocating for their rights risk arrest and even execution on charges of opposing the government.



Open Doors in Saudi Arabia

Open Doors raises prayer support for the believers / church in the Arabian Peninsula.

About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
