

FINAL WWL 2019 COUNTRY DOSSIER

SAUDI ARABIA

LEVEL 3/EMBARGO

(Reporting period: 1 November 2017 – 31 October 2018)

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Introduction

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Introduction

World Watch List Saudi Arabia	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2019	77	15
WWL 2018	79	12
WWL 2017	76	14
WWL 2016	76	14
WWL 2015	77	12

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country was among the fifty highest scoring countries (Top 50) in the WWL 2015-2019 reporting periods.

Please note: The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.

WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Saudi Arabia

Link for general background information

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14702705>

Recent country history

Founded in 1932, Saudi Arabia has been transformed from an under-developed tribal kingdom into one of the richest and modern nations in the region thanks to the exploitation of its extensive oil reserves starting in the 1950s. The oil industry drew large numbers of migrant workers to the country, including Christians.

The Arab Spring uprisings which spread in 2011 had little effect on Saudi Arabia. There were some calls for political reform and some small scale protests, especially by the Shiite minority in the Eastern Province. The government banned all protests; raised public sector salaries and provided increased benefits for the religious authorities and for low-paid workers. A few minor reforms were promised or implemented, such as easing certain restrictions on women. The country's first elections for municipal councilors were held in 2005 and 2011; women were allowed to vote and stand as candidates for the first time in December 2015. After the death of King Abdullah in January 2015, Salman bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud became king and, two months later, Saudi Arabia started a military campaign together with ten other countries to restore the government of Yemen which had been expelled by the Houthis. The ongoing war in Yemen has resulted in a high number of civilian casualties and a humanitarian crisis, leading to worldwide criticism.

The current king, Salman, is ageing just like the other rulers of the government and they have [reportedly](#) struggled with the task of running a modern, youthful state, where 59% of the 33.6 million citizens are under 30. King Salman started to address this in 2015 by nominating a member of the younger generation—his nephew, Mohammad bin Nayef—as crown prince. He lasted just two years and was replaced by his favored son according to [analysts](#), Mohammad bin Salman in 2017. Prince Mohammad casts himself as a youthful reformer but is transforming Saudi Arabia into a truly absolute monarchy.

In 2016, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman launched an ambitious set of socio-economic reforms known as "Saudi Vision 2030". The plan focuses not only on the Saudi economy (aiming to reduce dependency on the oil industry) but also mentions the importance of creating "a vibrant society" and of "living by Islamic values". The crown prince's actions so far have been an anti-corruption sweep, a costly war in Yemen and the blockade of neighbouring Qatar, which has achieved little beyond dividing the Gulf Co-operation Council according to [observers](#). On a more positive note, the crown prince has also announced he wants the country to follow a 'more moderate form of Islam' and has even hosted and visited Christian clergymen abroad. He has also started to allow cinemas, open-air pop concerts and even female drivers in the strict Islamic Kingdom. His meetings with representatives of the Vatican, Coptic and Anglican churches are indicators of greater openness to direct inter-faith engagement. However, these discussions have not led to much substantive improvement in the treatment of expatriate Christians in the country, and have not indicated any real intention to increase the religious freedom of Saudi Christians. Moreover, the breaking of diplomatic and wider relations with Canada in August 2018 (after Canada raised human rights concerns) shows how sensitive this issue is. The Saudi regime is obviously determined to continue its agenda without outside interference, also regardless of the international pressure that has been put on the kingdom

after the killing of exiled Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi embassy in Turkey in October 2018.

The religious landscape

The desert kingdom controls the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina (birth and burial place of Mohammed, the prophet of Islam) and is defined by Wahhabism, a purist and strict interpretation of Islam. Other religions are not allowed to be practiced openly. A Shiite minority of 8% exists and suffers discrimination. There are more than 1.4 million Christians in Saudi Arabia. However, these are not Saudi Arabian citizens but mostly expatriate Asians working temporarily in the country. There are also Christians from other parts of the world. No official churches are allowed in Saudi Arabia of any Christian denomination. The small number of Saudi Arabian Christians meet in private.

Saudi Arabia finances missionary efforts beyond its own borders through the Islamic missionary organization "Muslim World League" based in Mecca. Islamic proselytizing literature and missionaries are being sent abroad and the construction of Wahhabi mosques in various countries is being financed through oil dollars. Also, the country sponsors academic institutions on the condition that centers for Islamic Studies are built. Apart from numerous copies of the Quran, large amounts of literature promoting hatred against non-Muslims are also shipped abroad every year, for instance to countries in Africa, South East Asia and Western Europe. Also, religious hatred against followers of other religions than Sunni Islam still features in Saudi school textbooks, in spite of promised reforms.

According to an article by The Economist, published on 2 August 2018, "bigoted preachers have been removed from the airwaves and injunctions to fight the unbelievers deleted from primary-school textbooks". However, less than a year before (27 September 2017) Human Rights Watch (HRW) published a report on "statements and writings of Saudi clerics, courts, and textbooks" which demonstrate that Saudi government officials and institutions have been inciting hatred or discrimination against Christians and others. Apparently some positive changes are taking place but they need time to take effect.

The political landscape

The country is an absolute monarchy and its royal family – the House of Saud – includes approximately 15,000 members, of whom about 200 have political influence and have held key positions for many years. Political parties are not allowed. The relationship between the religious establishment and the House of Saud is uneasy and determined by conflicting and complying interests. However, both power elements are important to successfully unite the traditionally tribal Saudi society. As geopolitical intelligence firm [Stratfor](#) puts it: "The relationship between the House of Saud and the religious leadership is a critical pillar of Saudi rule because it gives the government religious legitimacy and authority and allows it to balance an oftentimes conflicting domestic and foreign policy agenda." However, the religious authorities are losing credibility among the population. Whereas they had previously banned satellite TV, Internet, camera phones as well as travelling abroad, now they are using these technological advances themselves. On the one hand, they have gained in popularity by using these means (e.g. social media) on the other hand it has led to criticism of their being inconsistent. Additionally, the unpopular religious police were stripped of their power to arrest starting from 2016, possibly in an attempt to please citizens.

The socio-economic landscape

Saudi Arabia holds some 16% of the world's known petroleum reserves and the petroleum sector accounts for the majority of export earnings and government revenues (87% and 90% respectively).

This success has created an economic interdependence with the West, since this is where the main consumer demand is found. This has led to strong political and military relationships, with a series of US military bases being allowed to continue operating in the country and a huge [arms deal](#) being signed in May 2017. Since 2015, Saudi Arabia has been leading military intervention in Yemen's civil war in an effort to stabilize the Yemeni government and avert any possibility of its southern neighbor becoming Shiite-controlled.

The lack of economic diversity combined with a large number of foreign workers (roughly 90%) in the private sector has led to mounting youth unemployment. Other factors are the inferior education system and a underdeveloped work ethic due to generous financial allocations by the government. These factors have led to widespread social discontent and a growing gap between rich and poor which can drive young people towards radical Islamic influences. To combat this, the government has started measures to create more jobs for Saudis which involve job quotas for Saudi nationals and raising the salaries of Saudis. Also, companies that adhere to the quotas are granted benefits in applying for visas; others are limited in this respect, making it very expensive for them to hire workers from abroad. In the long run, this could affect the number of foreign workers entering the country – including the number of Christians.

Concluding remarks

In only a matter of decades, Saudi Arabia developed into one of largest exporters of petroleum worldwide. As the oil prices dropped in 2016, Saudi Arabia decided to implement austerity measures and cut bonuses and special allowances for civil servants and military personnel. After the oil prices rose again, these benefits were reinstated in April 2017. The Saudi kingdom is depending very much 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 'Saudi Vision 2030'. This strategy document also clearly underlines the Saudi kingdom's proud Islamic identity and leading role in the Muslim world. At the same time Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman has expressed his desire to return the kingdom to 'a more moderate form of Islam', introducing reforms such as allowing women to drive and permitting certain forms of entertainment.

Saudi Arabia is going through considerable social change. The Internet is playing an important role in this development, which could also lead to increased opportunities for online Christian ministry. On the other hand, the number of Christians entering the country may well fall in the long run as a result of the "Saudization" of the work force.

External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Saudi Arabia

- Recent country history: reportedly
<https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2017/11/14/the-rise-of-muhammad-bin-salman>
- Recent country history: analysts
<https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2017/11/14/the-rise-of-muhammad-bin-salman>
- Recent country history: observers
<https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2017/11/14/the-rise-of-muhammad-bin-salman>

- The political landscape: Stratfor
<https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/challenges-saudi-royal-family-legitimacy>
- The socio-economic landscape: arms deal
<http://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/19/politics/jared-kushner-saudi-arms-deal-lockheed-martin/index.html>

WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2018	Christians	Chr%
33,554,000	1,419,000	4.2

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

How did Christians get there?

By the end of the 6th and 7th century, Saudi Arabia had considerable numbers of Jews and synagogues, Christians (probably mostly Nestorians) and church buildings. They were mostly living in what is today the Western Province around the cities of Medina, Khaybar and Tayma. Even today, there are ruins of a church near Jubail in Eastern Province. It dates from the 4th century and is said to be the world's oldest church. There are different traditions about how Christianity came to the Arabian Peninsula. According to one tradition, a merchant from Najran (on the southern tip of Saudi Arabia) converted during one of his trips to modern day Iraq and formed a house church at the beginning of the 5th century. Another tradition concerns an envoy of the Roman emperor, Constantius, who preached the Gospel to the Himyarite king of South Arabia, who as a result converted. Both traditions indicate that churches were built especially – but not exclusively - in South Arabia, where ultimately most Christians would be. After the arrival of Nestorianism, Christianity continued to grow in the 4th century and even flourished in the 5th century. For hundreds of years, Christian merchants and tribes were living in and travelling through the vast plains of the Arabian Peninsula. This all changed with the arrival of Islam (7th - 10th centuries), when Jews and Christians converted to Islam either voluntarily or under duress, with many others being killed or driven from their homes.

In the course of the next few centuries, the Arabian Peninsula became overwhelmingly Islamic and Christianity lost significance. The historical role of Christianity in the region was forgotten for almost 13 centuries. This changed in the 19th century after Britain concluded protection treaties in the eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula; Christian expatriate workers started to enter Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE. Along with them came church buildings in the Gulf States - with the exception of Saudi Arabia, where still no churches are allowed. The churches also played an important role in providing medical care and schools, especially in the pre-petroleum era. The oil-boom of the 1970s led to an enormous expansion in local development, infrastructure and labor force, with more foreign workers arriving from Asia, Africa, other parts of the Middle East and the West. It is estimated that there are now more than 15 million foreign workers in the Gulf.

What church networks exist today?

Church networks: Saudi Arabia	Christians	%
Orthodox	51,100	3.6
Catholic	1,255,000	88.4
Protestant	35,500	2.5
Independent	58,100	4.1
Unaffiliated	19,600	1.4
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	1,419,300	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		

Evangelical movement	27,900	2.0
Renewalist movement	182,000	12.8

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. Roman Catholics: All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. Protestants: Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. Independents: Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). Unaffiliated Christians: Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. Doubly-affiliated Christians: Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. Evangelical movement: Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. Renewalist movement: Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

Public Christian worship is forbidden in Saudi Arabia and its citizens are officially only allowed to adhere to Islam. The roughly 1.4 million Christians in Saudi Arabia are mostly foreign workers of Asian, African, Middle Eastern or Western origin. The main denomination by far is the Roman Catholic Church, followed by independent and Orthodox congregations. Traditional Protestants only have a small presence. The majority of Christian expatriates are Catholics from the Philippines and India. Church-buildings do not exist in Saudi Arabia, so all expatriate Christians have to meet secretly in small groups, otherwise they run a high risk of being arrested.

Religious context

Religious Context: Saudi Arabia	Numbers	%
Christians	1,419,000	4.2
Muslim	30,937,000	92.2
Hindu	673,000	2.0
Buddhist	113,000	0.3
Ethnoreligionist	63,500	0.2
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	6,600	0.0
Atheist	10,800	0.0
Agnostic	216,000	0.6
Other	115,100	0.3

OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

The 92.2% Muslim desert kingdom is defined by Wahhabism, a purist and strict interpretation of Sunni Islam. In spite of the fairly large numbers of foreign workers of various faiths, it is forbidden to openly practice other religions. Saudi Arabia controls the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina and hosts millions of Hadj visitors every year. Non-Muslims are not allowed to enter Mecca.

There is a significant Shiite minority which is located mostly in the Eastern Province and suffers prejudice and discrimination.

Notes on the current situation

According to observers in the region, the indigenous Christian presence in Saudi Arabia is growing. They are not only growing in number, but also in boldness to share the Gospel. As a result, it is likely that Saudi Christians will experience more persecution in the future.

WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

With a score of 77 points, Saudi Arabia ranked 16 on WWL 2019.

What type of persecution dominates?

- **Islamic oppression:** Due to Wahhabism, a purist and strict interpretation of Islam, it is forbidden to openly practice other religions. Conversion to another religion is punishable by death if the accused does not recant.
- **Ethnic antagonism:** Communities exert pressure enforcing adherence to indigenous customs. In the case of Saudi Arabia, Ethnic antagonism is clearly mixed with Islam. This particularly affects Christians from a Muslim background.
- **Dictatorial paranoia:** 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. Changes affecting expatriates in general have been implemented, which also affect resident foreign Christians.

Who is driving persecution?

The following drivers of persecution are active on a medium, strong or very strong level in Saudi Arabia: Government officials at any level from local to national, ethnic group leaders, non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national, normal citizens and family including extended family. Converts from Islam to Christianity are mostly suffering from pressure from their family and extended family, which can even include death threats, honor killings and permanent in-house detention. Government officials create and maintain a strict Islamic system that treats Christians as second class people and denies places of worship to any other religion than Islam. Islamic leaders also try to impose strict Islamic law on all people who come to Saudi Arabia, including Christians. Islamic leaders are also a problem to converts (who are still considered to be Muslims) as well as to low-paid foreign Christian workers who are continually under pressure to convert to Islam, particularly the ones living isolated from other Christians serving in Saudi homes. Finally "normal citizens" are especially a source of pressure for converts to Christianity, since society in general is against anything regarded as opposing Islam.

What it results in

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 entails the risk of detention and deportation. The few Saudi Christians from a Muslim background face even more pressure. Nevertheless, the small number of Saudi Christians has been 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.

Violence

The following table is based on reported cases. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures.

Saudi Arabia	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2019	01 Nov 2017 - 31 Oct 2018	0	23	5	0	0
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	0	20	13	3	0

Christians killed refers to the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons (including state-sanctioned executions). Christians attacked refers to the number of Christians abducted, raped or otherwise sexually harassed, forced into marriage to non-Christians or otherwise physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death-threats) for faith-related reasons. Christians arrested refers to the number of Christians detained without trial or sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment or similar things for faith-related reasons. Churches attacked refers to the number of churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons. Christian-owned houses and shops attacked refers to the number of houses of Christians or other property (including shops and businesses of Christians) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons.

Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period

- Many converts are under strong pressure from their families and are fearful of their violent reaction if their new faith would become known. Converts run a high risk of being sentenced to death for apostasy, however as far as is known there were none officially executed for this reason in recent years. Nevertheless, the risk of extra-judicial killings cannot be excluded in an attempt to save the honor of the family.
- Rape and sexual harassment remain a huge problem in Saudi Arabia and Christians working as housemaids in Saudi homes are particularly vulnerable.
- Christians - both Saudis and foreigners - risk imprisonment, physical abuse and serious threats because of their faith. A few were reportedly forced to leave the country because of their faith or faith-related activities.
- A few Christians were arrested and briefly detained, some of them in a raid on a fellowship meeting.
- A Saudi Christian woman was forcibly married as a form of 'corrective' measure.

Please note: For security reasons it is not possible to give further details.

WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 77 points, Saudi Arabia ranked 16 on WWL 2019. The decrease of two points compared to WWL 2018 is mostly explained by a decrease in the number of violent incidents against Christians. For instance, a lower number of Christians were detained and forced to leave the country. The overall score for pressure on Christians remains more or less constant at an extreme level in Saudi Arabia, one of the world's few countries where church buildings are forbidden.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Saudi Arabia	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	EA	Very strong
Denominational protectionism	DPR	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 (long version).

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 recognised Wahhabi Islam is permitted to be practised publicly and it is forbidden to openly practice any other religions. All Saudi citizens are assumed to be Muslim and expatriates of other faiths can only practise 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.

Ethnic antagonism (Very strong - blended with Islamic oppression):

Typical for this persecution engine is how it results in pressure being exerted to enforce on communities and households the continuing influence of age-old indigenous customs established by tribes or ethnic people groups. In the case of Saudi Arabia, Ethnic antagonism is clearly mixed with Islam. This particularly affects Christians from a Muslim background.

Dictatorial paranoia (Strong):

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 Crown Prince in June 2017. According to observers it was a move to preserve the monarchial 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. The top two authorities of the land have implemented many changes that have affected 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.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of Persecution: Saudi Arabia	IO	RN	EA	DPR	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG	-	VERY STRONG	-	-	-	STRONG	-
Government officials	Very strong	-	Strong	-	-	-	Very strong	-
Ethnic group leaders	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	Very weak	-	-	-	-	-	Very weak	-

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 (long version).

Drivers of Islamic oppression: Government officials, tribal leaders, non-Christian religious leaders, violent religious groups, citizens and family.

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 is harming this image. The maintenance and implementation by state authorities of highly oppressive laws restricting religious freedom are strong sources of persecution. However, the State often plays a reasonably passive role, content to rely upon the even stronger societal pressures to ensure that Christians and other religious minorities remain in check. This applies to 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); for 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 two years. Another driver of persecution are tribal leaders, they enforce Islam as part of their tribe's age old values. Finally, independent groups (with no respect for tribes or government) try to radicalize society. These mostly Sunni groups have a strong group culture and evangelize Shia Muslims, expatriates and are active in influencing the communities around them. If this group hears of converts, they will go to any lengths to persecute them.

Drivers of Ethnic antagonism (blended with Islamic oppression): Tribal leaders, government officials, non-Christian religious leaders, citizens and family.

Each tribe has their own way of dealing with disturbances. When a tribal member's Christian faith becomes public, other members can resort to any means to force a return to Islam. The government will likely not interfere in faith matters unless tribal leaders give their consent. Another source of persecution comes from religious or community leaders (e.g. the imam, university professors, medical doctors or others of high standing in the community) who take it as their responsibility to keep their community free from bad influences. This resembles a tribal system and operates particularly in places (for example in cities) where the tribe is not so influential.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia: Government officials.

The Saudi rulers, especially the King and Crown Prince, will do anything 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 dishonour 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 of family or community members. The Saudi government is combating Islamic militancy on a national level because it can be a threat to the reign of the royal family. However, private Saudi funds do support Islamic militant groups outside the country and are hence one of the main sources of Sunni-armed conflict in the world, e.g. in Iraq and Syria.

Context

Saudi Arabia has developed into one of largest exporters of petroleum worldwide and this has drawn large numbers of foreign workers to the country, including Christians. This economic success has created an economic interdependence with the West and has led to strong political and military relationships, with a series of US military bases being allowed to continue operating in the country and a huge [arms deal](#) being signed in May 2017. Since 2015, Saudi Arabia has been leading military intervention in Yemen's civil war, reportedly in efforts to stabilize the Yemeni government, but considering the Saudi Arabian airstrikes on airports, ports, hospitals, schools, funerals (all causing the largest humanitarian catastrophe in the world today), it is more likely to be an effort to avert any possibility of its southern neighbor becoming Shiite-controlled.

In order to reduce its dependency on the petroleum industry, the Saudi kingdom is trying to diversify its economy and creating more jobs for Saudis, as set out in Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's reform plan entitled "Saudi Vision 2030". Announced in April 2016, this strategy document also clearly underlines the Saudi kingdom's proud Islamic identity and leading role in the Muslim world. Saudi Arabia is going through considerable social change. The internet is playing an important role in this development, which could also lead to increased opportunities for online Christian ministry. Nevertheless, this development is likely to be coupled with higher levels of internet monitoring. In

another effort to compensate the disappointing economy and to compensate the costs of war with Yemen, Saudi Arabia has increased visa fees for spouses and children of foreign workers. As visas are becoming so expensive, many low-paid Christian workers are leaving: Several church leaders are reporting that 20-25% of their congregation have already left the country. This will have a negative impact on the Christian community in the country, causing both a lack of church leaders and members. On the other hand, the number of converts with a Muslim or Hindu background seem to increase. However, this does not compensate the number of Christians leaving.

The increased role of the internet, social media and satellite TV has radically changed Saudi youth culture. As a result the gap between Saudi's large youth population and the ageing monarch is growing. The majority of the population is under thirty and they (especially women) are longing for more freedom without being restricted by the religious police. Social reforms introduced by the young crown prince who was appointed in 2017, are a step forward in that respect. He has [allowed women drivers](#), entertainment (such as cinema and concerts) and has also curbed the powers of the religious police. There is also a considerable degree of youth unemployment, partly caused by the weak education system and a underdeveloped work ethic. These factors lead to widespread social discontent which can drive young people towards radical Islam. This is aggravated by a clearly divided society - the wealth of the elite versus the poverty of the masses. On the other hand, social discontent is not new - and has been bought off with large sums of money, for instance in the form of allocations for housing finance. Social dissatisfaction has been in existence for at least twenty years (including the civil disobedience of women driving, for instance). Moreover, the internet revolution has also reached Islamic leaders: Several imams have twitter accounts and have a large following. The number of Christian converts from Islam (and other religions) is increasing, along with their boldness in sharing their new faith.

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. 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. Expatriate Christians are severely restricted in sharing their Christian faith with Muslims and in gathering for worship, which entails the risk of detention and deportation.

Historical Christian communities:

Indigenous historical Christian communities do not exist in Saudi Arabia.

Converts to Christianity:

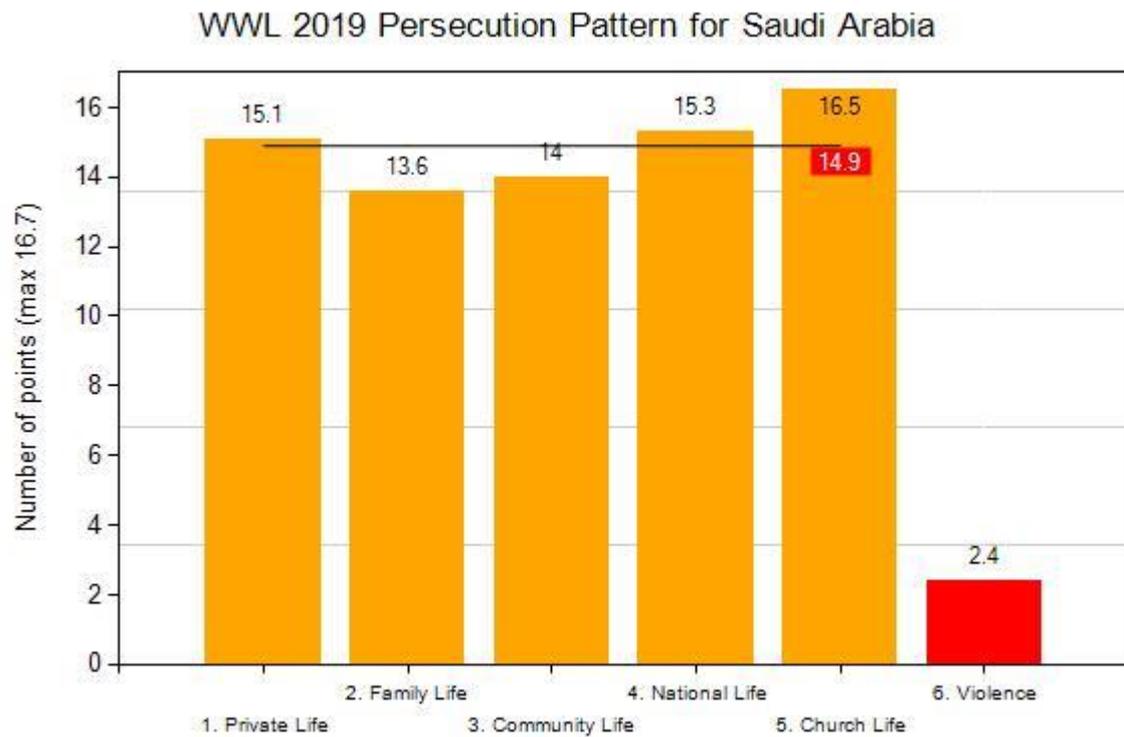
Converts are mainly from a Muslim background. There are relatively few Saudi converts in the country and they often live out their Christian faith in deepest secrecy. Many of them responded to Christian programs via satellite TV or became Christians through visions or dreams, sometimes experienced during 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 in Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, the small number of Saudi converts has been increasing and they are also becoming bolder, sharing their Christian faith with others on the

Internet and Christian satellite TV channels. This public sharing has often led to serious repercussions either from their families or authorities.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

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

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The WWL 2019 Persecution pattern for Saudi Arabia shows:

- The average pressure on Christians remains stable at the same extreme level (14.9 points) as in WWL 2018.
- The scores for pressure in all *spheres of life* are at extreme levels, except for the score in the *Family sphere* which is at a very high level bordering on extreme. The *Family sphere* score is lowest due to foreign Christians experiencing hardly any or less pressure than indigenous converts from Islam in this *sphere of life*. The reason for this is that the families of migrant Christians are often not living with them in Saudi Arabia.
- Pressure is most extreme in the *Church, National and Private 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 *Ethnic antagonism* 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 fell from 4.1 in WWL 2018 to 2.4 in WWL 2019 as less reports of violence were registered.

Private sphere:

Christians with a Muslim background cannot openly practice their faith. Giving any indication of their new faith to those around them can have serious consequences. Many expatriate Christians from the West have relatively more freedom to practice their faith privately and on their own compounds, as long as they do not evangelize Muslims. Asian and African Christians have to act carefully and persecution depends on the attitude and religion of fellow low-paid workers who live in the same 'labor camps'. Especially vulnerable are the Christian maids living in Saudi houses who are without any contact with other Christians and face constant abuse and pressure to become Muslim.

Family sphere:

All Saudis are considered Muslims. For a Muslim family, it is a great disgrace when one of its members leaves Islam. Converts run the great risk of honor-killing or physical violence if their families or communities discover their faith. A number have fled the country because of this. Open Christian weddings cannot be celebrated in Saudi Arabia and Christians with a Muslim background must marry according to Islamic rites. They cannot have their children registered as Christians or give them obviously Christian names. In school, children of converts are obliged to attend Islamic classes. In the case of divorce, custody of children and inheritance issues, converts are often disadvantaged.

Community sphere:

All Christians are more or less put under pressure to renounce their faith through all kinds of discrimination. Converts to Christianity will experience harassment and discrimination in their workplace if their new faith is known. Sentiments against adherents of other religions are strong throughout Saudi society. Asian and African workers, including Christians, have been exposed to verbal, physical and sexual abuse from employers. International schools are banned from celebrating non-Islamic holidays, such as Christmas and New Year, but do have an extended holiday during Christmas. Schools violating this ban risk losing their permits.

National sphere:

There are no provisions for religious freedom in the kingdom's constitution or basic laws. The legal system is based on Sharia law and conversion to any religion other than Islam is punishable by death. Muslims have more rights than followers of other religions. Converts in particular face serious pressure in dealing with the authorities if their Christian faith is known. Foreign Christians will face problems in this *sphere of life* if they are active in proselytizing Muslims, which can lead to imprisonment and deportation.

Church sphere:

There are no church buildings at all in Saudi Arabia and Christian services take place at secret locations. Although the government recognizes the right of non-Muslims to worship in private, the religious police (Muttawa) often do not respect this right. Christian services are seriously restricted by the strict gender segregation, prohibiting men and women from different families to worship in the same room. Christians who engage in such activities risk arrest, intimate body searches in life-threatening conditions, imprisonment, lashing, deportation and torture. 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. Proselytism of Muslims, Bible training, publishing and importing Bibles (and other Christian materials) in Arabic are all illegal.

Violence:

In the WWL 2019 reporting period, there were less reports on anti-Christian violence, leading to a lower score for violence. In general, Christians in the country are very careful how they act in order to avoid harsh consequences and this helps keep the violence score down.

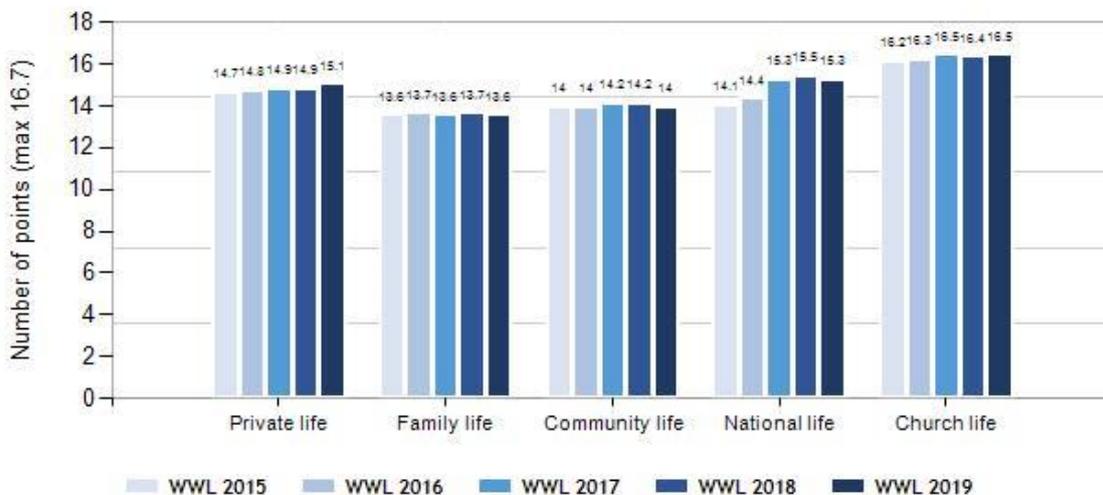
Many converts are under strong pressure from their families and are fearful of facing violent reactions if their new faith would become known. Converts run a high risk of being sentenced to death for apostasy, however as far as is known there were none officially executed for this reason in recent years. Nevertheless, the risk of extra-judicial killings cannot be excluded in an attempt to save the honor of the family. As in previous years, rape and sexual harassment remain a huge problem in Saudi Arabia. Asian and African Christians, mainly housemaids working in Saudi homes, are very vulnerable in this respect. According to country researchers ‘thousands and thousands’ of house maids are suffering from physical and sexual abuse. Christians - both Saudis and foreigners - risk imprisonment, physical abuse and serious threats because of their faith. A few were reportedly forced to leave the country because of their faith or faith-related activities. A few others were arrested and briefly detained, some of them in a raid on a fellowship meetings. Finally, a local female believer was forcibly married as an attempted 'corrective' measure.

For a summary of the statistics on violence and examples, please see the Short and Simple Persecution Profile section above.

5 Year trends

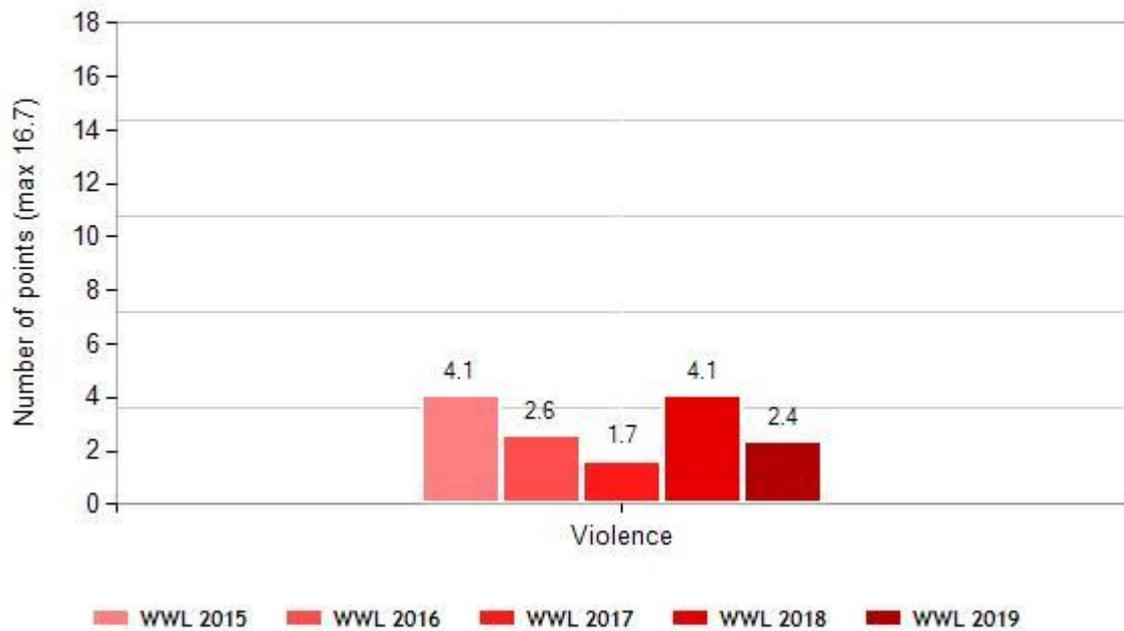
Pressure in all *spheres of life* have been stable and most often at an extremely high or at a very high level bordering on extreme since WWL2015 (chart 1). Also the average pressure over the five *spheres of life* (chart 2) shows that persecution of Christians in Saudi Arabia has been extremely high and stable for the past five years, climbing from 14.5 in WWL 2015 to 14.9 in WWL 2017, a level at which it has remained for the past three years. The data for violence shows more variation (chart 3), but the score has never been over a level of 4.1 and has been well under the 3 point level in the WWL 2016, 2017 and 2019 reporting periods.

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Saudi Arabia (Spheres of life)



WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern history: Saudi Arabia	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2019	14.9
2018	14.9
2017	14.9
2016	14.6
2015	14.5

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Saudi Arabia (Violence)



Gender specific persecution

For Saudi or other Christians from a Muslim background, the most common pressures faced are those from family and community - and these would typically be felt most keenly by women and girls (and then by younger men and older men respectively), reflecting levels of status and freedom generally within Saudi Islamic culture.

Female:

In a country where all citizens are considered to be Muslim, female Christians with a Muslim background are especially vulnerable. If their conversion gets known, they risk violence, house-arrest and forced marriage. In the strict Islamic Saudi society, women are closely monitored. They need to uphold the family's reputation - any undesired behavior can harm their family's honor, which is considered a mortal sin. Leaving Islam is one of the biggest crimes a Muslim can commit. Saudi's legal system is based on Sharia Law and apostasy carries the death sentence. If married, a female convert risks divorce and losing custody of her children. This means loss of a social safety net and protection. Considering this, it comes as no surprise that most female converts either become secret believers or ultimately leave the country, for their own safety.

Asian and African workers are known to suffer from physical and sexual abuse from their employers. Christian and other non-Islamic workers are additionally vulnerable in this respect. Among them, women are even more at risk of abuse. This is very much connected to the subordinate position of women in Saudi society and their unprotected status when on their own (e.g. when working outside their home). Saudi women are not allowed to leave their home without being escorted by a male relative.

Male:

Deviations from standard behavior is quickly noticed and male converts to Christianity will experience pressure exerted by family and society. Also, within Saudi society, males are more commonly the bread-winners. If a male believer is detained or imprisoned, or subjected to effective house-arrest by the wider family, this could potentially have a significant economic impact on the family. The forms of persecution men and boys are particularly subject to are: Public shaming, isolation, physical abuse, losing all forms of help and access to community life. Promises of complete restoration and even offers of material reward will be made to encourage the convert to return to Islam. Such offers are made up to the point when the family realizes the convert will not change. At this point, the threat of death is very real for most male converts.

Persecution of other religious minorities

A major religious minority facing discrimination and persecution in Saudi Arabia are Shiite Muslims who 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 opportunities, government posts and religious activities. Shiites seek greater political participation and more religious tolerance. Following sectarian tensions in the region, including the war against the Iran-backed rebels in Yemen, the Shiites' hope for tolerance and pluralism is fading. Shiite clerics and activists who advocate for equal treatment of Shiite Muslims [risk arrest and even execution](#) on charges of opposing the government.

Example of persecution: "In a [2017 report](#), Amnesty, along with Human Rights Watch, said that in recent years it has recorded an increase in death sentences against political dissidents in Saudi Arabia, including members of the Shia Muslim minority. The organisations said that there are at least 38 members of Saudi's Shia community – who make up 10 to 15 percent of the population – currently sentenced to death", [Middle East Eye](#) reported on 19 April 2018.

Future outlook

The political outlook: In its annual forecast, the Economist Intelligence Unit, expects that "the lingering economic and business impact from the diplomatic fallout between Saudi Arabia and western governments over the murder of a Saudi journalist in Turkey will prove short-lived. Domestic policy will remain in the hands of the crown prince, [Mohammed bin Salman](#), who will continue to open up the economy for foreign investment, although political rights will remain severely restricted. The economy should retain growth through 2023, lifted by a general uptick in oil prices."

The outlook for Christians - viewed through the lens of:

- **Dictatorial paranoia:** Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has loosened social restrictions affecting the youth. As such, cinemas were opened for the first time in 35 years and women were allowed to drive as of June 2018. This apparent shift towards younger, more tolerant leadership and away from traditional roots is possibly an effort to take the large number of Saudi youth seriously who long for more freedom. Also, the powers of the religious police were reduced.

Moreover, the Crown Prince [stated](#) in October 2017 that the kingdom needed to "return" to a "moderate Islam that is open to all religions and to the world". He hosted and visited representatives of the Vatican, Coptic, Anglican and Evangelical churches, which are indicators of greater openness to direct inter-faith engagement. Although foreign Christians working in Saudi Arabia are hopeful that this will ultimately lead to more tolerance towards other religions, these discussions have not yet led to any substantive improvement in the treatment of expatriate Christians and have not indicated any intent to increase the religious freedom of Saudi Christians. Commentators warn that these reforms are mostly 'cosmetic', and it is also the same Crown Prince who started the war against Yemen which has led to the world's biggest humanitarian crisis at the current time (and also to an increased persecution of Christians in Yemen). Furthermore, the breaking of diplomatic relations with Canada in August 2018 after Canada raised human rights concerns, shows how the Saudi regime is determined to continue its agenda without outside interference.

- **Islamic oppression, blended with Ethnic antagonism:** "Vision 2030" plans have been influenced by the demands of youth, a need to move away from oil dependency and shifting regional and global political alliances. The plans are not new, but if MBS is given the ability to execute them, significant changes could take place in society, leading to more openness and a move to a more moderate form of Islam. Social and economic reforms are likely to have continuing impact, particularly if they are driven by the large youth demographic and the technological advancement, since Saudis are among the world's most prolific social media users. Nevertheless, ultra-conservative Islam is still very much alive and active in Saudi Arabia and will not allow any changes in society to be too comprehensive. Reforms could in fact cause polarization in society leading to an increase in the targeting and persecution of minorities (including Christians) by ultra-conservative elements, such as Islamic leaders and tribal leaders. As such, research group Fitch Solutions foresees (in its 2018 Fourth Quarter Saudi Arabia Country Risk Report) an increase in the risk of conservative forces trying to regain the upper hand as reforms progress.

Conclusion: The overall expectation is that some parts of Saudi society may begin to feel more freedom to show tolerance towards non-Muslims. However, the severe religious restrictions which typically result from the persecution engine *Islamic oppression* blended with *Ethnic antagonism* in its fully developed form, will continue to lead to severe pressure on religious minorities (including Christians) in 2019.

External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

- Context: arms deal
<http://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/19/politics/jared-kushner-saudi-arms-deal-lockheed-martin/index.html>
- Context: allowed women drivers,
<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-women-driving/rain-begins-with-a-single-drop-saudi-women-rejoice-at-end-of-driving-ban-idUSKCN1C217F>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: risk arrest and even execution
<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256499.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: 2017 report
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/06/saudi-arabia-14-protesters-facing-execution-after-unfair-trials/>

- Persecution of other religious minorities: Middle East Eye
<https://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/fearing-execution-saudi-shias-are-forced-life-hiding-1174712646>
- Future outlook: Mohammed bin Salman
<http://country.eiu.com/saudi-arabia>
- Future outlook: stated
<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/saudi-crown-prince-promises-return-moderate-islam-171024182102549.html>

Additional Reports and Articles

WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

Open Doors article(s) from the region

A selection of articles is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

World Watch Monitor news articles

Use the country search function at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

Recent country developments

Use the country search function at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/> (password: freedom).