



Saudi Arabia



Mecca in Saudi Arabia is Islam's holiest site

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Saudi Arabia is home to the two holiest Muslim sites, Mecca and Medina, and the Saudi government considers itself the authoritative voice of Islam. The region once had a large Christian population, which vanished completely when Islam gained control around 630 AD. Saudi Arabia is now one of the most rigid, hardline and authoritarian states in the world, and it makes virtually no provision for religious freedom. Its official religion is Sunni Islam; its constitution is the Quran and the traditions about Muhammad, and its legal system is based on the government's strict and puritanical interpretation of sharia. There is no separation of state and religion, and all the country's citizens must be Muslim. School textbooks, sermons and fatwas promote hatred and violence against Christians and Jews.

In line with Muhammad's prohibition of more than one religion in the Arabian Peninsula, the government disallows the public practice of any non-Muslim religion. There are no non-Muslim places of worship in the country, and the Grand Mufti declared in March 2012 that it was "necessary to destroy all the churches of the region". Conversion from Islam is officially punishable by death, and the small number of Saudi Christians have to practise their faith in extreme secrecy. Because of this, their exact numbers are known only to the Lord. The mutawaah (religious police) ruthlessly enforce restrictions on behaviour. Expatriate Christians living in Saudi Arabia are permitted to worship in private, but their meetings are sometimes raided by the mutawaah and their Christian resources confiscated. In December 2011 a group of Ethiopian Christians were arrested at a private prayer meeting; the women were strip-searched and sexually abused, and officers kicked and beat the men and called them "unbelievers". They were detained for months and eventually deported.

The 2011 uprisings in the Middle East prompted King Abdullah to announce a number of economic and political reforms, but none of them involved religious freedom. In fact, Saudi Arabia has used the opportunity provided by the "Arab Spring" to promote its Wahhabi version of Islam in the Middle East and North Africa. It has also clamped down hard on any potential dissent within its own borders.

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