

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

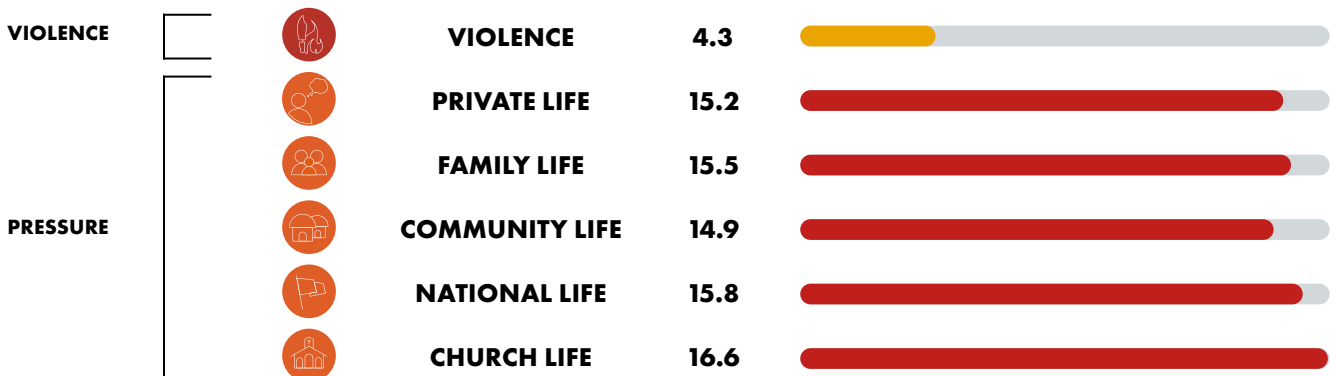
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

## SAUDI ARABIA

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**13**



### 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

Christians in Saudi Arabia are mostly expatriates from low and middle-income countries in Asia and Africa, with a smaller number from Western nations. They face exploitation, poor wages and verbal and physical abuse due to their ethnicity and low economic status, with their Christian faith likely to increasing their vulnerability. Expatriate Christians cannot share their faith with Muslims without risking detention and deportation. By 2025, several Christian expats were expelled from the country; some were told that the reason was “Christianity,” while most were given no reason. Foreign Muslim converts to Christianity experience similar persecution levels as in their home countries since they typically live in close-knit expatriate communities from their country of origin. The small number of Saudi Christian converts from Muslim backgrounds face intense pressure, particularly from their families, generally keeping their faith secret. Despite this, their numbers are slowly growing, and some are sharing their faith online and through Christian satellite TV channels, though this often leads to serious consequences from families and authorities.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

King Salman bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud

### POPULATION

37,990,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

2,295,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Absolute Monarchy



## Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	2,295,000	6.0
Muslims	34,284,000	90.2
Hindus	788,000	2.1
Others	623,000	1.7
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source<sup>2</sup>

Saudi Arabia, transformed by vast oil reserves into one of the region's wealthiest nations, operates as an authoritarian absolute monarchy without political parties or democratic elections. King Salman bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud, who ascended to the throne in 2015, quickly engaged in military action in Yemen against Shiite Houthis, largely driven by his son Mohammed bin Salman, resulting in thousands of civilian casualties and a humanitarian crisis. Recent reforms have granted women permission to drive and travel without male guardians, while significantly reducing religious police presence.

As custodian of Islam's holiest sites, Mecca and Medina (Mohammed's birthplace and burial location), Saudi Arabia adheres to Wahhabism, a strict Islamic interpretation. Other religions are not allowed to be practiced openly. The country's 10% Shiite minority faces systematic discrimination.

Approximately 2.3 million Christians live in Saudi Arabia, primarily temporary expatriate workers from Asia. According to World Christian Database statistics, over 90% are Roman Catholic. Saudi citizens who convert from Islam to Christianity face the death penalty under apostasy laws, though no judicial executions for apostasy have been documented in recent years.

School textbooks have undergone significant reforms to remove content hostile to non-Muslims, though it remains unclear how many older textbooks remain in circulation. Despite these positive developments, the Saudi government continues to prohibit the public practice of non-Muslim religions, and religious minorities face ongoing discrimination in legal, educational and employment spheres.



<sup>1</sup>Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

<sup>2</sup> Other refers to all the rest to make up 100%: Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### ISLAMIC OPPRESSION

Saudi Arabia is fundamentally defined by Wahhabism, with the Qur'an and Sunna declared as the Constitution and Sharia as the legal foundation. Only Wahhabi Islam can be practiced publicly and all citizens are presumed Muslim. While apostasy technically carries the death penalty, no recent judicial executions for this offense have been documented. The government's role as guardian of Islam's holiest sites reinforces its self-image as the defender of Islamic orthodoxy.

### CLAN OPPRESSION

Tribal and clan structures significantly impact Saudi society, influencing marriages, employment, property transactions and social status. Surnames identify tribal affiliations, with general contempt directed at those lacking such connections, especially non-Muslim expatriates. This oppression intersects directly with Islamic identity, particularly affecting Christian converts from Muslim backgrounds. Leaving Islam represents a profound violation of family and tribal honor, frequently triggering violent responses from immediate and extended family members.

### DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

The Saudi monarchy exercises absolute control, with the royal family vigilantly suppressing potential dissent. The king and crown prince prioritize maintaining the status quo. Saudi converts to Christianity are viewed as dishonoring the country's reputation as custodian of Islam's two holiest mosques, leading to official denial of their existence. Government officials sometimes target Saudi Christians at the request of family or community members, while expatriate Christians, like other foreign workers, are affected by general policies such as increased visa fees for dependents and enhanced surveillance of communications.

## How the situation varies by region

Christians in Saudi Arabia face varying levels of persecution depending on their location and background. While expatriate workers are distributed throughout the country based on employment, persecution intensity remains consistent nationwide. Rural areas exhibit significantly higher levels of social control and religious conservatism, creating particularly dangerous environments for Muslim-background believers.

Western expatriate compounds represent exceptions to these patterns, offering reduced monitoring and less pressure to conform to Islamic norms. Major urban centers like Riyadh and Jeddah have shown marginally increased tolerance in recent years, though fundamental restrictions on religious freedom remain firmly in place throughout the kingdom.

## Who is affected?

### COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

Expatriate Christians, mostly Roman Catholic, come to Saudi Arabia from Africa, Asia and Western countries for employment. Migrants from low-income countries, living and working within a Muslim-majority context, often face abuse due to their ethnicity and low social status, as well as ongoing pressure to convert to Islam. They cannot share their faith with Muslims or legally establish churches, though some worship services occur without substantial interference. This community includes Muslim background converts who face persecution similar to their home countries 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

Converts from Islam maintain secrecy due to extreme risk, learning about Christianity through regulated TV programs and internet sources.

### NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

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



## How are men and women differently affected?

### WOMEN

Female converts from Islam in Saudi Arabia live under strict male guardianship, leaving them with little privacy or freedom of belief. They face severe family and community pressure, including violence, forced marriage, house arrest, divorce and loss of child custody. The risk of honor killings, combined with the lack of specific legal protection, forces most to remain secret believers. Constant surveillance and dependence on families deepen women's vulnerability. Thousands of Christian migrant domestic workers endure sexual abuse, exploitation, and wage theft under the kafala system.

#### Female typical pressure points:

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied custody of children
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

### MEN

In Saudi Arabia's male-dominated society, Christian men who convert from Islam face severe repercussions. They risk public shaming, beatings, imprisonment, loss of family and income and even death. Families may pressure them back into Islam through religious "re-education" or material incentives. Although reforms have reduced the authority of religious police, public Christian practice remains banned. Known Christians face workplace discrimination and are denied promotions or raised salaries, while both local and migrant Christians are forbidden from displaying Christian symbols. Under constant surveillance, most Christian converts live as secret believers.

#### Male typical pressure points:

- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological



## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	13	82
2025	12	81
2024	13	81
2023	13	80
2022	11	81

The overall score increased by one point, from 81 to 82 points, primarily due to a rise in the violence score. Pressure across all spheres of life remains extremely high. Although Saudi Arabia presents itself externally as open and reform-minded, and some modest positive developments have occurred in the area of religious freedom, significant restrictions persist. In 2025, the first major wave of deportations of foreign Christian workers in more than a decade took place. Christian expats were initially held for questioning and subsequently deported. One house church was shut down; those present were individually approached and expelled from the country without explanation. At the same time, the public practice of non-Islamic religions remains prohibited, and religious minorities continue to face discrimination. Moreover, Saudi Arabia is one of the few countries in the world where church buildings are still officially banned.

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## Examples of violence in the reporting period

- Expatriate Christians were held for interrogation and consequently deported.
- One house church was closed; attendees were individually approached and expelled from the country without explanation.





### PRIVATE LIFE

Saudi Arabia's anti-proselytism laws severely restrict Christians from expressing their faith. Converts cannot discuss beliefs even with family members. For expatriates, faith discussions risk employment termination and deportation. Online religious engagement is particularly dangerous due to pervasive digital surveillance. Christians cannot display Christian symbols or possess Christian materials in Arabic. Converts face the most severe consequences, including potential imprisonment under apostasy laws, though judicial executions for apostasy have not been recently documented.

### FAMILY LIFE

Non-Islamic religious practices are prohibited, preventing Christians from conducting worship, baptisms, or weddings. Christian marriages conducted within Saudi Arabia receive no legal recognition. Saudi converts to Christianity risk losing child custody if their faith is discovered. Under Saudi law, migrant Christian women who marry Saudi men forfeit child custody rights to ensure Islamic upbringing. Christian parents face challenges raising children in their faith within the Saudi school system where religious education is strictly controlled and children must participate in Islamic instruction regardless of personal beliefs.

### COMMUNITY LIFE

Christians converts face intense community-level persecution throughout Saudi Arabia. They risk threats, violence and job loss if their faith becomes known. Local communities routinely monitor

suspected converts. Expatriates must declare their religion during employment applications; identifying as Christian can hinder workers from low-income countries from being hired. Some register as Muslims to improve their chances of employment.

### NATIONAL LIFE

Saudi law prohibits blasphemy, religious defamation and non-Islamic proselytizing, along with public expressions of non-Islamic worship. Christians practice extensive self-censorship to avoid consequences. While Christmas decorations are increasingly tolerated in urban centers, they're marketed as "seasonal" rather than religious items. Business logos undergo screening for religious imagery. Christians cannot access senior government positions or military leadership roles. Christian testimony carries little weight in Saudi courts, and citizenship applications implicitly require adherence to Islam.

### CHURCH LIFE

Saudi Arabia prohibits church buildings and formal Christian organizations. Expatriates form informal fellowships in private settings, though authorities routinely monitor these gatherings. Gender segregation complicates worship, as men and women from different families cannot gather. Importing non-Islamic religious materials in Arabic is prohibited. Though expatriates may theoretically possess one personal Bible, customs officials have harassed non-Western Christian workers when found with one. Online religious content undergoes filtering and surveillance.



## International obligations & rights violated

**Saudi Arabia has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under 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 is severely restricted by their own families (CEDAW Art. 15)
- Female Christian converts are forcibly married to Muslim men to force them to 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 (10% of population) face discrimination in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. Viewed as heretics, they experience inequities in justice, education, employment and government representation. Shiite advocates risk arrest and execution on anti-government charges. In 2024 and 2025, several Shia men were executed for alleged terrorism, their religious beliefs or political activism linked to their Shi'a identity. Other religious minorities, including Uyghur Muslims, also face significant restrictions and potential deportation.





## Open Doors in Saudi Arabia

Open Doors raises prayer support for the believers/church in Saudi Arabia.





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## ABOUT THIS DOSSIER

- The content of this Country Dossier is based on detailed analysis carried out by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. This dossier may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2026 Open Doors International.
- All 50 Country Dossiers – along with the latest update of WWL Methodology – can be accessed [here](#).
- The WWL 2026 reporting period was 01 October 2024 - 30 September 2025.

*All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*