Erased by Law: Sectarian Repression and the Shia Struggle for Equality in Saudi Arabia

Introduction

In Saudi Arabia, being part of the Shia Muslim minority often means facing barriers that go far beyond personal belief. Though they make up around 10 to 12 percent of the population[1] Shia citizens are routinely treated as second-class—excluded from public office, underrepresented in key sectors, and even targeted for their religious practices. While the Saudi government presents an image of reform under Vision 2030, the reality for many Shia communities tells a different story: mosque demolitions in Al-Qatif, discriminatory court rulings, and school curricula that stigmatize their faith.

This briefing paper explores how this discrimination is embedded in Saudi Arabia's institutions and policies. It focuses on five key areas: the legal framework, education, economic opportunity, cultural and religious expression, and land rights. Drawing on reports from human rights organizations, UN bodies, and regional sources, the paper sheds light on the lived experience of marginalization—how laws, rhetoric, and policies intersect to restrict the rights and dignity of Shia individuals.

With 2024 marking a record high in executions, totaling 345 cases, including 50 politically motivated executions, 9 of which targeted Shia citizens, the urgent need to address this issue becomes clear, especially with the continued targeting of a large number of Shia citizens[2]. By unpacking the structure of this repression, the paper aims to contribute to a broader conversation about accountability and justice, and to explore how the international community can support efforts for genuine equality inside the Kingdom.

Legal and Institutional Discrimination

Saudi Arabia's legal and institutional framework systematically excludes the Shia minority through both structural and discretionary mechanisms. The 1992 Basic Law of Governance, which functions as the de facto constitution, enshrines Islam as the state religion and establishes the Quran and the Sunna—interpreted through the Hanbali

[1] U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Annual Report 2025. 2025, p. 37. https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report.pdf (accessed on 12 May 2025).

[2] European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights (ESOHR). A Historic Record of Executions in Saudi Arabia. 2025. https://www.esohr.org/en/%D8%B9%D9%87%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%85-%D8%B1%D9%82%D9%85-%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AE%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A/ (accessed on 12 May 2025)

school of Sunni jurisprudence—as the basis of law. It contains no provision guaranteeing freedom of religion or belief[3]. Conversion from Islam is criminalized and can result in the death penalty, although executions for apostasy have not been recorded in recent years.

Compounding the issue is the absence of a codified penal code. Saudi judges enjoy wide discretionary powers to classify acts as crimes based on their interpretation of Islamic law, particularly in ta'zir cases (discretionary offenses). This legal ambiguity fosters arbitrary and inconsistent sentencing practices, often shaped by sectarian prejudice[4]. The judiciary itself is homogeneously Sunni. As of 2017, no Shia citizens had served as judges or prosecutors in criminal courts, and legal education is confined to the four Sunni schools, further entrenching exclusion[5]. Reports confirm that the testimony of Shia Muslims is frequently discounted in favor of Sunni witnesses in criminal proceedings[6].

Two laws in particular have been wielded to suppress Shia expression: the 2017 Counterterrorism Law and the Anti-Cybercrime Law. Both equate peaceful religious expression with threats to national unity. These vague formulations have enabled authorities to prosecute Shia clerics and activists for sermons, tweets, or gatherings deemed "sectarian" or "disruptive to public order"[7].

A telling example is the case of Sheikh Mohammad al-Habib, a Shia cleric sentenced to twelve years in prison after being charged with "sectarianism" and "inciting riots" in relation to sermons critical of state-promoted sectarianism in school curricula. His sentence was upheld on appeal, and the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention later ruled that his detention was discriminatory and in violation of international law[8].

The death penalty constitutes a grave violation of the right to life. It is irreversible, often discriminatory in application and in Saudi Arabia, it disproportionately targets marginalized communities—particularly the Shia minority. Among the 345 individuals executed in 2024, numerous Shia citizens were sentenced following trials that flagrantly violated due process standards. Many of these convictions were based on confessions

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[3] U.S. Department of State. 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Saudi Arabia – Section II. 2022. https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/saudi-arabia/ (accessed on 12 May 2025).
[4] Human Rights Watch. Saudi Arabia: Forthcoming Penal Code Should Protect Rights. 29 April 2022. https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/29/saudi-arabia-forthcoming-penal-code-should-protect-rights (accessed on 12 May 2025).
[5] MENA Rights Group. *Alternative Report to the CERD Committee: Saudi Arabia*, 2024, p. 6. https://menarights.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/Alternative%20Report_CERD_Saudi%20Arabia_FINAL_Anonymized.pdf (accessed on 12 May 2025).
[6] ibid.
[7] ibid.,pp15-16.
[8] ibid.,pp-5-6

extracted under torture or other forms of inhuman treatment. One of the most recent and alarming cases involves two Shia brothers from the Eastern Province who were executed on political grounds. Their prosecution, like many others, reflected a pattern of judicial abuse aimed at silencing dissent and punishing individuals for their sectarian identity. These executions underscore how capital punishment in Saudi Arabia is not only a legal tool, but also a mechanism of repression—used to instill fear and entrench sectarian control.

Religious and Cultural Repression

The Saudi government continues to impose systemic restrictions on the religious and cultural expression of the Shia community. One of the most visible manifestations of this is the ban on constructing Shia mosques outside the Eastern Province, a policy that has left thousands of Shia in other parts of the country without recognized places of worship[9].

Even in regions with large Shia populations, such as Al-Qatif, religious sites have been demolished or defaced, often under the pretext of urban redevelopment. In 2022, reports confirmed the destruction of several mosques in Qatif, particularly in the city of Al-awamiya, and the arrest of worshippers during peaceful gatherings[10]. These actions compound a sense of vulnerability and exclusion among Shia residents.

The Council of Senior Scholars, the kingdom's top religious authority, is composed exclusively of Sunni clerics—primarily from the Hanbali school—with no Shia representation[11].Government-appointed scholars on this council have repeatedly issued sectarian *fatwas*, referring to Shia Muslims as "polytheists," "rejectionists," or even "brothers of Satan"[12]. These labels are not just rhetorical; they help justify exclusion and discrimination in legal and social policy.

Religious rituals central to Shia identity—such as Ashura commemorations—are tolerated in some areas like Qatif but suppressed in others. In Al-Ahsa and Khobar, holding prayer gatherings or observing Ashura has resulted in jail sentences and lashing[13]. Pilgrims traveling to Mecca or Medina are subject to surveillance, and Shia religious literature is routinely confiscated by security agents[14].

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[9] Minority Rights Group. Still Invisible: The Stigmatization of Shi'a and Other Religious Minorities in Saudi Arabia (2023), p. 6. https://minorityrights.org/app/uploads/2023/12/mrg-brief-saudi-nov15-v1.pdf (accessed on 12 May 2025).

[10k]Mehr News. "Saudi Arabia Destroys Shia Mosque in Al-Qatif," *Mehr News*, https://en.mehrnews.com/news/185879/ (accessed 13 May 2025).

[11] U.S. Department of State, 2022,Section II.

[12]Human Rights Watch. *They Are Not Our Brothers: Hate Speech by Saudi Officials* (2017), p. 33, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/saudi0917_web.pdf (accessed 13 May 2025).

[13] Minority Rights Group, *Still Invisible*, pp. 6–7.

[14] ibid.

Finally, state institutions like the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) and the Ministry of Interior play a central role in enforcing these restrictions. The CPVPV, which once patrolled public spaces to enforce religious orthodoxy, continues to monitor and report on Shia religious activity. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Interior oversees key decisions on religious affairs, including bans on construction of Shia religious sites and the detention of Shia activists[15].

Education and Ideological Framing

In Saudi Arabia, the education system has long been a central tool in reinforcing sectarian narratives. Textbooks used at both primary and secondary levels have historically depicted Shia and Sufi Muslims as heretics and idolaters, often placing them alongside non-Muslim groups in lists of deviant or dangerous beliefs[1]. These portrayals have helped institutionalize a vision of national identity that excludes the Shia minority, presenting their practices—such as visiting shrines or celebrating religious holidays—as religiously deviant and socially threatening[16].

While the Saudi government has, under international pressure, committed to reforming its curriculum, progress has been partial and inconsistent. Reviews by human rights monitors and independent education watchdogs show that inflammatory content continues to appear, including references that label Shia beliefs as "polytheistic" or condemn them as innovations (bidaʿ) deserving divine punishmen. In some cases, textbooks still include phrases suggesting that those who practice such beliefs will go to hell[17].These biases extend beyond schoolbooks into higher education. Shia faculty remain dramatically underrepresented in universities, especially in senior academic roles. In regions like Al-Ahsa, where Shia constitute a significant portion of the population, they make up as little as 5% of the university faculty[18]. Meanwhile, dissertations and academic work targeting Shia beliefs have been institutionalized: graduate theses at the Islamic University of Medina include titles such as The Rafidis' Propagation of Their Doctrine Through Satellite Channels or The Trenchant Sword on the Necks of the Rafidi Infidels, often framing Shia theology as a threat to Islam and national unity[19].

Shia religious schools and seminaries—despite existing in the Eastern Province—are not officially recognized by the Saudi government. Their certifications are not accepted for employment in the public sector, and graduates are barred from teaching religion in state schools or joining government-approved religious institutions[20]. This denial of

[15] ibid.
[16] ibid.
[17] USCIRF. (2025). Annual Report, p. 37
[18] Minority Rights Group,Still Invisible, p. 8.
[19] ibid.
[20] ibid.

institutional recognition perpetuates the exclusion of Shia thought from public life, leaving young Shia students with few paths to express or explore their identity within the formal education system.

These structural barriers in education don't just reflect societal bias—they actively reproduce it. Through textbooks, academic gatekeeping, and religious exclusion, the Saudi education system sustains a sectarian order that marginalizes the Shia community at every level.

Economic and Employment Discrimination

Shia communities in Saudi Arabia face systemic economic marginalization, particularly in regions like Qatif and Al-Ahsa where they constitute a significant portion of the population. These areas remain notably underdeveloped compared to Sunni-majority regions such as Najd and Hijaz, with fewer hospitals, universities, and infrastructure projects, despite similar population sizes[21].

Discrimination permeates both public and private sector employment. Shia applicants are frequently denied jobs or promotions once their religious identity or place of origin is discovered. This exclusion is particularly stark in sensitive or influential institutions, such as the military, judiciary, oil sector, and Ministry of Interior, where Shia are either underrepresented or completely absent. For example, in Al-Ahsa, as of 2013, only 15 out of 200 boys' schools had Shia principals, and none of the 200 girls' schools were headed by Shia administrators[22].

Shia professionals often encounter a glass ceiling even when they are hired, with Sunni colleagues favored for advancement regardless of qualifications. This entrenched system restricts Shia citizens from attaining decision-making positions, perpetuating cycles of exclusion[23].

Economic marginalization is reinforced by fatwas issued by influential Wahhabi clerics, who discourage any form of social or commercial interaction with Shia Muslims. A widely cited example is a fatwa by Sheikh Abdullah bin Abdurrahman Ibn Jebreen, who urged followers not to engage in trade with Shia, not to greet them, and not to show respect during their religious holidays.[24]

Land and Urban Policy

[21] Minority Rights Group,Still Invisible,.pp. 7-8
[22] ibid.
[23] ibid.
[24] ibid.

In Shia-majority regions such as Qatif and Al-Ahsa, land and urban development policies have long been employed as tools of state control and sectarian exclusion. Rather than addressing the infrastructural needs of these areas, Saudi authorities have often enacted policies that exacerbate underdevelopment and displace communities under the guise of urban planning or security. The destruction of homes and religious sites—particularly mosques and community centers—has become a hallmark of this repressive strategy. In 2022, authorities demolished a Shia mosque in Al-Qatif, sparking criticism from human rights groups that denounced the move as a deliberate erasure of cultural and religious identity[25].

These demolitions are not isolated events. Reports indicate that home razing operations have intensified in recent years, often carried out without adequate notice or compensation. Local residents, particularly in Qatif, describe these actions as collective punishment for political dissent or simply for existing in a space perceived as "disloyal" to the central government. As a result, Shia families are not only stripped of their property but also of their historical and spiritual anchors[26].

Beyond outright demolitions, the Saudi state imposes stringent restrictions on mosque construction and renovation for Shia communities outside the Eastern Province. While Sunni mosques receive state funding and bureaucratic support, Shia communities often find their permit applications rejected, delayed, or ignored entirely. In cities like Riyadh, where thousands of Shia live and work, authorities continue to deny requests to build mosques—forcing believers to worship in private spaces at risk of harassment or arrest[27].Urban planning policies also reinforce spatial segregation. Infrastructure investments disproportionately favor Sunni-majority areas such as Najd and the western Hijaz region, while Shia-populated districts remain visibly underdeveloped, lacking hospitals, schools, and even basic road maintenance. According to community reports, even when development projects are announced in Shia regions, they are often symbolic or poorly executed, serving more as political window dressing than genuine investment in equality[28].

This pattern of marginalization is closely tied to the state's broader strategy of securitization and sectarian control. By systematically denying Shia communities the right to physical space—whether through home demolitions, religious suppression, or

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[25] Mehr News (2022).
[26]PressTV. "Saudi Officials Embark on Mass Home Demolitions in Shia-Populated Qatif: Rights Group," https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2022/10/25/691569/Saudi-officials-embark-on-mass-home-demolitions-in-Shia-populated-Qatif--Rights-group (accessed 13 May 2025).
[27] Minority Rights Group,Still Invisible,.pp. 7-8
[28] Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB). *Systemic Discrimination and Religious Repression: The Shia Struggle for Equality in Saudi Arabia.* February 2025. https://www.adhrb.org/2025/02/systemic-discrimination-and-religious-repression-the-shia-struggle-for-equality-in-saudi-arabia/ *(accessed on 13 May 2025)*.

urban neglect—the Saudi state effectively erodes their social cohesion, political voice, and economic mobility. Such policies violate not only the right to adequate housing but also the right to religious freedom and cultural expression.

International Response and Impunity

Despite repeated condemnations from UN bodies and human rights organizations, the international response to systemic discrimination against Shia Muslims in Saudi Arabia remains largely ineffective. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has issued multiple opinions criticizing the imprisonment of Shia clerics and activists, such as Sheikh Mohammad bin Hassan Al-Habib, as violations of international law grounded in religious discrimination and denial of due process rights. Yet these findings have failed to yield concrete outcomes, with Saudi authorities routinely ignoring calls for accountability and release of detainees. The absence of enforcement mechanisms underscores the limitations of international law when faced with a state unwilling to cooperate[29].

The strategic interests of powerful Western governments have further insulated Saudi Arabia from scrutiny. Both the United States and key European partners continue to provide arms and maintain military, energy, and investment ties with the Kingdom, often sidelining concerns about human rights violations. In 2022, despite the record-high number of executions—many targeting Shia citizens—the U.S. Secretary of State renewed Saudi Arabia's designation as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act, but simultaneously issued a national interest waiver exempting the Kingdom from sanctions[30].

These contradictions reveal how economic and geopolitical priorities consistently override human rights concerns. Vision 2030—Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's ambitious modernization plan—has been deployed as a soft power tool to rebrand Saudi Arabia globally. While it pledges greater tolerance and inclusion, there is little evidence of structural change. For the Shia population, the vision remains largely aspirational: they continue to face exclusion from government institutions, legal discrimination, and repression of religious expression[31].

Global sporting events and international partnerships have become another mechanism of image management. Saudi Arabia's successful bid to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup and its growing portfolio of Western investment partnerships serve to whitewash the country's rights record. According to Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in

[29] MENA Rights Group. *Alternative Report to the CERD.,* pp. 11–12.
[30] U.S. Department of State. *2022*. Section II.
[31] Caruso, A. (2021). *Saudi Arabia Still Treats Shiites as Second-Class Citizens*. *Foreign Policy*. https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/11/mohammed-bin-salman-mbs-saudi-arabia-still-treats-shiites-second-class-citizens (accessed 13 May 2025).

Bahrain (ADHRB), these initiatives offer a veneer of progress while masking the Kingdom's ongoing human rights violations.[32]

Until foreign governments, multilateral bodies, and private actors align their actions with their stated values, the Saudi authorities will remain emboldened to continue policies of repression. What is urgently needed is not merely rhetorical condemnation, but meaningful pressure: suspension of military aid, greater scrutiny of business partnerships, and insistence on transparency and inclusion in all state-led reforms.

Conclusion

The systemic discrimination faced by Saudi Arabia's Shia minority is neither incidental nor invisible. It is embedded in law, sanctioned by state institutions, and reinforced by ideological, economic, and geopolitical structures. From the exclusionary legal framework and biased education system to employment barriers and land dispossession, Shia citizens encounter a layered architecture of marginalization that denies them full participation in society. Far from being addressed by the Kingdom's Vision 2030 reform agenda, these patterns of repression have persisted—and in some cases intensified—under the guise of modernization.

What emerges is a model of governance that selectively embraces reform while consolidating authoritarian control. This duality is not lost on international observers, yet meaningful action remains scarce. Foreign governments and international organizations continue to privilege diplomatic and commercial interests over the rights of Saudi citizens—enabling the state's repressive apparatus through silence, arms deals, and global partnerships.

At a time when the country has already executed over 100 individuals in the first four months of 2025,the stakes could not be higher[33]. Human rights institutions, civil society actors, and democratic governments must recognize that impunity for religious persecution is sustained not only by domestic policy but also by global complacency.

Addressing this crisis requires more than symbolic condemnation. It demands sustained pressure, conditional engagement, and support for independent monitoring

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[32] Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB), Unequal Before the Law: How Saudi Arabia Executes Foreign Nationals in Silence, May 2025, https://www.adhrb.org/2025/05/unequal-before-the-law-how-saudi-arabia-executes-foreign-nationals-in-silence/ (accessed 13 May 2025).

[33] European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights (ESOHR), *100 Executions Since the Beginning of 2025: Saudi Arabia Is Killing a Person Almost Every Day*, 2025, https://www.esohr.org/en/100-%d8%a5%d8%b9%d8%af%d8%a7%d9%85-%d9%85%d9%86%d8%b0-%d8%a8%d8%af%d8%a7%d9%8a%d8%a9-2025-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b3%d8%b9%d9%88%d8%af%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d8%aa%d9%82%d8%aa%d9%84-%d8%b4%d8%ae%d8%b5%d8%a7-%d9%83/ (accessed 13 May 2025).

mechanisms. Above all, it requires a principled commitment to ensuring that all Saudi citizens, regardless of their sectarian identity, enjoy the rights to worship, speak, work, and live with dignity.

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