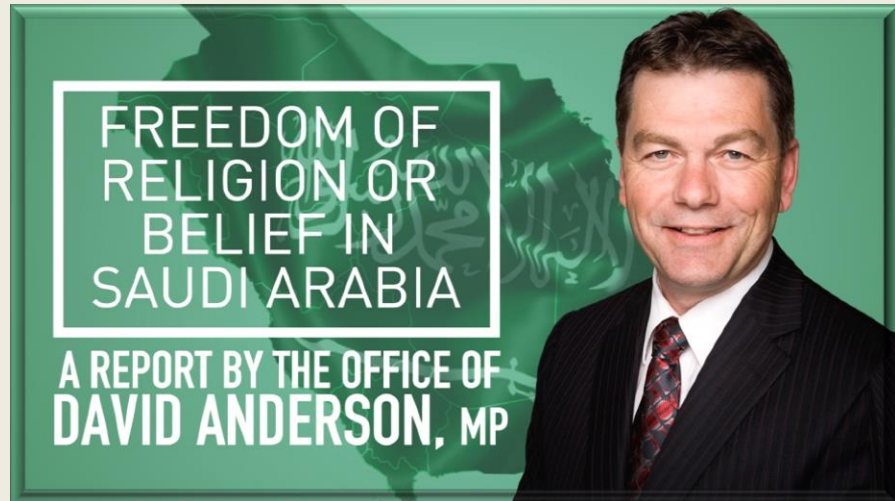


**Freedom of  
Religion or  
Belief in Saudi  
Arabia: A  
Report by the  
Office of David  
Anderson, MP**

**April 2018**



**Introduction**

Saudi Arabia, as one of the current members of the UN Human Rights Council should be exerting a positive influence on human rights around the globe. It is not, and instead continues a long history of ignoring and violating basic human rights. One example is its ongoing violation of the rights expressly declared in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states:

*“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”*

Saudi Arabia’s government is an Islamic theocratic monarchy in which Sunni Islam is the official state religion. For those who are not members of the official state religion, including Shia Muslims and even Sunni Muslims, who offer differing interpretations of Islam, religious freedom is virtually non-existent. In the last few months, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman has indicated that the religious climate within Saudi Arabia is going to change; however, there has been no indication as of yet that a change has taken place.

Saudi Arabia does not have a formal penal code. The religious establishment is given privileged reign over many aspects of Saudi life including education and law, which is based on an interpretation of Islam that has its roots in the Hanbali School of Jurisprudence, the most conservative of the four traditional Sunni Islamic schools of jurisprudence.

Every citizen must be Muslim and has the obligation to defend Islam. Religious minorities suffer discrimination in all areas of life from public services to judicial matters and are not treated as equals under Islamic law. Shia clerics and activists are regarded

as dissidents and are interrogated, imprisoned or sentenced to death. Religious minorities cannot worship publicly as mosques are the only legal places to worship in the country. Both Shia Muslims and dissident Sunni Muslims in Saudi Arabia have been prosecuted and the persecution of Shia Muslims has been particularly severe in the Eastern Province. Blasphemy against Sunni Islam is potentially punishable by death.

The [Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice \(CPVPV\)](#), Saudi Arabia's "religious police", or "mutwa", has played a significant role in carrying out the repression of minorities since its formation in 1940<sup>1</sup>. Saudi Arabia's CPVPV has taken the initiative to shut down businesses and enforce gender segregation, to ban alcohol, and to regulate prayer times. According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the Saudi government took steps to limit the Commission's powers in 2016 by requiring them to report to the government prior to acting and restricting them in participating in arrests. However, reports from last year indicate that abuses from the CPVPV on Saudi citizens are still occurring.

Judges of Sharia courts have routinely imprisoned 'blasphemers' of Islam. A 2014 counterterrorism law classified advocating atheism as blasphemy and an act of terrorism. Under the law, anyone who questions Saudi Arabia's interpretation of Islam has committed an act of [terrorism](#) even if it is demonstrated through peaceful means. Such a person is charged and put in prison from anywhere between three and twenty years. Saudi blogger Raif Badawi, whose family is in Canada, advocated for human rights and democracy and has been subject to lashings and imprisonment. He has been in jail for over five years for 'insulting Islam'.

### **Saudi Arabia's Basic Law of Governance**

A look at Saudi Arabia's Basic Law of Governance, introduced in 1992, reveals that religious freedom is not a part of the country's framework.

Saudi Arabia's Basic Law is made up of the Quran and Sunna (traditions) of the Prophet Muhammad. The current Basic Law of Governance contains a number of elements that declare that Sunni Islam is the only accepted religion in Saudi Arabia, and anything else is not tolerated.

Article 7 reads:

"The regime derives its power from the Holy Qur'an and the Prophet's Sunnah which rule over this and all other State Laws."

Article 8 states:

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<sup>1</sup> Some sources say that the commission began in 1926 under Abdulaziz al-Saud with the name 'Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and the Elimination of Sin'.

“The system of government in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is established on the foundation of justice, "Shoura" and equality in compliance with the Islamic Shariah (the revealed law of Islam).”

Article 48 states:

“Courts shall apply the provisions of Islamic Shariah to cases brought before them, according to the teachings of the Holy Qur'an and the Prophet's Sunnah as well as other regulations issued by the Head of State in strict conformity with the Holy Qur'an and the Prophet's Sunnah.”

As mentioned, Saudi Arabia`s judicial system is influenced by the Hanbali School, the strictest form of Sunni Islam, favouring male, Sunni Muslims. In the case that a judge might rule in favour of a plaintiff who is a minority Christian or Jew, the plaintiff would only receive 50% in compensation of what a Sunni Muslim male would receive.

Saudi Arabia`s Basic Law reads that the State has the responsibility to protect the Islamic Creed.

Article 23 states:

“The State shall protect the Islamic Creed and shall cater to the application of Shariah. The State shall enjoin good and forbid evil, and shall undertake the duties of the call to Islam.”

Article 23 directly correlates to Saudi Arabia`s record of repression toward its religious minorities, relying on teachings in the Quran and Hadith (‘inspired writings of Muhammad) that permit violence toward ‘unbelievers’.

Article 26 states:

“The State shall protect human rights in accordance with Islamic Shariah”

The lens through which human rights in Saudi Arabia shall be established is to be that of Islamic Sharia. Although peace is taught in passages in the Quran, there are other passages in both the Quran and Hadith that promote violence towards non-Muslims. The application of the principles of Islamic Sharia in Saudi Arabia has created an environment in which violence is not seen to be in direct disobedience to Muhammad.<sup>2</sup> This interpretation of Islam fundamentally contradicts the basic principles of religious freedom found in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Despite their concept of religious freedom differing starkly from that found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Saudi Arabia sits on the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). [Human Rights Watch](#) reports that Saudi Arabia got the least number of votes and still retained its seat on the UNHRC in 2016 because it did not

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<sup>2</sup> Sura 9 in the Quran and Sahih Muslim, Book 19, Number 4294 in the Hadith.

have to compete for its seat. Saudi Arabia remained on the Council despite 'repeated[ly] blocking international investigations' into war crimes committed in Yemen.

Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen is an example of the use of violence motivated by the desire to counter beliefs heretical to Sunni Islam. The Shiite movements promoted by Iran are seen by the Saudis to be a threat both to religious and political aspirations of Sunni Islam. A recent [Globe and Mail](#) article provides the scope of the number of civilians killed in Yemen:

"Human rights advocates have accused Saudi Arabia of war crimes over its conduct in Yemen, where more than 5,200 civilians have been killed and 8,800 injured since Riyadh began a military campaign there in 2015 against Houthi rebels aligned with Iran."

Saudi Arabia's Basic Law of Governance has been applied in and outside of Saudi Arabia, to the detriment of religious minorities.

## **Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy, legitimized by the Hanbali School of Jurisprudence and the Wahhabi clerical establishment. It is important to examine the role that Wahhabism as an ideology has played in the restriction of religious freedom and the acceleration of jihadist activity abroad. The following sections will look at Wahhabism as an ideology, how Saudi Arabia was founded by the help of the Wahhabi, the role of the Wahhabi clerical establishment (the ulama) in Saudi Arabia, and the pervasiveness of Wahhabi education in Saudi classrooms.

### *Brief Historical Background*

The founder of Wahhabism is Mohammed Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-92). He advocated for a reversion to first generation Islam at a time when superstition, the veneration of saints and the visitation of their tombs had become popular throughout the Islamic world.

An earlier movement toward puritanical Islam existed under Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855). Like al-Wahhab, his reforms were also based on literal interpretations of the Quran and Hadith. Hanbal felt that the Caliph and wealthy of his day were deriving Islamic law more from the customs of the day than from the Quran and Hadith. Hanbal founded the Hanbali School of Jurisprudence. According to the European Parliament, its influence in Iraq and Syria diminished during the reign of the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century, but '[found favourable ground in Arabia... to develop in the form of Wahhabism](#)'. The Wahhabi clerical establishment bases its jurisprudence on the Hanbali School in current day Saudi Arabia.

Al-Wahhab's teaching was greatly influenced by Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328), a controversial Sunni Muslim theologian that orthodox Islamic scholars of his time

rejected. Taymiyyah felt that jihad against the unbeliever was justified according to the Prophet Muhammad:

“It is allowed to fight people for (not observing) unambiguous and generally recognized obligations and prohibitions, until they undertake to perform the explicitly prescribed prayers, to pay zakat, to fast during the month of Ramadan, to make the pilgrimage to Mecca and to avoid what is prohibited, such as marrying women in spite of legal impediments, eating impure things, acting unlawfully against the lives and properties of Muslims and the like. It is obligatory to take the initiative in fighting those people, as soon as the Prophet's summons with the reasons for which they are fought has reached them. But if they first attack the Muslims then fighting them is even more urgent, as we have mentioned when dealing with the fighting against rebellious and aggressive bandits.”

Taymiyyah's teaching greatly influenced Al-Wahhab and has become popular with current day jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda, who have referenced Taymiyyah's fatwa allowing jihad.

#### *Alliance with Al Saud family*

In the eighteenth century, a clan of tribal leaders headed by Mohammad ibn Al Saud had influence across the Arabian Peninsula, including Mecca and Medina. This came to an end in 1818 when the Ottoman Empire sacked Riyadh. Al-Saud tried unsuccessfully to re-establish his rule over the next eighty years. In 1902, a direct descendent of ibn Al-Saud, Abd al Aziz ibn Saud sought the help of Wahhabi warriors and Islamic puritans called the Ikhwan. The Ikhwan and ibn Al-Saud struck a deal. The Ikhwan would fight for Abd al Aziz, and [restore the family empire](#) in exchange for the spread of Wahhabi ideology. Abd al Aziz subsequently captured Mecca and Medina in the early 1920s with the help of these Wahhabi warriors.

Abd al-Aziz ibn al Saud declared himself king and named the land Saudi Arabia. To consolidate power, he married a wife from every tribe as well as from the Wahhabi clerical families, producing 45 sons. All Saudi kings have been sons of ibn Al-Saud. Today, the descendants of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab are called the Al ash-Sheikh family.

The Al-Sauds have needed the Wahhabi clerical establishment to legitimize their political decisions ever since the beginning of their alliance. The Al ash-Sheikh family have needed the Al-Saud family in order to continue its Wahhabi mission. The relationship has not always been smooth and there have been several conflicts regarding modernization over the years.<sup>3,4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Max Fisher, “9 questions about Saudi Arabia you were too embarrassed to ask,” Vox, January 26, 2015, accessed March 20, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2015/1/26/7877619/saudi-arabia-questions>.

<sup>4</sup> John L. Esposito and Emad El-Din Shahin, *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 415-16.

As Wahhabi education permeated Saudi Arabian culture and education, some Saudi citizens became radicalized and turned on the Saudi government. In 1979, a group of fundamentalists seized the Great Mosque. The leader of the group was a direct descendent of the Ikhwan. The fundamentalists called for a stop to modernization and a return to puritanical Islam. They protested against Al-Saud's relations with the West. The Al-Sauds sought the authority of the Wahhabi clerical establishment (ulama), who [authorized](#) the government to use force to stop the fundamentalists.<sup>5</sup>

This event shaped the influence of Wahhabism within Saudi Arabia and abroad. The fear of an anti-government uprising at home and the need to preserve the relationship with the Wahhabi clerical establishment led the Saudi government to begin increasing funding of Wahhabi teaching in madrassas and mosques around the world. This accomplished two things. First, it continued the spread of the Wahhabi mission; and second, it turned the focus abroad, lessening the likelihood of uprisings such as the one in 1979. Unfortunately, this has led to the promotion and acceleration of radical jihadist movements around the world.<sup>6</sup>

According to Simon Valentine's 2016 book, *Force and Fanaticism*, "the majority of mainstream Sunni and Shia Muslims worldwide...strongly disagree with the interpretation of Wahhabism..." Rather than see Wahhabism as a reform movement, many Muslims...reject it in the strongest terms as a firqa, a new factions, a vile sect."

Wahhabi and Salafiya are used interchangeably and both believe that the Quran and Hadith are the ultimate religious sources of authority. They are not a united movement. Some believe that the Salafis are a hybrid of Wahhabi and started in the eighteenth century. Others believe that it started in the twentieth century as a reaction to modernity and Western thought and grew more and more conservative over time.

A large number of Salafis are purists who do not get involved in politics. A second group are active politically, and third group are involved with jihadist activity.<sup>78</sup>

History suggests that Wahhabism never was merely a peaceful movement attempting to recover the fundamentals of Islam. Conquest, war and violence seem to have been a justifiable part of the Wahhabi ideology from its founding days. Wahhabism is taught in Saudi classrooms and is taught across the world. However, the name is seen as derogatory for many Muslims, perhaps because it has become a gateway to the acceleration of jihadist activity.

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<sup>5</sup> "A Chronology: The House of Saud," PBS Frontline, last updated August 1, 2005, accessed March 20, 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saud/cron/>.

<sup>6</sup> Max Fisher, "9 questions about Saudi Arabia you were too embarrassed to ask," Vox, January 26, 2015, accessed March 7, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2015/1/26/7877619/saudi-arabia-questions>.

<sup>7</sup> "Understanding the branches of Islam: Sunni Islam," European Parliament, February 2016, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/577963/EPRS\\_BRI%282016%29577963\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/577963/EPRS_BRI%282016%29577963_EN.pdf), 5-6.

<sup>8</sup> "Politics and the puritanical," The Economist, June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed March 21, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21656189-islams-most-conservative-adherents-are-finding-politics-hard-it-beats>.

## *The Ulama and the Judicial System*

The interpretation of religious texts and law is governed by the ulama in Saudi Arabia. They are effectively the source of religious authority in Saudi Arabia and have been since the power sharing agreement that was made between al Wahhab and ibn-Saud in 1744.

The Senior Ulama (Islamic scholars) Board and Administration of Religious Research is given authority by the royalty in Saudi Arabia.

Article 45 of the Kingdom's Basic Law of Governance states:

“The source of Ifta (religious ruling) in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the Holy Quran and the Prophet's Sunnah. The law shall specify the composition of the Senior Ulama Board and of the Administration of Religious Research and Ifta and its jurisdictions.”

A 2010 [report](#) on Saudi Arabia by Freedom House notes that the ulama are:

“[t]he best-organized interest group outside of the ruling family...which has allowed itself to be bureaucratized by the Al Saud since the late 1960s in return for considerable influence over the kingdom's educational and judicial system as well as the enforcement of public morals. The strict social authoritarianism of the Saudi system—in terms of restrictions on women's rights, religious rights, and cultural rights—is mostly enforced through the Saudi ulama and the religious police attached to them [...].”

Dr. Abdullah F. Ansary, former Director General of Legal Affairs and International Cooperation at the Ministry of the Interior, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia writes in his article ["A Brief Overview of the Saudi Arabian Legal System"](#):

“The [Council of Senior Ulama](#) (Religious Scholars) heads the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia. It is an official body, comprising the Kingdom's most senior scholars, created in 1971 to issue *fatwas* on questions submitted to it by the Government or otherwise requiring the establishment of general rules. [\[106\]](#) The Basic Law recognizes the need for such a council. It states that: “The source of *fatwa* (religious legal opinion) in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia shall be the Book of God and the Sunnah of His Messenger. The Law shall define the hierarchy and jurisdiction of the Council of Senior Ulama and the Department of Religious Research and *fatwa*.” [\[107\]](#) Although it is not part of the legislative authority, the Council of Senior Ulama has been a participant in the legislative process of enacting statutory laws. In many cases, its participation has been crucial in gaining public support for such laws. [\[108\]](#) In the February 2009 governmental reshuffle, King Abdullah expanded the Council to 21 members

and, for the first time in Saudi history, extended membership to representatives from all four schools of Sunni jurisprudence, not just the Hanbali *madhab* (school of law). [\[109\]](#)

### *Wahhabism in the Judicial system*

Wahhabi doctrine has a theory based on the teachings of Ibn Taymiyyah that requires Muslims to obey the ruling monarch as long as the decree is in accordance with Sharia. This permits the ruling monarch to organize government as he sees fit with one caveat - ruling monarchs cannot interfere with a qadis' ruling as qadis are independent and their rulings are basically absolute. Rulings cannot be overturned by the monarch<sup>9</sup> and appeals are rare because it is understood that Sharia requires a judge to discover Allah's will. The application of the law is dependent on this decision.

Traditionally, while decisions have been somewhat centralized, individual judges and scholars have had leeway in how they interpret and enforce rules. Though Wahhabi religious judges (qadi) usually followed the Hanbali legal tradition, they were not obliged to. There was no concept of precedence, uniformity or consistency in Saudi law; even for decisions made by the same judge.

In the 1930s, King Ibn Saud began issuing regulations on issues like nationality, firearms and motor vehicles. The ulama judges refused to preside over such issues so Ibn Saud created statutory courts to enforce the regulations. This led to the development of two distinct legal systems, one religious and one statutory.

According to Frank Vogel, a scholar and legal consultant on Islamic law, the ulama accepted the King's regulations and judicial system initially as a temporary phenomenon, but as the Saudi economy and society changed, the ulama were alarmed by the growth of the statutory courts' influence and pushed back its influence. Courts that were initially secular became dominated by Wahhabi qadis.

A [2007](#) report published by Freedom House notes:

“The judiciary lacks independence from the monarchy. In May 2006, the Justice Ministry announced the establishment of specialized courts. State security courts, as well as family, traffic, and commercial courts, are to be set up in Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam. These new courts stem from judicial reforms implemented in 2005. As part of the plan, a Supreme Court will be created in Riyadh, with appeals courts in each of the kingdom's 13 regions. In 2001, the Council of Ministers approved a 225-article penal code that bans torture. However, allegations of torture by police and prison officials are frequent, and access to prisoners by independent human rights and legal organizations is strictly limited. In July 2006, King Abdullah declared amnesty for any militants who surrendered to security forces after participating in radical groups.”

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 115.



According to [Arab News](#), “[t]he justice minister and chairman of the Supreme Judicial Council, Walid Al-Samaani, ...inaugurated a book of 2,323 judicial principles and legal precedents, printed in eight volumes” in January 2018.

No amount of ‘codifying’ in Saudi Arabia will get around the fact that legislation in Saudi Arabia does not afford religious freedom for non-Sunnis. Some sources indicate that the ‘domination of the religious establishment in law is ending’<sup>10</sup>, but so long as the ulama have a part of in ‘drafting’ legislation based on the principles of Sharia, the Quran’s authority on all things moral and legal in Saudi Arabia will remain unchallenged.<sup>11</sup>

### **Wahhabi education in Saudi Arabia**

Religious freedom is not taught in Saudi Arabia’s classrooms. The ulama are given power over what students are educated on religiously. The influence of Wahhabi teaching, influenced by the Hanbali School, is still evident in Saudi Arabia’s textbooks today, in Islamic academies across the world.

The following excerpts from *The Politics of Truth Management in Saudi Arabia*, by Afshin Shahi, describe the role of the ulama, the education system in Saudi Arabia, and how it has become the bridge that has connected the ulama to many other policies in Saudi Arabia:

“The State granted the Wahhabi ulama many unmatched privileges to shape the new education system. For example, at some point King Faysal appointed an Islamic scholar as the Minister of Education. Hence the ministry became a stronghold of conservative bureaucrats...”<sup>12</sup>

“Indeed, in the modern Saudi state, education became the indispensable bridge that connected the ulama to the wider state bureaucracy.”<sup>13</sup>

“From the early stages of the institutionalization of education, the ulama played a leading role in writing school materials and preparing the textbooks exactly in accordance with the religio-political parameters of the Wahhabi-Saudi sect alliance.”

“...The Wahhabi ulama were never a monolithic group. Although the Saudi state adopted Wahhabism as its official creed, many ulama were still uncomfortable with the emergence of bureaucracy and its modern education institutions. Nonetheless, the necessary synergy was in place to implement the new state policies. The state’s resources were fundamental in creating and sustaining the

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<sup>10</sup> Nathan J. Brown, “The Remaking of the Saudi State,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 9, 2017, accessed March 21, 2018, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/11/09/remaking-of-saudi-state-pub-74681>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Shahi, Afshin, *The Politics of Truth Management in Saudi Arabia* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 103-4.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 104.

'mainstream' Wahhabi ulama who were a part of the policy-making and its enforcement."<sup>14</sup>

"Although he (King Faysal) tried to bureaucratize the ulama and bring them under his control by rigidly defining their institutional role, he gave them the power to control the education system. From time to time the conservative Wahhabi ulama were angered by his educational policies, but in the end compromises were made and the special relationship between the House of Saud and the ulama were preserved. A classic example of one of these compromises was the introduction of female education in the kingdom, which infuriated many orthodox Wahhabi ulama."<sup>15</sup>

According to a [report](#) by Freedom House in 2006, school children spent between a quarter to a third of their weekly hours at school in Islamic studies. The report stated:

"The Wahhabi sect of Islam is the foundation of the Saudi state's political ideology, and at the core of its educational curriculum. According to the Saudi embassy in Washington, the Saudi public school system has 25,000 schools, educating some 5 million students. Saudi Arabia also runs academies in 19 world capitals, including one outside Washington in Alexandria, Virginia, that use some of these same religious texts. Moreover, Saudi Arabia also distributes its religion texts around the world to some Islamic schools and madrassas that it does not directly operate."

In May 2006, The Center for Religious Freedom and the Institute of Gulf Affairs analyzed a dozen textbooks from Saudi Arabia and [found](#) that:

"The Saudi public school religious curriculum continues to propagate an ideology of hate toward the "unbeliever," that is, Christians, Jews, Shiites, Sufis, Sunni Muslims who do not follow Wahhabi doctrine, Hindus, atheists and others...This ideology is introduced in a religion textbook in the first grade and reinforced and developed in following years of the public education system, culminating in the twelfth grade, where a text instructs students that it is a religious obligation to do "battle" against infidels in order to spread the faith."

Pressure to undergo textbook reform from organizations resulted in the foreign minister, Prince Saud Al-Faisal, stating that there would be a transformation of Saudi Arabia's education system in 2006.

Almost 10 years later (2015), the US State Department found that Saudi Arabia had not fulfilled its multi-year commitment to remove violent and intolerant language from their textbooks.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 104.

USCIRF noted that there had been some improvements, but old texts containing directives to kill ‘infidels’ and violent language aimed at religious minorities remain in circulation.

David Weinberg of Defense Democracies testified that textbooks from as recently as 2017 still contain violent language directed towards religious minorities such as Christians and Jews. During his testimony at the US House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism, Non-Proliferation, and Trade, he called for the US Senate to pass legislation pressuring Saudi Arabia to make these changes.

The following is an excerpt from an [article](#) that Mr. Weinberg wrote for *The Hill*:

“Earlier this year, I conducted a deep dive into the official Saudi curriculum for the 2016-2017 academic year. What I found was still deeply disturbing...”

“The books were also rife with anti-Semitic and anti-Christian messages. They called modern-day Christianity “an invalid, perverted religion” and taught that the self-determination movement of the Jewish people, Zionism, is an “octopus” that seeks to destroy Islam and conquer the entire world. The books forbid befriending infidels, citing a Quranic verse that says not to take Christians or Jews as allies and calling such infidels “enemies of God” whom it said Muslims are commanded to hate.”

“A book from the 2016-2017 curriculum also called for “fighting the infidels and polytheists” except under a handful of extenuating circumstances. It added that any infidel who does not serve as a diplomat, pay a tax commonly associated with second-class status, or come from a nation that Muslims have awarded a non-aggression pact is inherently a ‘combatant’.”

Conversely, a [2017 Arab News](#) article states that the Saudi government is intent on following through with textbook reform. The article confirmed the following:

“The Saudi government has launched several education-reform efforts, the most ambitious of which is the \$22 billion Strategic Education Reform Initiative. The various projects seek to transform the country’s educational institutions, in an effort to produce graduates who can meet the demands of the job market and perform the technical jobs currently performed mostly by non-Saudis. They also aim to introduce new teaching methods, with an emphasis on changing from the rote-learning methods used for years to ones that encourage critical thinking. “Teacher training, early childhood education, and state-of-the-art new schools are all part of the plan. [...]”

“The revisions of the textbooks, while taking longer than had originally been anticipated, suggests that Education Ministry officials are making a sincere effort to inoculate Saudi youth against extremist thought. Officials overseeing education reform maintain that educational institutions have taken steps to

socialize Saudi students so that they value engaging people from other cultures and followers of other religions in an open dialogue, imbued with a spirit of mutual respect.”

## **From Wahhabi Education to Extremism**

### *The Use of Violence*

Some scholars believe that the use of violence in the form of *jihad* has nothing to do with Islam itself. However, the use of violence stemming from Wahhabi education can be traced specifically to the 1980s, when Saudi Arabia fought the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

As Wahhabi teaching spread in Saudi Arabia, extremists began to turn on the Saudi government itself. One of these examples was the seizure of ‘The Great Mosque at Mecca’ in 1979. The fundamentalists who seized the mosque protested against the Saudi royalty, accusing it of Westernization and disapproved of the ulama.

[PBS](#) reports that, from this point on:

“The royal family [began] `pumping millions into religious education under the ulama. Saudi charities raise even more. New theological schools and universities are built to produce large numbers of clerics who teach Wahhabism as the only true form of Islam and preach [that] jihad against infidels is the obligation of every true believer`.”

According to [Vox](#), this policy became a means of re-directing the threat of terrorism at home and turning its focus globally. It continued to appease the Wahhabi and prevented trouble at home.

That same year, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia began funding Afghan rebels. [PBS](#) reported that:

“Thousands of young Saudis are sent to fight alongside the mujahedeen in Afghanistan. For the next decade, some 45,000 young Saudi volunteers will trek to Afghanistan where they acquire military skills and come to believe that dedicated Islamic fighters can defeat a superpower. One of their leaders is Osama bin Laden.”

A [2016 article by the Telegraph](#) commented that:

“The exclusivism of Ibn Taymiyah combined with the use of violence advocated by modern ultra-Wahhabists such as Al Qaeda, ISIL and Boko Haram, have now given rise to cells of activists outside Saudi Arabia, ready to commit terrorist outrages such as the ones seen in Beirut, Paris, Brussels and Lahore.”

## *Funding*

Saudi Arabia's role in funding Wahhabi schools and mosques around the world has had a role in accelerating and multiplying the extremism we see today. Saudi government funding alone has been immense. However, it is only a portion of the funding made available to Wahhabists as it does not include the monies donated by wealthy Saudi individuals, which is more difficult to track. Funding estimates range from 10 billion to in excess of 100 billion US Dollars.

The article "[What is Wahhabism? The reactionary branch of Islam from Saudi Arabia said to be 'the main source of global terrorism'](#)", from a May 2017 edition of the *Telegraph*, states:

"In the 1970s, with the help of funding from petroleum exports and other factors, Saudi charities [started funding Wahhabi schools \(madrassas\) and mosques across the globe](#) and the movement underwent "explosive growth".

"The US State Department has estimated that over the past four decades Riyadh has invested more than \$10bn (£6bn) into charitable foundations in an attempt to replace mainstream Sunni Islam with the harsh intolerance of its Wahhabism. EU intelligence experts estimate that 15 to 20 per cent of this has been diverted to al-Qaida and other violent jihadists."

Cameron Glenn's 2016 (U.S. Institute of Peace) [blog](#) entry "Iran v. Saudi Arabia: Islam's Arch Rivals" writes:

"Riyadh began funding Wahhabi missionaries, mosques, and schools throughout the Muslim world in the 1980s, in part to counter the Islamic Republic's influence. By some estimates, Saudi Arabia has spent at least \$100 billion promoting Wahhabism since the 1980s. Saudi funds have been channeled to Sunni militant groups abroad, including Hamas, Al Qaeda, and the Taliban, according to a U.S. Embassy cable. Extremist groups have been known to gain access to Saudi-based charities that operate with little oversight from the government, diverting funds to support their operations.

"Saudi Arabia considers itself a key defender of Muslims and Arabs around the world. The kingdom began launching airstrikes against Yemen's Houthi rebels in March, and it is among the largest supporters of Sunni rebels in Syria."

[A 2013 Study by the European Parliament, Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union entitled Salafist/Wahhabite Financial Support to Educational, Social and Religious Institutions](#) notes that Saudi charitable organizations such as the Muslim World League and the International Islamic Relief Organizations have found "fertile ground to spread their ideological views in post-revolutionary Tunisia."

The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) published [Saudi Government Paper: 'Billions Spent by Saudi Royal Family to Spread Islam to Every Corner of the Earth'](#) in 2002. Their article contains excerpts (below) from a Saudi government

publication entitled *Ain Al Yaqeen documenting the 'royal family's efforts to spread (Wahhabi) Islam throughout the world'*:

"The Cost is Astronomical

"The cost of King Fahd's efforts in this field has been astronomical, amounting to many billions of Saudi Riyals. In terms of Islamic institutions, the result is some 210 Islamic centers wholly or partly financed by Saudi Arabia, more than 1,500 mosques and 202 colleges and almost 2,000 schools for educating Muslim children in non-Islamic countries in Europe, North and South America, Australia and Asia... All over the world the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has supported and contributed in the establishment of mosques and Islamic centers..."

"Establishing Islamic Schools

"With his lifelong commitment to education as the key to unlocking the potential of the individual, it is not surprising that King Fahd Ibn Abd Al-Aziz initiated a program to establish Islamic academies in some of the major capitals of the world. These academies were conceived in order to provide Muslim children abroad with the opportunity to attend an institution of academic excellence which could reinforce their commitment to their culture, religion and language while at the same time opening constructive dialogue with the societies in which they lived.

"Amongst them are the Islamic Academy in Washington Established in 1984 [sic], where multinational students are studying. The Islamic Academy in Washington teaches Arabic and Islamic studies. The academy has 1,200 students, both male and female. Of these, 549 are Saudis. The rest represent 29 nationalities. In the ten-year period 1984 to 1994, the costs of establishing and running the academy were in excess of SR 100 million."

"King Fahd Academy in London, United Kingdom of Great Britain. The King Fahd Academy in London caters for 1,000 students, amongst them the children of Arab diplomats serving in London, as well as other Arab and Muslim children living in London and belonging to 40 nationalities..."

"King Fahd Academy in Moscow, Russia...Is not only a major educational institution; it is a resolute attempt to undo the harm done to Islam and Islamic culture by the totalitarian communist regime of the erstwhile Soviet Union. Under communism, Muslims were persecuted, mosques were desecrated and an alien ideology of materialism was imposed on the individual by the State. The King Fahd Academy in Moscow is one step towards reasserting Arab and Islamic culture and values..."

"King Fahd Academy in Bonn. The King Fahd Academy, opened in Bonn in 1995, it comprises a school catering for 500 students and a mosque which can

accommodate 700 worshippers. It combines education in Arabic and Islam with a concerted effort to build bridges with German society by increasing understanding of Arab and Islamic culture. The total cost of the Academy was DM 30 million (equivalent to SR 76.5 million).

"The Bihac Islamic Academy: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia allocated SR 5 million for the establishment of this important educational institution, as part of its extensive aid program for the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina..."

"Efforts in the U.S.

"The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia under the leadership of King Fahd Ibn Abd Al-Aziz, has given support to the following institutions in the United States: Dar Al-Salam Institute, the Fresno Mosque in California, the Islamic Center in Colombia, Missouri, the Islamic Center in East Lansing, Michigan, the Islamic Center in Los Angeles, California, the Islamic Center in New Brunswick, New Jersey, the Islamic Center in New York, the Islamic Center in Tida, Maryland, the Islamic Center in Toledo, Ohio, the Islamic Center in Virginia, the Islamic Center in Washington, the Islamic Cultural Center in Chicago, the King Fahd Mosque in Los Angeles, the Mosque of the Albanian Community in Chicago, the South-West Big Mosque of Chicago, and the Omar Ibn Al-Khattab Mosque in Los Angeles.

"Efforts in Canada

"Also in Canada the Kingdom under King Fahd, has given support to the following institutions in Canada: the Calgary Mosque, the Islamic Center in Quebec, the Islamic Center in Toronto and the Ottawa Mosque. King Fahd has donated five million U.S. dollars for the cost of the Islamic Center in Toronto, in addition to 1.5 million U.S. dollars annually to run the facility.

"Efforts in Europe

"In Europe, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has supported and contributed in the establishment of many mosques and Islamic centers amongst which the Cultural Center in Brussels, Belgium which has received total support of SR 19 million. The Islamic Center in Geneva, Switzerland, which receives annual support of SR 19 million, and contains a large mosque, a cultural center, a school and a lecture hall, the Islamic Center in Madrid, Spain, which has had total support of SR 27 million, is one of the largest in Europe. It comprises a very capacious mosque, a prayer hall for women, a library, a lecture hall and a medical clinic, the Islamic Center in London, England in which the Kingdom has contributed some SR 25 million to the cost of the London Islamic Center. The Islamic Center in Edinburgh, Scotland, which is located in the city center, contains a mosque which can accommodate 1,000 worshippers, and includes a library, a lecture hall and classrooms. It cost around SR 15 million. The Islamic Center in Rome, Italy that

comprises a mosque, a library and a lecture hall. King Fahd donated US\$ 50 million (some 70% of the total) to cover the cost of construction. The Center also receives an annual donation of US\$ 1.5 million. The Mosque of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques in Gibraltar, which cost in excess of SR 30 million and comprises a mosque for men, a prayer hall for women, a school, a library and a lecture hall...

"...Among the biggest is King Fahd Islamic Center in Malaga, Spain, on an area of 3,848 sq. m., whose foundation stone was laid in 1998. The university-like center embraces academic, educational, cultural, and propagatory activities..." [...]<sup>16</sup>

### *South Asia*

Pakistan has also been the recipient of much Saudi funding provided to extremists. PBS (Frontline) provides an [analysis on madrassas](#). It states:

"A madrassa is an Islamic religious school. Many of the Taliban were educated in Saudi-financed madrassas in Pakistan that teach Wahhabism, a particularly austere and rigid form of Islam which is rooted in Saudi Arabia. Around the world, Saudi wealth and charities contributed to an explosive growth of madrassas during the Afghan jihad against the Soviets. During that war (1979-1989), a new kind of madrassa emerged in the Pakistan-Afghanistan region -- not so much concerned about scholarship as making war on infidels. The enemy then was the Soviet Union, today it's America..."

[According to a cable from the Consulate in Lahore in 2008](#), "financial support estimated at nearly 100 million USD annually was making its way to Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith clerics in the region from 'missionary' and 'Islamic charitable' organizations in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates ostensibly with the direct support of those governments."

James M. Dorsey, Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies notes in his 2016 article entitled, "[Creating Frankenstein: the impact of Saudi export of ultra-conservatism in South Asia](#)" that close to 70 to 100 billion of Saudi money has gone to fund mosques and institutions. According to Mr. Dorsey, the Al Huda International Welfare Foundation is spreading conservative Islamic ideology in cities in Pakistan, North America, Europe and the Middle East. He writes in "[Pakistan's lurch towards ultra-conservatism abetted by Saudi-inspired pyramid scheme \(April 18, 2017\)](#)":

"Al Huda has repeatedly denied that it was funded by Saudi institutions despite the institute's ideological affinity to the kingdom's worldview. The institution's [audited accounts](#) for fiscal year 2014-2015 reported net assets of \$9.2 million

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<sup>16</sup> The Bonn King Fahd Academy has since been closed because of concern that the academy was promoting extremism.



and income of \$3.3 million, primarily from donations, student fees and the sale of books and cassettes.”

A study by the Canadian Senate and its 2015 report entitled, “[Countering the Terrorist Threat in Canada: an interim report](#)” noted that wealthy Saudis are among those financing Wahhabism in Canada and using charities as conduits for the funding of mosques and community centres.

Michelle Waldron told the Senate committee that her son who was arrested on assault charges shortly after the Parliament Hill attack on October 22, 2014 had been influenced by a mosque in Ottawa during the 1990s. She testified:

“Wahhabism, also called Salafi’ism, whose adherents might refer to themselves as Ahl al-Hadith, Ahl al Sunnah or Zahiris, is the same ideology at the foundation of the uncontrollable monsters ISIS, Al Qaeda, al Shabaab and Boko Haram. It may not be the only ultra-conservative influence that exists among Muslims, but because of the Saudi billions used to fuel their politically motivated propaganda machine, it is the most prolific and ubiquitous. And it is the ideology that my son was taught right here in Ottawa.”

Colin Freeze and Affan Chowdry of The Globe and Mail [wrote](#), in 2015:

“The Saudi government is donating hundreds of thousands of dollars to help finance the expansion of private Islamic schools in Canada, according to newly leaked documents that shine a light on how foreign states are helping finance a growing demand for religious education.

“The documents, involving cables between diplomats at the Saudi embassy in Ottawa and government officials in Riyadh, contain conversations from 2012 and 2013 about a \$211,000 donation to a school in Ottawa and \$134,000 to a school in Mississauga. [...]

“... Olive Grove School in Mississauga, which got the \$134,000 Saudi donation. [...]

“The Saudi funds related to that project are highlighted in a memo that was circulated in Riyadh by the Saudi Ministry of Finance. Titled "Financial aid to the Ottawa Islamic School," it shows that a \$211,000 donation was discussed by several Saudi bureaucrats, including ones involved in their government's Foreign Affairs department and the Preaching and Islamic Affairs Outreach bureau.”

The Saudi government has denied its involvement in funding extremism until just recently.

In 2004, the Royal Court issued a [statement](#) stating its intention to “organize Saudi charity work abroad” by creating a charity commission called “the Saudi Non-

Governmental Commission for Relief and Charity Work Abroad” in order to “rid Saudi charity work abroad from any misdeeds that might undermine it or distort its reputation.” According to the Middle East & North Africa Financial Action Task Force (MENAFATF), a [royal decree](#) was issued in 2010 prohibiting Saudi charities, government entities and individuals (donating other people’s money) from donating or operating abroad. The decree did not, however, ban individuals from donating their own money abroad. MENAFATF notes that “...charities, governmental entities and individuals can give support abroad with the approval of the Domestic Saudi Commission for Rescue and Charity Abroad. This commission came into being on basis of the royal decree... It did not become clear to the assessment team whether this commission is active or not. Article 75 of the Charities Regulation provides that charities may only operate within the borders of the Kingdom.”<sup>17</sup>

Then came an admission by a Saudi official in 2016, who told a [former US official visiting Saudi Arabia](#) that Saudi Arabia had in fact been involved in funding extremism since the 1960s, first to counter Egypt’s Nasserism, which was a threat to Saudi Arabia. Supporting extremism also meant they could resist the Soviet Union, alongside the United States in Afghanistan in the 1980s and later Shiite movements in Iran. King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman said over time that Saudi funding of extremism turned on itself, admitting:

“We did not own up to it after 9/11 because we feared you would abandon or treat us as the enemy,” the Saudi senior official conceded. “And we were in denial.”

## Recent news

This report has examined the effect the spread of Wahhabism has had globally, but what about the future?

The recent lifting of the ban on women driving, their inclusion as security personnel in the military, the mixing of men and women at music and drama performances and the arrest of prominent Saudi political officials and princes involved in corruption has certainly caught the attention of many. Could these social reforms also be a sign that religious freedom might be coming to Saudi Arabia?

After the landmark law to allow women to drive passed, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman [stated](#):

“We want to lead normal lives, lives where our religion and our traditions translate into tolerance, so that we coexist with the world.

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<sup>17</sup> Mutual Evaluation Report: *Anti-Money Laundering and Combating the Financing of Terrorism – Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*,” Middle East & North Africa Financial Action Task Force (MENAFATF), published May 4, 2010, [http://www.menafatf.org/sites/default/files/MER\\_SaudiArabia\\_English.pdf](http://www.menafatf.org/sites/default/files/MER_SaudiArabia_English.pdf), 167-8.

“...In all honesty, we will not spend 30 years of our lives dealing with extremist ideologies.”

Mohammad bin Salman also announced plans when visiting the Lebanese Patriarch to [“restore and re-open a 900-year-old church, to be used as a centre for inter-religious dialogue....”](#) as a “gift” to the Patriarch.

A further [report](#) stated that Sunni Muslims could now pray in churches, synagogues and Shiite mosques.

In 2017, [World Watch Monitor](#) reported that:

“King Salman has [ordered an international council](#) of senior Islamic scholars to monitor preachers and jurists’ use of Prophet Muhammad’s hadiths (sayings) “to prevent them being used to justify violence or extremism”.”

Mohammad bin Salman’s recent crackdown on prominent members of Saudi society could also be seen as a step forward. The arrests of those involved in the nation’s corruption; businessmen, members of the cabinet and royal family have set a new tone, and indicate some willingness to crack down on corruption.

All these are positive signs pointing toward the potential for greater human rights in Saudi Arabia. However, time will tell whether or not greater religious freedom is granted.

While social reforms have been announced, Prince Mohammad bin Salman does not seem to be in a hurry to fundamentally address the issues of religious freedom. He has not moved to release the clergy and religious leaders that are currently detained, nor stop executions of human rights activists. Saudi Arabia has been notorious for its [executions](#) and ranks [third](#) in the world for them, under Iran. Research cited by [The Guardian](#) found that 70% of 141 executions of human rights activists took place after Mohammad bin Salman came to power in June 2017.

It is Mohammad bin Salman’s [view](#) that Wahhabism only arose after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. He states:

“We were not like this in the past...We only want to go back to what we were, to moderate Islam that is open to the world, open to all the religions.”

Saudi Arabia’s plans to modernize its economy, and to be independent of oil and energy, seems to be one of the main motivating factors behind the social reforms coming to the kingdom. [“Vision 2030”](#), announced in April 2016, is Saudi Arabia’s ‘blueprint’ for the country’s future which involves several pillars. In the forward of the plan, Prince Mohammad bin Salman, who also serves as Chairman of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs, lays out the plan for Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia plans to focus on being the 'heart of the Arab and Islamic world, '...a global investment powerhouse' which involves stimulating Saudi Arabia's economy and diversifying its revenues. Saudi Arabia also wants to be a 'global hub' and 'gateway to the world' for trade and a connecting point between Asia, Europe and Africa. The vision involves becoming independent of oil and energy and drawing upon other resources such as gold, phosphate, uranium and other minerals. The Vision also involves transforming Aramco, Saudi Arabia's oil producing company, into an 'industrial conglomerate'. Vision 2030 plans to transform the Public Investment Fund into 'the world's largest sovereign wealth fund' and 'manufacture half of its military needs within the Kingdom to create more job opportunities for citizens.'

Economic ambition seems to be a key driver behind some of the Prince's statements on a more 'moderate' Saudi Arabia.

Jayson Casper writes in [Christianity Today](#):

“Stated at the launch of a \$500 billion megacity overlapping the borders with Egypt and Jordan, such talk of moderation could encourage investors in the diversification of a lagging economy long dependent on oil revenues, which are now falling.”

The launch of Vision 2030 seems to have coincided with some positive changes to religious freedom. A [Saudi Islamic academy](#) that had campuses across the world, found to have ties to Al-Qaeda, shut down around the time that Vision 2030 was announced. The academy taught graduates, including one found guilty for plotting to assassinate President George W. Bush in 2005.

However, Vision 2030 may also produce challenges for religious minorities. According to [USCIRF](#), approximately 33% of Saudi Arabia's population are "expatriate workers of various faiths. Among these expatriate workers... are at least two million non-Muslims, including Buddhists, Christians, practitioners of folk religions, and the religiously unaffiliated." Vision 2030 plans to reduce foreign workers by 50% and focus on giving job opportunities to Saudi nationals. Many foreign workers could formerly work in Saudi Arabia without being taxed. A [Value Added Tax](#) and [expat tax](#) introduced earlier this year could make living and working in Saudi Arabia even more difficult for religious minorities.

## **Calls to Action**

### *Saudi Arabia*

So long as Saudi Arabia's current relationship with the religious establishment continues and the country favours a strict interpretation of Sunni Islam that permits violence, religious freedom will continue to be severely restricted. We call on the government of Saudi Arabia to:

- Cease the direct or indirect funding of extremist elements through its domestic and international financial aid.
- Ensure that full human rights are assured to all Saudi Arabian citizens, including women; and that citizenship rights are guaranteed to non-Muslim residents.
- Ensure that all commitments made in its long-term development policies, including *Vision 2030*, promote and protect the principles and practice of freedom of religion or belief for citizens and non-citizens.

It is unclear whether the Saudi regime's admission to the funding of extremism, its commitment to text book curriculum reform, and attempts to modernize the country by relaxing social rules will bring about any change to religious freedom; despite Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's indication that the religious climate is going to change.

If Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman is serious in his intention to increase religious freedom and temper extremist ideology in Saudi Arabia, we welcome it.

### *Canada*

Where there are clear violations of religious freedom, Canada must take a stand. For instance, Canada cut the charitable status of the Canadian chapter of the World Association of Muslim Youth in 2012, when it was found to be supporting terrorism.

In this spirit of principled leadership on issues of freedom of religion or belief, we call on the Government of Canada to:

- Refrain from supporting any state's candidacy for the United Nations Human Rights Council if that state does not comply with international human rights standards.
- Require that charitable organizations disclose the amount and the source of foreign funding, and that it remove the charitable status of any organization that does not comply with this requirement.
- Require transparency from the government of Saudi Arabia on the amount and purpose of funding to Canadian organizations.
- Re-establish the Office of Religious Freedom so that it may re-engage with persecuted religious minorities in Saudi Arabia and around the world.

In the meantime, we call on Saudi Arabia to respect the religious freedom of citizens both locally and abroad and to put in place the conditions to allow for the realization of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states:

*“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”*