




# TABOO OF ATHEISM IN SAUDI ARABIA

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 Von Martin

 Kommentieren

*by Hakim Khatib*

Atheism remains one of the most extreme taboos in Saudi Arabia. It is a red line that no one can cross. Atheists in Saudi Arabia have been suffering from imprisonment, marginalisation, slander, ostracisation and even execution. Indeed, atheists in Saudi are considered terrorists. Efforts for normalisation between those who believe and those who don't remain bleak in the kingdom.

Despite constant warnings of Saudi religious authorities of "the danger of atheism", which is, according to them, "equal to disbelieving in God", many citizens in the kingdom are turning their back on Islam. Perhaps inter alia the Saudi dehumanising strict laws in the name of Islam, easy access to information and mass communication are the primary driving

forces pushing Saudis to leave religion. Unfortunately, those who explicitly do, find themselves harshly punished or forced to live dual lives.



## UNFAIR TRIALS AND ATHEISTS

Just recently Saudi Arabia has **sentenced** another atheist to death for uploading a video renouncing Islam.

The man has been identified as Ahmad Al-Shamri, in his 20s, from the town of Hafar Al-Batin, a village located in Saudi Arabia's eastern Province. In his video, Al-Shamri renounces Islam and makes disparaging remarks about the prophet Muhammad.

**Saudi** authorities first picked him up in 2014 after he uploaded a series of videos reflecting his views on social media, which led to him being charged with "atheism and blasphemy".

While leaving Islam is punishable by death in Saudi Arabia, the country's Supreme Court, ruled against Al-Shamri on 25 April 2017, effectively sending him to his death. Court proceedings could last for months but when it comes to blasphemy, atheism or homosexuality, the sentence is more likely to be known beforehand.

Riyadh introduced a series of laws in 2014 criminalising those who spread "atheist thought" or question the

“fundamentals of the Islamic religion”. According to [Amnesty International Global Report](#) on death sentences and executions, Saudi Arabia has scored 154+ executions, in which “death penalty was imposed after proceedings that did not meet international fair trial standards”.

[In January 2017](#), an unnamed Yemeni man living in Saudi Arabia reportedly was charged with apostasy and sentenced to 21 years in prison for insulting Islam on his Facebook page.

[In November 2016](#), Indian migrant worker Shankar Ponnampalappil reportedly was sentenced to four months in prison and a fine of 1,195 € for sharing a picture of the Hindu god Shiva sitting atop the Kaaba on Facebook.

[In November 2015](#), Palestinian poet and artist Ashraf Fayadh was sentenced to death for apostasy for allegedly questioning religion and spreading atheist thought in his poetry. His sentence was reduced to eight years in prison and 800 lashes to be administered on 16 occasions.

[In 2014](#), Raif Badawi was also convicted of blasphemy for creating a website dedicated to fostering debate on religion and politics. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1000 lashes.

[In 2012](#), the journalist Hamza Kashgari was accused of blasphemy after he posted a string of tweets. He was

captured in Malaysia and brought back to the kingdom. No further information about his case has surfaced since.

## **ATHEISTS ARE TERRORISTS**

In 2014, Saudi Arabia introduced a series of new laws in the form of royal decrees, which define atheists as terrorists. The new royal provisions **define terrorism** as “calling for atheist thought in any form, or calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion on which Saudi Arabia is based”.

Conflating atheism and terrorism has become **official** in Saudi Arabia, by which nonbelievers who commit “thought crimes” are the same as violent terrorists.

**Article 4** of the kingdom’s laws on terrorism states: “Anyone who aids [“terrorist”] organisations, groups, currents [of thought], associations, or parties, or demonstrates affiliation with them, or sympathy with them, or promotes them, or holds meetings under their umbrella, either inside or outside the kingdom; this includes participation in audio, written, or visual media; social media in its audio, written, or visual forms; internet websites; or circulating their contents in any form, or using slogans of these groups and currents [of thought], or any symbols which point to support or sympathy with them.”

In a program named “UpFront” on Al Jazeera America, Saudi Ambassador to the UN, Abdallah Al-Mouallimi explains why advocating atheism in Saudi Arabia is considered a terrorist offence.

Al-Mouallimi says that atheists are deemed terrorists in his country because in Saudi Arabia, “we are a unique country”.

“We are the birthplace of Islam,” he adds. “We are the country that hosts the two holiest sites for Muslims in Mecca and Medina. We are the country that is based on Islamic principles and so forth. We are a country that is homogeneous in accepting Islam by the entire population. Any calls that challenge Islamic rule or Islamic ideology is considered subversive in Saudi Arabia and would be subversive and could lead to chaos.”

“If he [an atheist] was disbelieving in God, and keeping that to himself, and conducting himself, nobody would do anything or say anything about it. If he is going out in the public, and saying, ‘I don’t believe in God’, that’s subversive. He is inviting others to retaliate,” Al-Mouallimi elaborates.

## **COUNTER MEASURES**

**President of the Centre for Middle East Studies** in Riyadh Anwar Al-Ashqi does not see the authorities’ adoption of these laws as suppression of freedoms. While he believes that atheism, as an independent thought is positive, it may

become negative and require legal accountability if it aims to transform the traditional nature of the Saudi society, which instigates communal strife and challenges religion. The state in this case, **according to him**, “has the right to outlaw this type of atheism and declare it as an aspect of terrorism”.

Similar to other Gulf States, Saudi Arabia **perceives atheism as a threat** that should be eliminated. Thus, there have been several conferences, trainings and **workshops** in recent years aimed at “immunising society, especially the youth, against atheistic ideas”. Saudi Arabia has established **Yaqeen Centre at The Al-Madina University Department of the Study of Faith and Religions**. Yaqeen Centre, which means “certainty”, is specialised in combating atheistic and non-religious tendencies. The centre’s vision is “to achieve leadership in countering atheism and non-religiosity locally and globally”. Activities of this centre remain unknown.

In October 2016, the Saudi Ministry of Education **launched a government program** called “Immunity” in schools to “inoculate” children against Westernisation, atheism, liberalism and secularism.

## **ATHEISTS IN THE KINGDOM?**

In 2012, a poll by **WIN-Gallup International** (Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism) found that almost a quarter of people interviewed in Saudi Arabia described themselves as “not religious” and of those 5 to 9% declared themselves to

be convinced atheists. **Extrapolating** that figure on a national scale suggests there are about 1.4 million atheists living in Saudi Arabia. This of course excludes all work migrants from different parts of the world, who might be already nonbelievers.

The percentage of people who believe they are “convinced atheists” is the highest in Saudi Arabia among all Arabic-speaking countries. This percentage is the highest in comparison to Arab countries, even those known for their secular leanings such as Tunisia and Lebanon.

However, these figures contradict the ones released by the Egyptian Fatwa observatory of **Dar al-Iftaa Al-Missriyyah** in 2014, in which only 174 atheists are thought to be living in Saudi Arabia. It remains mysterious how this number could be this accurate.

Scientifically speaking, there are no official figures about the number of atheists in Saudi Arabia because it is very difficult to conduct a research about such a sensitive topic. However, there are several pages for atheists sweeping the Internet such as “**Saudis Without Religion**”, “**Spreading Atheism in Saudi**”, and “**Saudi Secular**”, which indicate that there is some “atheist” activities despite all restrictions. It is difficult to determine whether these pages operate from within the kingdom or from outside.

On Twitter, the most widely used site in Saudi Arabia, over **20,000 Saudis** reacted to topics related to the spread of atheism in Saudi Arabia. Voices advocating the rights of atheists appeared only very rarely compared to the ones affirming demanding persecution of atheists in the kingdom.

It must be noted that most accounts in Saudi Arabia hide behind fake names to avoid prosecution. A Saudi young man, 28, has been **sentenced** to 10 years in prison, 2,000 lashes and 4,780 € fine after being convicted of publishing more than 600 atheist tweets.

Many Saudis say the presence of atheists in Saudi Arabia is like any other country, but their number in the kingdom is negligible compared to millions of Saudis who are adherents of Islam as a religion and as a law applied by their state in the finest details of life.

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