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World Watch Research

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# Saudi Arabia: Persecution Dynamics

December 2024



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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[research@od.org](mailto:research@od.org)

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## World Watch List 2025 – Top 50

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2025	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	14.4	98	96	98	96	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.7	11.1	94	93	92	91	92
3	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.6	94	89	89	88	87
4	Libya	16.0	16.2	15.9	16.2	16.4	10.6	91	91	88	91	92
5	Sudan	14.1	14.2	15.5	14.9	15.3	16.1	90	87	83	79	79
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.9	12.2	89	89	89	88	88
7	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.6	14.9	14.5	16.7	88	88	88	87	85
8	Pakistan	13.6	13.9	15.0	15.0	12.9	16.7	87	87	86	87	88
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.9	16.5	10.9	86	86	86	85	86
10	Afghanistan	15.6	15.9	15.9	16.4	16.7	5.0	85	84	84	98	94
11	India	12.2	12.9	13.3	14.9	13.9	16.5	84	83	82	82	83
12	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.8	16.6	3.3	81	81	80	81	78
13	Myanmar	12.6	11.1	13.5	14.1	12.9	16.5	81	79	80	79	74
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	13.0	15.2	15.6	80	79	76	70	67
15	China	13.2	10.1	12.8	14.6	16.1	11.1	78	78	77	76	74
16	Maldives	15.6	15.3	13.7	15.8	16.5	0.7	78	78	77	77	77
17	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.3	14.8	13.9	6.1	78	79	76	78	82
18	Syria	13.5	14.4	13.9	14.4	14.3	7.0	78	81	80	78	81
19	Algeria	14.7	14.3	11.5	14.7	16.0	6.3	77	79	73	71	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	14.0	15.6	76	75	71	68	67
21	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.6	12.9	14.3	8.3	74	71	69	69	67
22	Laos	11.8	10.7	13.5	14.1	13.9	9.8	74	75	68	69	71
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	2.8	74	72	72	70	71
24	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.7	11.3	10.4	16.1	74	71	69	68	67
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.5	12.4	15.5	4.4	73	71	71	71	71
26	Cuba	13.2	8.5	13.9	13.3	15.1	9.1	73	73	70	66	62
27	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	14.0	15.6	72	70	70	68	66
28	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	14.6	15.7	72	70	70	68	62

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2025	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021
29	Turkmenistan	14.3	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.3	1.5	71	70	70	69	70
30	Nicaragua	12.4	7.6	13.7	13.3	14.1	9.6	71	70	65	56	51
31	Mexico	11.7	9.0	12.5	11.8	11.0	14.6	71	68	67	65	64
32	Oman	14.5	14.1	10.9	13.8	14.1	3.0	70	69	65	66	63
33	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	15.6	70	69	66	66	65
34	Tunisia	12.4	13.2	10.1	12.6	13.8	8.1	70	69	67	66	67
35	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	10.8	14.5	16.1	70	67	67	66	64
36	Bhutan	13.2	13.2	12.3	14.1	14.2	2.2	69	68	66	67	64
37	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.9	68	68	68	65	63
38	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.6	12.2	12.8	14.2	4.3	68	65	65	64	64
39	Tajikistan	14.1	12.7	12.7	13.2	13.7	1.9	68	66	66	65	66
40	Egypt	12.7	13.7	12.1	12.4	10.9	6.3	68	68	68	71	75
41	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.7	67	67	68	74	67
42	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	2.6	67	66	66	63	62
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.4	13.1	16.1	67	66	65	65	64
44	Vietnam	10.8	9.5	12.2	14.1	14.1	5.9	67	68	70	71	72
45	Turkey	13.0	11.7	11.7	13.2	11.5	5.4	67	64	66	65	69
46	Colombia	11.0	7.9	12.7	11.5	10.5	12.6	66	68	71	68	67
47	Kyrgyzstan	13.5	10.3	11.7	11.4	12.4	6.9	66	59	59	58	58
48	Brunei	14.8	14.8	10.8	10.8	14.0	0.6	66	66	65	64	64
49	Chad	11.0	8.2	10.2	9.9	10.3	15.9	65	61	58	55	53
50	Jordan	12.9	14.3	10.4	12.2	12.8	2.4	65	65	65	66	64

## World Watch List 2025 – Ranks 51-78

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2025	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021
51	Malaysia	12.8	13.7	11.7	12.4	11.2	3.0	65	64	66	63	63
52	Azerbaijan	13.3	10.2	9.6	12.2	13.7	5.6	65	60	59	60	56
53	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	13.9	64	63	64	63	62
54	Nepal	12.2	10.6	9.5	12.6	12.3	5.9	63	62	61	64	66
55	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	15.4	63	62	63	61	58
56	Russian Federation	12.7	7.9	10.7	13.1	14.1	4.4	63	58	57	56	57
57	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.1	1.7	61	61	60	59	56
58	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	61	64	64	63
59	Indonesia	10.9	11.9	10.9	11.6	10.2	5.7	61	66	68	68	63
60	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.6	61	61	62	62	62
61	Sri Lanka	12.7	8.7	11.5	11.5	8.5	7.6	60	60	57	63	62
62	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	10.3	10.7	12.1	0.2	60	60	60	59	58
63	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	14.6	59	57	55	52	48
64	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	12.1	9.4	58	58	57	50	42
65	Honduras	7.9	4.7	11.7	7.3	9.9	13.1	55	55	53	48	46
66	Togo	9.2	6.7	10.4	7.1	11.5	9.3	54	52	49	44	43
67	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	0.6	54	55	55	57	56
68	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	8.9	54	52	48	43	47
69	Ukraine	6.8	5.0	7.8	12.5	13.5	7.2	53	44	37	37	34
70	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	8.3	53	52	52	51	46
71	Venezuela	6.3	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	9.6	52	53	56	51	39
72	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	16.1	52	52	51	48	47
73	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	9.6	51	44	44	42	42
74	Lebanon	11.5	10.1	7.0	6.2	6.7	7.2	49	48	40	35	34
75	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	4.4	48	47	44	44	43
76	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	8.1	15.6	47	46	46	43	43

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2025	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021
77	Belarus	9.9	3.7	5.0	10.8	14.1	3.1	47	46	43	33	30
78	Philippines	9.2	6.6	6.6	6.1	5.7	8.5	43	40	32	34	26

## Copyright, sources and definitions

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- [Background country information](#) (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

These documents are the property of World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. They include data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD). Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the end of each document under the heading “External links”. These documents may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © Open Doors International.

The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/>.

## Reporting period

The WWL 2025 reporting period was 1 October 2023 - 30 September 2024.

## Brief country details

Saudi Arabia: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
37,474,000	2,274,000	6.1

*Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024*

Saudi Arabia: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	2,274,000	6.1
Muslim	33,817,000	90.2
Hindu	775,000	2.1
Buddhist	131,000	0.3
Ethnic religionist	72,800	0.2
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	7,500	0.0
Atheist	11,700	0.0
Agnostic	252,000	0.7
Other	134,600	0.4
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

## Map of country



## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

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

### Brief description of the persecution situation

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

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

### Summary of international obligations and rights violations

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

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



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

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

## Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

It is estimated that:

- Hundreds of Christians were mentally or physically abused as a result of (additional vulnerability due to) their faith;
- Several Christians were arrested due to their conversion from Islam or involvement in missionary activities.
- At least dozens of Christians had to leave their homes and relocate in or outside of the country for faith related reasons;
- At least hundreds of Christians faced sexual harassment or rape, especially house maids from low income countries.
- Dozens of Christians were locked away from family and community after their conversion was discovered.

For security reasons no details can be given.

## Specific examples of positive developments

- In February 2024 Iraqi Cardinal Louis Sako visited Saudi Arabia at the invitation of local authorities, participating in a forum on the role of the media in interreligious dialogue. During his visit, he publicly blessed a group of Christian migrant workers, mostly from India and the Philippines, by making the sign of the cross on their foreheads. Sako highlighted the openness he experienced in Saudi Arabia, noting the significant changes in the country, such as the relaxing of dress codes for women in Riyadh and the readiness to display more openness towards the world and to confront modernity ([AsiaNews, 5 March 2024](#)).
- According to its [annual review of Saudi textbooks](#) in May 2024, the NGO Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se):
  - "Findings show continued progress toward moderation, openness, and peaceful development through a step-by-step process".
  - "Almost all previously identified hateful examples regarding Jews and Christians were removed."
  - "The removal of problematic examples promoting jihad and martyrdom, as noted in previous reports, has continued. This year, all problematic examples have been removed or altered; this includes removal of an interpretation of jihad as an offensive violent act,

emphasizing instead the non-violent interpretations of jihad (namely, the jihad of the 'Self')."

## Christian communities and how they are affected

**Communities of expatriate Christians:** Most Christians in Saudi Arabia are expatriates who temporarily live and work in the country. These are Christians both from the Western world, the Middle East and from low and middle-income regions such as India, the Philippines and Africa. Westerners are afforded the most protection, East African and Southeast Asians the least protection. Besides being exploited and poorly paid, Asian and African workers are regularly exposed to verbal and physical abuse because of their ethnicity and low status, as well as facing constant pressure to convert to Islam. Most expatriate Christians are Roman Catholic. Travel for Catholic and Orthodox priests is limited, which is problematic for Catholic and Orthodox Christians because their religious traditions require the regular reception of sacraments from a priest.

Expatriate Christians are severely limited as far as sharing their Christian faith with Muslims and meeting for worship is concerned. Church buildings are not legally permitted, but some Christian worship services are reportedly being held regularly without substantial interference from government officials or the religious police. The category 'Christian migrants' also includes converts, mainly from Islam, who often have an Arab background. In many cases, conversion arose through disappointment with the radicalization of Islamic society. If these expatriate converts were previously known as Muslims and are part of micro home-country communities, they usually face the same (or more severe) levels of persecution that they would in their home country. Therefore, most live as secret Christians in order to avoid job loss and physical and mental abuse.

**Historical Christian communities:** Indigenous historical Christian communities do not exist in Saudi Arabia.

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

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

## Areas where Christians face most difficulties

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

## Position on the World Watch List

Saudi Arabia: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2025	81	12
WWL 2024	81	13
WWL 2023	80	13
WWL 2022	81	11
WWL 2021	78	14

The overall score remained the same as in WWL 2024. Both average pressure and the score for violence remained unchanged. There have been some positive developments in religious freedom in Saudi Arabia, but significant restrictions remain. In large cities, there has been greater tolerance for Christmas decorations in some public areas in recent years. School textbooks have been further reformed to remove problematic content about non-Muslims. At the same time, public practice of non-Muslim religions remains prohibited and religious minorities continue to be discriminated against. Moreover, Saudi Arabia is one of the few countries in the world in which church buildings are still officially forbidden.

## Persecution engines

Saudi Arabia: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Very strong
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

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

**Islamic oppression (Very strong)**

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

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

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

**Dictatorial paranoia (Strong - blended with Islamic oppression)**

The Saudi monarchy has supreme power and absolute authority. As such, the monarch can implement any law he desires as long as this complies with Sharia and the Quran. In an unexpected move, King Salman promoted his son to the position of Crown Prince in June 2017. According to observers it was a move to preserve the monarchical ascendancy of the family rather than a focused vision for the country. A key objective of the rulers (especially the king and crown prince) is to maintain the status quo by asserting their own power and by carefully controlling any currents that may be considered dissident or likely to inflame social tensions. Especially Saudi converts to Christianity dishonor the country's proud reputation as the custodian of the two holy mosques and their existence is denied. State officials often act against Christians in reaction to requests by family or community members. The top two authorities of the land have implemented many changes that have affected mostly Saudis but also expatriates in general, including Christians (although Christians are not thereby being specifically targeted). An example of this is the increase in visa fees for all dependents of expatriates resulting in more expatriate Christians leaving for economic reasons, thus decreasing the Christian presence and potential opportunities for being a Christian witness.

## Drivers of persecution

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

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

### Drivers of Islamic oppression

- **Government officials (Very strong):** Saudi Arabia likes to be seen as the defender of Islam with a one hundred percent Muslim citizenship. Persecution will be applied to anyone who harms this image. The maintenance and implementation of highly oppressive laws restricting religious free-

dom by the state authorities are strong sources of persecution. However, the state often plays an otherwise passive role, content to rely upon the strong societal pressures to ensure that Christians and other religious minorities remain in check. This applies to:

- i) Expatriate Christians - for the many groups that gather regularly for private worship, the key threat comes from neighbors and wider communities - state agencies would typically only intervene in response to community demands;
- ii) Converts to Christianity (especially Saudi nationals) - the authorities can and do take severe action, but often in practice this is at the instigation or request of family or community members.

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

- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Very strong):** Often these are prominent leaders (e.g. imams, university professors, medical doctors or others of high standing in the community), who would take it as their task to protect their community from bad influences. To some extent, this functions like a tribal system in a community where actual tribal influence is low (for example in the cities). The fear of hostile pronouncements or actions by Islamic leaders contributes to the very high degree of caution Christians feel compelled to exercise. The high degree of hostility (especially towards converts) and the significant levels of authority and influence mean that religious leaders contribute significantly to the pressure felt by Christians. For example, these leaders keep calling for radical observance of Wahhabi rules, including the call to put pressure on anyone disobeying the teachings of this strict form of Islam.
- **Ordinary citizens (Very strong):** Generally speaking, there is a pronounced anti-Christian (and anti anything regarded as non-Islamic) attitude in society. Although broader society does not constitute a major direct threat, it can often be a trigger for state or family intervention. For example, if neighbors complain about expatriate Christians meeting for fellowship causing excessive noise or inconsiderate parking, the authorities may feel compelled to take action. Similarly, if work colleagues or neighbors became suspicious of a possible conversion to Christianity, it is likely that they would inform the convert's family who might then take severe action. This threat from broader society applies equally within the context of the Internet and social media.
- **Family (Very strong):** It is felt as a great dishonor if a Saudi family member becomes a Christian; the shame needs to be eradicated from the family. Honor killings are still allowed in Saudi Arabia and a family member can be killed to protect or restore the honor of the family. Family hostility (and the fear of provoking violent reactions from immediate or extended family) is the main pressure faced by Saudi Christians. (This mostly affects Saudi converts since most expatriate converts will not have their families with them. However, the level of persecution the latter face from society in general is comparable to that experienced by Saudi Christians.) A history of documented persecution of Saudi Christians from family members has included (but is not limited to) death, attempted electrocution, imprisonment, beatings, arrests, house and room arrest, verbal abuse, freezing of bank accounts, confiscation of passports, forced divorce, forced marriage, loss of parental rights, burning of cars, and threats aimed at family members.

- **Ethnic group leaders (Very strong):** Tribal leaders enforce Islam as part of their tribe keeping age-old values. Tribe and family leaders are a source of persecution for Christians as these leaders use whatever means necessary to maintain the honor of their tribe. Each tribe has its own way of dealing with disturbances. When the conversion of one of their members becomes public, they are usually willing to go to great lengths to bring him or her back to the ancestral faith of the tribe (Islam). This includes forcing a convert's dismissal from work, divorce, return from abroad, forced marriages, etc. Certain tribes contribute to the constitution of the "Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice" (CPVPV - or simply 'Islamic religious police'). These tribes pride themselves in notifying chief CPVPV officials or the local imams about people who deviate from Islamic practices, especially reporting anyone suspected of converting to Christianity. Although the CPVPV has lost much of its authority publicly, it continues to report issues to the police, local Imams, and families of the suspected persons, but in a more quiet manner than in earlier years. Saudis generally fear any such reporting. The threat of reporting others is also used to put people under pressure.
- **Violent religious groups (Strong):** These are independent groups with no respect for tribes or government, which are trying to radicalize society, such as the Islamic State group (IS). Al-Qaeda is active in Yemen and it is assumed that they also pose a threat in Saudi Arabia. These mostly Sunni groups have a strong group culture; they try to convert Shia Muslims and expatriates and are active in influencing the communities around them. If local groups hear of converts to Christianity, they will go to any lengths to persecute them. Saudi Christians, in particular, know that if these groups were to take action against an 'apostate', they could probably do so with impunity. Generally, the government is effective in keeping violent religious groups in check that would pose a threat to the rulers and as such to national stability. There is therefore no constant threat from violent religious groups. However, there are uncertainties and ambiguities in Saudi relations with some religious groups that have perpetrated violence acts in the wider region. Although the activity of such groups is likely to be limited, the high degree of hostility such groups show towards converts (in particular) and expatriate Christians means that they are still a threat to Christian life.

#### **Drivers of Clan oppression (blended with Islamic oppression)**

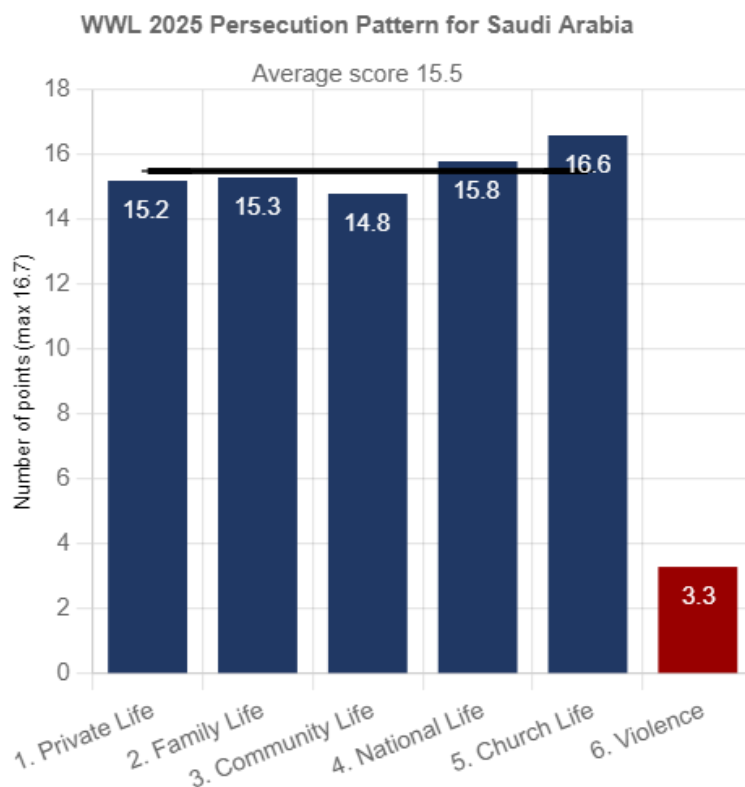
- **Ethnic group leaders (Very strong):** Each tribe has their own way of dealing with disturbances. When a tribal member's Christian faith becomes public, other members usually resort to any means to force a return to Islam.
- **Family (Very strong):** Leaving Islam is a great violation of family and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

- **Ordinary citizens (Strong):** In tribal society it is dangerous to go against traditional opinions and ways of life. There is the constant threat from the broader community that they will inform an 'apostate's' family if they find out about his/her conversion to Christianity.

**Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia (blended with Islamic oppression)**

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

**The Persecution pattern**



The WWL 2025 Persecution pattern for Saudi Arabia shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at the extreme level of 15.5 points, the same as in WWL 2024. The scores for pressure in all *spheres of life* are at extreme levels. Pressure is most extreme in the *Church and National spheres of life* which is typical for a situation in which *Islamic oppression* is the main Persecution engine combined with *Dictatorial paranoia*.
- Pressure resulting from the Persecution engine *Islamic oppression* blended with *Clan oppression* is present mostly in the *Private, Family and Community spheres* and is exerted especially on Christians with a Muslim background by the social environment.



- The score for violence remained at 3.3 points in WWL 2025 though there were some small changes: two arrests of Christians were reported, as compared to one in WWL 2024 and unlike the previous year, there were no reports of forced marriages.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

*In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2025 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/>.*

### Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

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

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

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

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

***Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (4.00 points)***

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

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

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

are locally known as "labor camps" are also often isolated from meeting other Christians due to working conditions.

### **Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere**

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

There is no scope for formalizing a non-Islamic marriage in Saudi Arabia, and no public non-Islamic religious practice is permitted. Any Christian wedding ceremony inside Saudi Arabia would therefore have to be undertaken in private and could not be officially registered with the Saudi authorities. Christians with a Muslim background must marry according to Islamic rites and Christians marrying Muslims cannot do so without converting to Islam.

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### ***Block 2: Additional information***

Saudi Christian parents must hide their faith from their children (until they are old enough to keep it a secret) or risk exposure. As a result, their children grow up as Muslims. It is dangerous to tell a child about their parents' beliefs, because the child is likely to unwittingly expose the parents' faith at school or to family members. This means that the child has to learn all about Islamic life, which is taught from the earliest pre-school education onwards. According to a country expert, this is a major challenge for Saudi Christian parents.

### Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

***Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (4.00 points)***

Monitoring by the government, local communities and private groups is common practice in Saudi Arabia for all citizens and residents. Phone calls, e-mails and social media are all monitored. The primary focus of such surveillance is to identify anti-government or anti-Islamic sentiments. For Saudi Christians, once their beliefs are known to others, they will be more closely monitored by officials and family members. Their personal belongings such as computers and phones will be searched, their social media accounts monitored, and their movements will be tracked closely by family members or concerned community members. One Saudi convert was called in for questioning because his sister was known to be a convert through posts on social media. For expatriate Christians residing in the country, monitoring will increase and will often lead to deportation should they be suspected of speaking about Christian faith with Saudis or of distributing Christian literature.

The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV, commonly known outside the country as the “religious police”) monitors social behavior to encourage obedience to laws and regulations protecting “public morals.” While the CPVPV has lost much of its authority publicly, it still continues to quietly report issues to the police, local Imams, and families of the suspected persons. The larger Christian fellowships, often located on compounds, also have their sermons monitored at random times, to make sure there is no anti-Islamic content or any focus on evangelizing Muslims. However, the smaller fellowships do not report monitoring of services or sermons. They remain untouched by the authorities unless they are being 'bad neighbors' and their meetings interfere with the neighborhood by crowded parking or disturbing noise. Employers and others in the same ethnic/nationality groups monitor migrants supposedly as part of ensuring communal harmony and mutual support for living within Saudi culture.

***Block 3.6: Christians have been hindered in participating in communal institutions, forums, etc., for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)***

There is no room for any openly Christian (or other non-Muslim) form of social representation. There are no non-Islamic communal institutions in Saudi Arabia. In principle this pressure could also apply to a Christian from a Muslim background, though in practice a convert would be highly unlikely to seek to be actively involved in communal institutions if their faith was known, as this would be asking for trouble. As such, Saudi Christians are hindered from participating in communal institutions, forums, etc., for faith-related reasons. Once a Saudi is known to be a Christian, he will no longer be welcome in the community and his opinions will not be considered valuable. Expatriate Christians are hindered from expressing their beliefs at work and in public. Because they are not Muslim, they are not invited or accepted into communal institutions or activities.

***Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)***

In Saudi society, employment in both the public and private sectors is largely based on family/tribe relationships and social standing. For Saudi Christians whose faith becomes known their standing

within the tribe and society would be damaged resulting in denial of or dismissal from employment. For expatriate Christians and migrant Christian workers, they are discriminated against in both the public and private sectors. Their faith needs to be recorded as a part of their application process and any mention of Christian faith may result in them not being hired. All non-Muslims have less rights than Muslims. For example, during Ramadan they must work longer hours than Muslims and the Muslim employees receive one month of extra salary during Ramadan. Christians who are active in living out their faith in a way that affects others may lose their jobs.

***Block 3.1: Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (e.g. for not meeting majority religion or traditional dress codes, beard codes etc.). (3.75 points)***

Christian converts from Islam are threatened if their faith is known. Daily life is dominated by Islam and this leads to several restrictions and limitations. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has relaxed the dress code for women, with the *abaya* no longer mandatory in cities like Riyadh and Jeddah. However, women are still expected to dress modestly, covering their arms, legs, and chest, and the *abaya* remains common in more conservative areas and during religious events. Men also continue to wear traditional clothing like the *thobe* in rural areas and religious events, but Western-style attire is becoming more accepted in cities, with modest dress standards still required in schools, workplaces and religious sites.

#### **Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Saudi Arabia traditionally prohibits the public display of non-Islamic religious symbols, such as Christian symbols, and - officially - businesses have not been permitted to publicly celebrate Christmas or display Christmas decorations. Indeed, Christmas decorations have in the past been confiscated at the border, and even company logos containing non-Muslim religious imagery have been subjected to scrutiny. However, in recent years, there has been a gradual shift towards cultural openness, especially in large cities like Riyadh and Jeddah, where there has been greater tolerance: Christmas decorations are now available in stores and malls. This shift is part of the broader reforms under Vision 2030, aiming to modernize the country and promote tolerance. Although Christmas items are being sold, they are often labeled as "festive" rather than explicitly named after the holiday, and some people still hold reservations about these changes due to the conservative nature of the country. Despite these developments, the public display of non-Islamic religious symbols is still officially prohibited, and religious practices remain restricted to private spaces for non-Muslims.

**Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere**

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

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

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

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

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

The importation of non-Islamic religious materials in Arabic into Saudi Arabia is prohibited. However, expatriate Christians can bring a personal copy of the Bible in their own language.

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

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

## Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

### **1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced.**

Possible reasons for this may be:

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

### **2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:**

- *Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).*
- *In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.*
- *Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.*

### **3. The use of symbolic numbers:**

- *In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10\*, 100\* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10\* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100\* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000\* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000\*, 100,000\* and 1,000,000\*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWL chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.*

### **4. The symbol “x” in the table:**

- *This denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security concerns.*

Saudi Arabia: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2025	WWL 2024
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	x	x
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	x	x
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	x	x
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	x	x
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	10 *	10 *
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	100 *	100 *
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	x	x
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	100 *	100 *
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	x	x
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	x	x
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	10 *	10 *
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	10 *	10 *

Due to security concerns, it was decided not to publish all available details of arrests and attacks in this document.

In the WWL 2025 reporting period, the score for violent incidents and pressure remained at the same level as in WWL 2024. The score for violence remained at 3.3 points in WWL 2025 though there were some small changes: Two arrests of Christians were reported, as compared to one in WWL 2024 and unlike the previous year, there were no reports of forced marriages in WWL 2025. In general, Christians

in the country are very careful how they act in order to avoid harsh consequences and this contributes to the violence score remaining relatively low.

- **Christians arrested:** Some Christians were arrested due to their conversion from Islam or involvement in missionary activities.
- **Christians under house arrest:** it is estimated that dozens of Christians were locked away from family and community after their conversion was discovered.
- **Christians attacked:** There are more than 2 million foreign Christians living in Saudi Arabia of whom large numbers are employed as domestic staff. As in previous WWL reporting periods, rape and sexual harassment remain a huge problem in Saudi Arabia and it is estimated that this has happened to (at least) hundreds of foreign Christian domestic workers - as well as physical abuse. Asian and African Christians, mainly housemaids working in Saudi homes, are very vulnerable and are often badly treated with motives including negative attitudes towards race and faith. Verifiable statistics are scarce because of the social taboo and lack of legal protection/justice. The table above shows a conservative estimate.

## 5 Year trends

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

### 5 Year trends: Average pressure

Saudi Arabia: WWL 2021 - WWL 2025	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2025	15.5
2024	15.5
2023	15.6
2022	15.5
2021	15.2

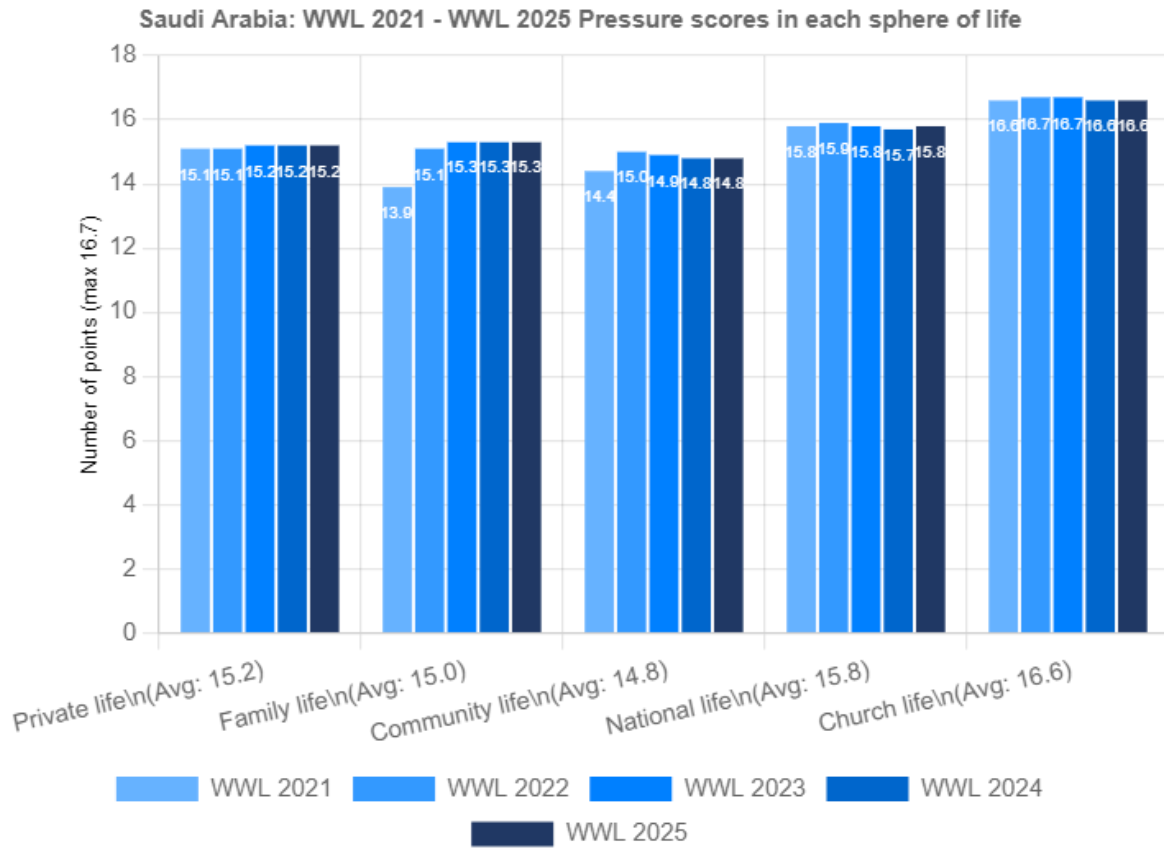
The average pressure over the five *spheres of life* has been extremely high over the past five reporting periods, with scores levelling off at 15.5/15.6 points since WWL 2022. Over the years more data has become available - particularly on the situation of converts among foreign workers - thus contributing to the rise in points after WWL 2021. In WWL 2024 the average pressure decreased very slightly reflecting a somewhat more relaxed atmosphere in society. In WWL 2025 there was no major change in the level of pressure experienced by Christians in Saudi Arabia.

### 5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

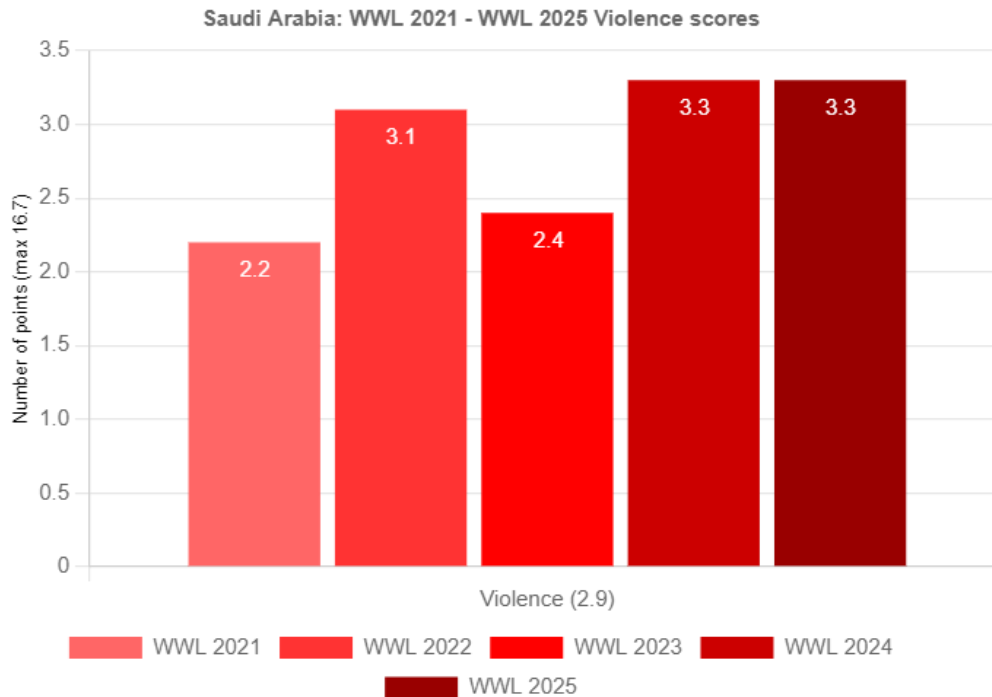
As can be seen in the blue chart below, pressure in all *spheres of life* has been more or less stable at an extreme level. The level of pressure in *Community* and *Church life*, which had shown a slightly increasing trend since WWL 2020, has leveled off since WWL 2023 and even shows a further very slight



decrease from WWL 2024 onwards as a result of a somewhat more relaxed social atmosphere. In WWL 2025 there was no major change in the level of pressure.



**5 Year trends: Violence against Christians**



As can be seen in the red chart above, the score for violence shows a fluctuating picture over the past five WWL reporting periods. As in WWL 2022, the scores in WWL 2024 and WWL 2025 were fairly high, the latter two WWL reporting periods attaining 3.3 points. Apart from a slightly higher score of reported violent incidents, the rise to 3.3 points was also caused in part by an adjustment in the scoring: Since WWL 2024, house arrest by a convert's family is counted as a form of abduction. In general, Christians in the country are very careful how they act in order to avoid harsh consequences which helps keep the violence score relatively low. There has also been less enforcement of Islamic practice in recent years due to the reduction in religious police powers.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Saudi Arabia	Female Pressure Points Most frequently recorded PPs: WWL 2019 - WWL 2024
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Denied access to social community/networks</li> <li>Forced divorce</li> <li>Forced marriage</li> <li>Incarceration by family (house arrest)</li> <li>Travel bans/restrictions on movement</li> <li>Violence – physical</li> <li>Violence – psychological</li> <li>Violence – sexual</li> </ul>

Women and girls have an extremely limited voice in Saudi Arabia’s Islamic, male-controlled society, and are under constant monitoring and surveillance by their family and local community. As such, they can struggle to access Christian materials and teachings, such as Bible apps and Christian music, as their mobile phones may be taken away by family members and searched. A country expert explained that, in addition, “women are at higher risk for being persecuted while conducting Christian acts of worship by themselves, because women tend to be surrounded by family and not afforded privacy”. This lack of privacy is an important reason as to why women either hide their faith or do not convert.

Leaving Islam is one of the biggest sins a Muslim can commit; for Saudi female converts from Islam, pressure primarily comes from the *Family* and *Community spheres*. Upon discovery of their conversion, they risk physical violence, harassment, and can be married to conservative Muslims as a ‘corrective’ measure (sometimes as a second wife). A country expert explained that “if women are abused physically, it often occurs in places on their bodies that are less noticeable”. Whilst boys are more likely to be expelled from the home, girls are more likely to be locked in under strict house arrest, have their phones removed and be isolated from the outside world.

Converts who are already married risk being divorced and are especially vulnerable to their children being taken away. An expert mentioned the “intense fear” that female converts face regarding losing custody of their children, demonstrating “both a high [likelihood] that this will occur if their faith is revealed and the high intensity of their impact it will make on their lives”.

Outside the context of marriage, sources report that instances of rape and sexual assault are commonplace across Saudi Arabia for the thousands of non-Saudi (especially Asian and African) house maids across the country who are Christian (or non-Islamic), a position in which they are commonly

abused and virtually treated as slaves. This reflects the subordinate position of women in Saudi society and their unprotected status when on their own (for example, if working outside their home) a vulnerability which is compounded by their nationality and religion (i.e., non-Saudi and non-Muslim).

Given such pressure and violence – and the ultimate threat of honor killings – it comes as no surprise that many women choose to become secret believers. Fleeing is rarely an option, as despite [2019 legislation](#) allowing women to travel without a chaperone (HRW, 22 August 2019), the movement of women remains heavily controlled by male guardians who can still file cases against female family members for “disobedience” ([HRW 2022, Saudi Arabia country chapter](#)). This applies to Muslim women as well, but Christian women are especially vulnerable here, with their movement remaining heavily controlled. Women are largely dependent on their families for the support of their basic needs, including shelter, food and clothing. As a country expert summarized: “Women typically have more to lose because culturally they have less freedom.”

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Saudi Arabia	Male Pressure Points Most frequently recorded PPs: WWL 2019 - WWL 2024
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Economic harassment via business/job/work access</li> <li>Forced out of home – expulsion</li> <li>Imprisonment by government</li> <li>Violence - physical</li> <li>Violence – psychological</li> </ul>

The male-dominated nature of public society in Saudi means that Saudi Christian men pay a considerable price if their faith becomes known. Saudi Arabia’s strict Islamic society means that any deviation from standard behavior is quickly observed.

In a shame and honor culture, to bring shame on the family is the worst thing a son or father could do. Whereas female converts are often punished secretly or behind closed doors, male converts are punished publicly or openly within the family. They risk being publicly shamed, beaten, thrown out of their home, emotionally abused and threatened. They may be denied financial support, then offered material incentives to return to Islam and revoke the shame brought upon the family. Alternatively, they might be taken to a Sheikh who will pressure them to recant. Compounding the psychological trauma, families commonly cover up why they are mistreating their male family member.

Commenting on the economic pressures facing men, a country expert noted: “Men are more likely to lose their job.” There are reports of men who are known to be Christians being denied promotion, excluded from receiving the annual company raise, being pressured to work longer hours, and harassed to renounce Christ. In light of such pressure and the potentially crippling economic repercussions it can have on their families, most converts choose to live as secret believers. This extends as far as not even telling their own spouse or children about their faith, for fear that extended family members or school staff could discover that they have left Islam.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

A major religious minority facing discrimination and persecution in Saudi Arabia are Shiite Muslims. They are located mostly in the Eastern Province. Regarded as heretics by Saudi rulers for most of Saudi history up until today, Shiites are discriminated against in the justice system, education, public-sector employment and housing opportunities, government posts and religious activities. Shiites seek greater political participation and more religious tolerance.

In 2024 in Saudi Arabia, the number of executions rose to more than 300, the highest number since 1990. Many of them were drug-related executions but also included political critics, such as [Shiite citizens involved in anti-government protests](#) from 2011 to 2013 (Amnesty International, 30 September 2024).

According to [USCIRF 2024 Saudi Arabia](#):

- Saudi Arabia is recommended by USIRCF for the category "Countries of Particular Concern" (CPC).
- In March [2023], a court sentenced Shi'a activist Mariam Al Qisoom to a 25-year prison sentence and subsequent travel ban.
- In June [2023], authorities arrested Shi'a Bahraini cleric Sheikh Jamil al-Baqari for posting a social media video in which he recited a prayer for the deliverance of Imam Mahdi.

## Trends Summary

### 1) Saudi Arabia is trying to diversify its economy

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

### 2) There is less public enforcement of Islam

In tandem with the above-mentioned trend, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman has expressed his desire to return the kingdom to a more "[moderate](#)" form of Islam (Al-Jazeera, 25 October 2017), introducing reforms such as allowing women to drive and permitting certain forms of entertainment. With the curbing of the religious police's powers, there is less public enforcement of Islam as compared to previous years, which has led to relatively more freedom for both expatriates and Saudi citizens. According to observers in Saudi Arabia, these freedoms have made people feel more free to explore other ideas, ideologies and faiths. While atheism and esoteric philosophies are in vogue, this development has not yet led to much greater openness towards Christian faith. On the other hand, in certain parts of the country, some converts from Islam have been able to speak of their new faith to their families without major repercussions. However, the influence of the values and beliefs of tribe and community remains undiminished.

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

The Internet is playing an important role in the rapid social change currently underway. This also leads to increased opportunities for online Christian ministry. Internet speed has increased, leading to high levels of social media usage. Because of this, more Saudis are searching online for faith-related material. However, these increased freedoms can also provide another context for pressure, as individual 'vigilantes' can respond to them on social media, and the government can also monitor them. The country is aiming to both stimulate tourism and maintain its influence on worldwide Islam. Although there have been some positive steps, it is too early to assume that this will lead to a broader acceptance of different religions.

### Further useful reports

Further background information per country and a selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-background/>
- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

### External Links

- Copyright, sources and definitions: Background country information - <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-background/>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Specific examples of positive developments: AsiaNews, 5 March 2024 - <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Card.-Sakon-'surprising'-reality-in-Riyadh,-blessing-of-Christian-migrants-60277.html>
- Specific examples of positive developments: annual review of Saudi textbooks - <https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/Updated-Review-Saudi-Textbooks-2023-24.pdf>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: 2019 legislation - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/08/22/saudi-arabia-travel-restrictions-saudi-women-lifted>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: HRW 2022, Saudi Arabia country chapter - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/saudi-arabia#49dda6>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Shiite citizens involved in anti-government protests - <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/09/saudi-arabia-highest-execution-toll-in-decades-as-authorities-put-to-death-198-people/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: USCIRF 2024 Saudi Arabia - <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2024-05/Saudi%20Arabia.pdf>
- Trends Summary: moderate - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/saudi-crown-prince-promises-return-moderate-islam-171024182102549.html>