

## STATE RELIGIOUS POLICIES AND THE EMERGENCE OF ATHEISM IN SAUDI ARABIA, 2000–2022

Yuangga Kurnia Yahya<sup>1\*</sup>, Umi Mahmudah<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Universitas Darussalam Gontor, Indonesia

\*Corresponding author: [yuangga4@unida.gontor.ac.id](mailto:yuangga4@unida.gontor.ac.id)

### ABSTRACT

**Keywords:**  
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muslim country;  
Saudi.

In 2018, the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) reported that nine of the ten least atheist-friendly countries are Muslim-majority states, with the death penalty for apostasy and atheism cited as a key indicator. Despite such restrictions, surveys have suggested the presence of atheist identities in Saudi Arabia, although these figures are likely underestimated due to fear of persecution. This study examines the trajectories of conversion from Islam to atheism in a Muslim-majority country that applies Islamic law, focusing on Saudi Arabia during the period 2000–2022. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research relies on document analysis of state policies, international reports on religious freedom, and the writings of Abdullah al-Qasimi as a representative intellectual case. The findings indicate that restrictive religious governance, social control, and exposure to alternative ideas—particularly through digital media—contribute to the emergence of religious doubt and the formation of atheist identities among segments of Saudi society. The study also shows that strong religious socialization, combined with perceived injustice and limitations on freedom of belief, may intensify skepticism toward religious authority. These results suggest that discriminatory state policies may unintentionally foster intellectual resistance and curiosity toward atheistic ideas. By linking state policy, social conditions, and intellectual transformation, this study contributes to the sociology of religion by offering a new perspective on how structural constraints within highly conservative Islamic states shape trajectories toward atheism.

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### المخلص

في عام ٢٠١٨، أفاد الاتحاد الدولي للإنسانيين والأخلاقيين (IHEU) بأن تسعاً من الدول العشر الأقل ترحيباً بالملحدين هي دول ذات أغلبية مسلمة، مع الإشارة إلى عقوبة الإعدام للردة والإلحاد كمؤشر رئيسي. ورغم هذه القيود، أشارت استطلاعات الرأي إلى وجود هويات ملحدة في المملكة العربية السعودية، إلا أن هذه الأرقام يُرجح أن تكون أقل من الواقع بسبب الخوف من الاضطهاد. تتناول هذه الدراسة مسارات التحول من الإسلام إلى الإلحاد في دولة ذات أغلبية مسلمة تطبق الشريعة الإسلامية، مع التركيز على المملكة العربية السعودية خلال الفترة ٢٠٠٠-٢٠٢٢. وباستخدام منهج دراسة الحالة النوعية، يعتمد البحث على تحليل وثائق سياسات الدولة، والتقارير الدولية المتعلقة بالحرية الدينية، وكتابات عبد الله القاسمي كحالة فكرية نموذجية. وتشير النتائج إلى أن الحوكمة الدينية التقييدية، والرقابة الاجتماعية، والتعرض للأفكار البديلة - لا سيما عبر وسائل الإعلام الرقمية - تسهم في ظهور الشك الديني وتكوين الهويات الملحدة بين شرائح المجتمع السعودي. تظهر الدراسة أيضاً أن التنشئة الدينية القوية، إلى جانب الشعور بالظلم والقيود

المفروضة على حرية المعتقد، قد تفاقم الشكوك تجاه السلطة الدينية. وتشير هذه النتائج إلى أن سياسات الدولة التمييزية قد تعزز، دون قصد، المقاومة الفكرية والفضول تجاه الأفكار الإلحادية. ومن خلال ربط سياسة الدولة والظروف الاجتماعية والتحول الفكري، تسهم هذه الدراسة في علم اجتماع الدين بتقديم منظور جديد حول كيفية تأثير القيود الهيكلية داخل الدول الإسلامية المحافظة على مسارات التوجه نحو الإلحاد.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the global religious landscape has undergone significant transformation, particularly in the growth of non-religious identities. The Pew Research Center projects that religious switching, rather than fertility or migration, will become a major driver of religious change worldwide, with the number of people identifying as non-religious continuing to increase toward 2050 (Pew Research Center, 2015). This trend is also visible in the Middle East and North Africa; a region commonly associated with strong religious adherence and the institutional role of Islam in public life. Although the growth rate of atheism in this region remains lower than population growth, the emergence of religious doubt and non-affiliation has attracted increasing scholarly attention (Pew Research Center, 2015; The Arda, 2021b).

The phenomenon becomes especially intriguing in Muslim-majority countries where religion is closely intertwined with state authority. In many of these countries, religious identity is not merely a private matter but a legal and social obligation. Saudi Arabia represents one of the most prominent examples of such a context. As the home of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and a state governed by Islamic law derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah, Saudi Arabia is widely perceived as a symbolic representation of Islamic governance (Akbar, 2018; The Embassy of KSA, 2022). In this system, atheism and apostasy are formally prohibited and may be associated with serious legal and social consequences, including criminal sanctions and social exclusion (Khatib, 2017; Nelson, 2014). Consequently, Saudi Arabia has often been classified as one of the least favorable environments for atheists according to international reports on freedom of belief (IHEU, 2018).

Despite these restrictions, various surveys indicate the presence of atheist and non-religious identities in Saudi Arabia, although the exact numbers remain difficult to determine due to fear of persecution and social stigma. A WIN/Gallup poll in 2012 reported that approximately 19% of respondents in Saudi Arabia identified as having no religion, with around 5% describing themselves as atheists (WIN-Gallup International, 2012a). Other estimates vary significantly: the Pew Research Center reported that approximately 0.7% of the population identified as atheist or religiously unaffiliated. Other estimates vary significantly: the Pew Research Center reported that approximately 0.7% of the population identified as atheist or religiously unaffiliated (Pew Research Center, 2015), while the World Population Review suggested that up to 24% of the population may not be affiliated with any religion (World Population Review, 2021). These discrepancies reflect the sensitivity of the issue and the risks associated with openly declaring atheism in a highly regulated religious environment (Whitaker, 2014).

The existence of irreligion in such a restrictive setting raises an important analytical question: why do atheist identities continue to emerge in societies where religious norms are strongly enforced? This paradox suggests that restrictive religious governance and strong social control may produce unintended consequences, including skepticism toward religious authority and curiosity about alternative belief systems. In this context, religious change cannot be explained solely by individual factors but must also consider structural conditions, particularly the role of the state.

Previous studies have explored the development of atheism in different socio-political contexts. Smith (2011) and Ledrew (2013) provide important groundwork in understanding the trajectories of conversion to atheism, emphasizing the role of socialization and personal background. Brunn and Gilbreath (2016) notes that atheism has historically developed in contexts characterized by strong ideological or political control, such as communist and socialist states. Similarly, research conducted by Coleman (Coleman, 2000) in the Soviet Union and Rimmel (2016) in Estonia demonstrates that state policies and ideological regulation can significantly influence the growth of atheism. In Muslim-majority contexts, Kasapoglu (2017) and Azak (2018) show that the close relationship between religion and the state in Turkey contributed to the emergence of atheist movements in the public sphere, while Richter (2021) identifies similar patterns among young people in Morocco. Related studies in the Arab world have also documented the presence of irreligion and religious skepticism in contemporary Muslim societies (Al Hariri et al., 2019; Azedi, 2025; Elsässer, 2025; Yahya, 2022), as well as in the longer historical development of Muslim communities (Coury, 2018; Schielke, 2012).

While previous studies have examined the relationship between state policy and the development of atheism in various contexts, limited attention has been given to how restrictive religious governance in highly conservative Islamic states shapes individual trajectories toward atheism. Most existing research focuses on social, cultural, or economic factors, while the role of the state as a central explanatory variable remains underexplored, particularly in the context of Saudi Arabia. This study addresses that gap by examining the correlation between discriminatory state policies and the emergence of atheist identities in Saudi Arabia during the period 2000–2022.

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This study employs a qualitative case study approach to analyze the relationship between state policy and the emergence of atheism in a Muslim-majority society (Yin, 1994). The analysis relies on document-based sources, including government regulations, international reports on religious freedom, academic literature, and statistical surveys on religiosity. The data are examined through qualitative thematic analysis focusing on three main dimensions: state regulation of religion, socio-cultural conditions shaping religious identity, and intellectual critiques of religious authority. In interpreting the role of social interaction and media exposure, the study also draws on Social Learning Theory, which suggests that individuals acquire beliefs and behaviors through observation and interaction within their social environment (Bandura, 1977).

By linking state policy, social conditions, and intellectual transformation, this study contributes to the sociology of religion and the study of irreligion by offering an alternative perspective on how restrictive governance in conservative religious states may unintentionally stimulate religious doubt, intellectual resistance, and the emergence of atheist identities.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### State policies and religious governance in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia represents a political system in which religion and state authority are closely interconnected. The country adopts Islamic law derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah as the basis of governance, making religious identity a central element of citizenship and public life (The Embassy of KSA, 2022). This institutional arrangement has produced a regulatory framework that strongly controls religious expression and limits alternative belief systems.

One of the most visible manifestations of this framework is the establishment of institutions responsible for monitoring religious conformity, including the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPPVV), commonly known as the religious police. This institution has the authority to supervise social behavior and enforce religious norms in accordance with the state's interpretation of Islamic law (United States Department of State, 2011). Legal provisions reinforce these controls. In 2014, the Saudi government introduced regulations that classified atheism as a form of extremism, effectively placing non-belief within the category of national security threats (Khatib, 2017; Nelson, 2014). Therefore, atheism in Saudi Arabia is a very taboo and forbidden thing. This country, which is in the form of an absolute monarchy and is based on the Qur'an and Sunnah, even labels atheists as terrorists (Nelson, 2014). The decision is embodied in a law passed by King Abdullah in 2014. In fact, providing advocacy assistance to atheists is also included in the form of acts of theory and resistance to the kingdom (Khatib, 2017). One of their arguments is the fatwa that apostasy (leaving from Islam) is a major sin and their blood is lawful to kill (IHEU, 2018).

Despite the introduction of social reforms under the Saudi Vision 2030 program, the legal status of atheism has not substantially changed. Freedom of religious expression remains restricted, and public expressions of disbelief continue to be subject to legal and social sanctions (USCIRF, 2022). These conditions illustrate how state policies continue to define the limits of religious identity in Saudi Arabia.

### The increasing number of atheists

To contextualize the Saudi case, comparative quantitative data from other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries were examined to assess whether the relationship between economic prosperity and the emergence of atheism is unique to Saudi Arabia or reflects a broader regional pattern. Several international surveys indicate that non-religious identities are present across wealthy Gulf states, although the proportion varies depending on legal restrictions, social norms, and levels of public expression.

Available estimates suggest that Saudi Arabia shows relatively higher reported levels of atheism or religious non-affiliation compared to neighbouring Gulf countries. However, the presence of non-religious individuals is not exclusive to Saudi Arabia. Countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman despite having high GDP per capita also report measurable levels of irreligion. These findings indicate that economic prosperity alone does not automatically produce higher levels of atheism. Instead, the interaction between wealth, state regulation of religion, social control, and access to global information appears to shape the visibility and development of atheist identities in the Gulf region. This comparative perspective supports the argument that while modernization and economic growth may create structural conditions for religious questioning, the intensity of state policy and religious governance remains a critical factor influencing the trajectory of atheism in Muslim-majority societies.

Tabel 1. Atheism/Religious Non-Affiliation in Gulf Countries

No.	Country	Estimated GDP per Capita (USD)	Estimated % Non-Religious / Atheist	Religious Regulation Level
1	Saudi Arabia	27,000	0.7% - 5% (up to 24% unaffiliated)	Very High
2	Uni Arab Emirates	49,000	3% - 7%	High
3	Kuwait	32,000	2% - 5%	High
4	Qatar	60,000	1% - 3%	High
5	Bahrain	28,000	1% - 2%	Moderate High
6	Oman	21,000	<1% - 2%	High

Note: Atheism / Religious Non-Affiliation in Gulf Countries (Pew Research Center, 2015; The Arda, 2021a, 2021b; WIN-Gallup International, 2012b)

The comparative data in Table 1 show that the existence of atheism or religious non-affiliation is observable across wealthy Gulf societies, but the magnitude and visibility differ significantly. Saudi Arabia appears to display a relatively higher reported level of atheist identity compared to neighbouring states, which may be associated not only with economic conditions but also with stricter religious governance and stronger social control mechanisms. This finding suggests that the relationship between prosperity and atheism in the Gulf region is conditional rather than deterministic.

Various surveys indicate a growing presence of irreligion in Saudi Arabia. A WIN/Gallup poll in 2012 reported that 19% of respondents no longer identified with any religion and about 5% described themselves as atheists (WIN-Gallup International, 2012b). Other studies present varying estimates: Pew Research Center (2015) found that around 0.7% of the population identified as atheist or religiously unaffiliated, while a 2021 survey suggested that up to 24% of Saudis may not be affiliated with any religion (World Population Review, 2021). These discrepancies are unsurprising given the sensitive nature of the issue. Many individuals prefer to remain publicly affiliated with Islam to retain their social and legal rights, while openly declaring atheism may expose them to severe social stigma, legal punishment, or even violence (Whitaker, 2014). In Muslim-majority societies, irreligion is often perceived as a violation of social norms and may lead to ostracism from family and community, prompting many atheists to conceal their beliefs in public life (Fisher, 2012a; Hayward, 2019a; Schielke, 2012).

However, one thing that is certain is that atheists in Saudi, although structurally and administratively do not exist, in fact they do exist. For their own safety, they prefer to keep their identity a secret from their surroundings. One of these indicators is in data from The Arda, atheists in Saudi are experiencing an increasing trend. Although only a small percentage, but as noted above, the number who dare to declare themselves as an atheist is increasing in number.

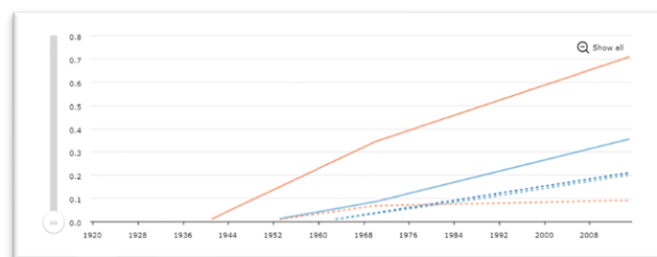


Figure 1. Graphics of Atheists in Saudi Arabia, the red line is the number of atheists (The Arda, 2021a)

From the graph in Figure 1, the number of atheists tends to increase from time to time. The percentage of atheists is under Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism. Christian and Hinduism itself is not embraced by Saudi citizens, but the religion of the newcomers and migrants who work and settle in Saudi. Based on this data, atheism indirectly becomes the second belief held by genuine Saudis. Most of them have converted from Islam to become atheists or do not believe in any religion.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia also has the highest number of atheists among Middle Eastern countries. This data can be seen in maps created by the Independent (Staufenberg, 2016) and the Sarajevo Times (TheSrpskaTimes, 2018). Both maps show that Saudi Arabia has the highest atheist population among all Middle Eastern countries, or even Muslim-majority countries, with figures ranging from 5% to 10% in the Independent and 5% to 9% in the Sarajevo Times.

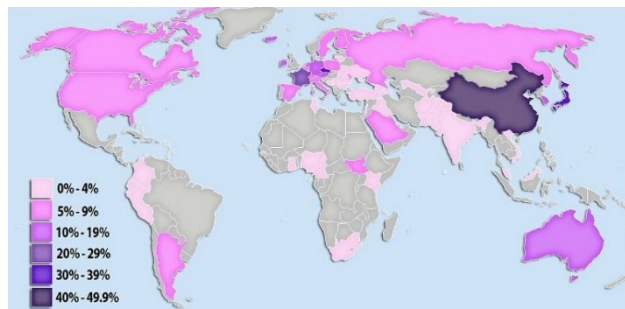


Figure 2. Map of the world's atheist population (TheSrpskaTimes, 2018)

As shown in Figure 2, the increase in the number of atheists in Saudi Arabia is a unique phenomenon. In his research, Inglehart (2021) concludes that the more prosperous a country is, which is indicated by a large income and per-capita income, the greater the potential for its population to become atheists. Conversely, the smaller a country's income and low economic growth, the more religious the population is (Inglehart, 2021). Inglehart makes an exception for wealthy Muslim countries. According to him, Muslim-majority countries have become rich without going through the process of modernization, industrialization, improving the quality of education, job specialization, and developing technology, but because of their abundant natural resources in the form of gas and oil. This is what keeps these countries from being included in the category of prosperous countries and has the potential to become increasingly atheist. Instead, the wealth is monopolized by the regime and the elite for one-sided gain. This makes Inglehart include these countries in the category of countries that have low survival prospects (Inglehart, 2021).

Overall, the Saudi economy is good and growing thanks to natural resources. Saudi Arabia's Nominal GDP was reported at 252.0 USD bn in 2022 (month 03). This record is up from the previous 227.9 USD bn for 2021 (12 months) (CEIC, 2022). Apart from oil, Saudi income also comes from foreign exchange earned from Muslims who perform Hajj. Since 2008, Saudi Arabia has been a member of the G-20, an elite collaboration that represents 60% of the Earth's population, 75% of global trade, and 80% of world GDP. The 20 members of the G-20 are the countries with the highest economic levels and the fastest economic growth. Saudi itself is a group of 10 countries with the largest wealth in the world (Saudi Gazette, 2019).

However, changes in socio-political conditions affect the religious pattern of Saudi society. The style of traditionalist society is gradually changing. The digital era has made information from outside of Saudi Arabia accessible to many Saudis, who on the other hand are dominated by the productive age population. More than 67% of the total Saudi

population belongs to the productive age group (1-34 years). This figure is also supported by the number of Saudis who use social media, which reaches 98.43% of the total population (GASTAT, 2020). This makes young Saudis have access to information from abroad, so that the social situation of society is no longer at the traditional level.

Apart from advances in information technology, another factor that is changing the landscape of Saudi society in accepting modernization from the outside is the proclamation of Saudi Vision 2030. In this vision, Prince Muhammad bin Salman declared Saudi Arabia to be a global investment center and a link between three continents, namely Asia, Africa and Europe (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2016). This has opened the contact and encounter of Saudi youth with ideas around modernization, including atheism.

Saudi Arabia's closedness from the outside world has given rise to culture-shock when it meets the outside world (the others). In particular, the closedness in meeting with different parties from diverse religious backgrounds will result in a lack of confidence and lack of ability to adapt. These different perspectives, from traditional and imprisoned society in conservative religious views, authoritarian governments, and exclusive traditions towards more free and global associations, give rise to doubts and loss of self-confidence. In fact, not a few of them have lost their faith. The more conservative and isolated the community in which individuals live, the greater the culture-shock they will encounter when hanging out in the real world (Ezzi, 2014). The next section will try to see how the culture-shock forms, which gives rise to the tendency to become atheists.

### **The formation of atheist identity in Saudi Arabia: Insights from 'Abd Allāh al-Qāsimī**

The 'Abd Allāh al-Qāsimī (sometimes spelled al-Quṣaymī) is a thinker born in Najed, Saudi Arabia who has been dubbed the 'Father of Gulf Arab Atheism' (Al-Qurtuby, 2020). He is known to be quite controversial because he changed paths of thought, from being initially conservative in *salaḥī* style to being a defender of free thought (liberal) and skepticism towards Islam. He wrote many works. One of his controversial works that has invited many responses is *Hādhihi Hiya al-Aghlāl (These Are the Chains)* (1948).

In that book, he described some of the shackles that made him decide to become an atheist. 'Abd Allāh al-Qāsimī initially emerged as a committed *wahhābī* scholar who strongly supported the religious reform movement in Saudi Arabia. However, over time, his expectations that religious reform would lead to social progress gradually faded, marking the beginning of his intellectual transformation toward skepticism (Al-Qasimy, 1931, 1936). However, over time, the optimism and hope that hung in the revolution began to fade. The thing that makes him optimistic is the great desire of Muslims, especially in Saudi, to progress and develop into big countries in the world. As happened to many Islamic countries in the early twentieth century which experienced a decline, the same thing happened to Saudi Arabia. Al-Qāsimī hopes that with the revolution, Saudi Arabia can develop into developed countries such as Europe, Japan, and so on (Al-Qasimy, 2000a). In fact, in the years since the revolution, Saudi Arabia has not experienced significant changes. The country is still static and far from prosperous. This is where Al-Qāsimī began to feel disappointment and doubt about Arab culture, kingdoms, religious institutions, the Prophets, even God.

According to him, Saudi Arabia with the identity of the Arab thinking style and the implementation of Islam as it has been running in the country, will find it difficult to move forward. The political alliance between the *Āl Sa'ūd* and *wahhābī* families in the socio-political field is a step backwards (Al-Qasimy, 2000a). Both keep Saudi society closed from the outside world and far from freedom. In Al-Qāsimī's perspective, the limitation and application of various strict regulations is actually a denial of the potential of human reason. Humans, with their minds, are creatures of God who are able to process and develop to be

extraordinary, even surpassing angels. He emphasized this by referring to the dialogue that took place between Allah, the Angels, and Ādam in the Qur’ān (Al-Qasimy, 2000a). The regulations applied in Saudi do not provide space for human reason to be free in determining the way of life, including choosing beliefs. The various punishments and persecutions for those who convert to religions other than Islam are examples (Al-Qasimy, 2001a). Coury (2018) mentioned that in these works, Al-Qāsimī highlighted Muslims who according to him are fatalistic and ascetic, refuse to study, and fearful of worldly success. This is what allows foreign parties to seize Arab freedom and egalitarianism. This work received fierce criticism in one hand, but on the other hand it also awakened Arab minds that were sleeping from various technological advances and civilizations (Coury, 2018).

Al-Qāsimī argued that although Islam theoretically respects reason, in practice it often limits its development, a condition he described as the “infantile phase of reason” (Wasella, 2001). For him, reason should hold a more central role than religious authority. He observed that religion is commonly regarded as the source of moral values, yet in the Muslim world—particularly in Saudi Arabia—he found a different reality: many individuals appeared religious in belief but behaved immorally in daily life (Al-Qasimy, 1967, 2001b). Conversely, he noted that individuals without religious affiliation could display strong moral conduct. In his view, certain religious doctrines practiced in society also hindered social progress, as they often glorified poverty, suffering, and asceticism, drawing inspiration from the lives of prophets and religious figures who distanced themselves from worldly life (Al-Qasimy, 2000b; 2001b). He interpreted this as a form of false hope that encouraged believers to accept hardship rather than strive for prosperity and development, which he believed contributed to the stagnation of Arab societies in the modern world (Al-Qasimy, 1940).

Al-Qāsimī further argued that these problems were intensified by the treatment of women within Arab religious and cultural traditions. In his view, the social construction of Saudi society often placed women in a subordinate position, treating them more as commodities than as equal members of society (Al-Qasimy, 2000b). Patriarchal norms, which he believed were legitimized through religious interpretations, imposed strict limitations on women’s roles, including restrictions on education, mobility, self-expression, and property rights. For Al-Qāsimī, such practices represented a denial of the fundamental principle of human equality before God and reflected broader structural constraints that hindered intellectual freedom and social progress.

Smith (2011) in his research describes the stages in the construction of atheist identity in America. He suggested that there are 4 stages that a person goes through when changing beliefs from adherents of a religion (theism) to become an atheist. The four stages are belief in God, questioning the concept of God, rejecting the concept of God, and declaring oneself an atheist (Smith, 2011). In his research, Smith explained that the second stage, namely questioning the concept of God slowly emerged when a child in America left home and entered the world of college. Some of the brands are inspired by “New Atheism” figures such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens or from their atheism-affiliated lecturers (Smith, 2011; Taira, 2016). The various issues raised by these writers seem to have influenced the mindset of the teenagers and made their distrust of their religion more real before finally deciding to reject their belief in religion. The same thing is reinforced by Stolz et al’s research on the three stages of religious decline, which begin by decline in ritual practices, decline in the importance of religion, and ultimately loss of religious affiliation (Stolz et al., 2025).

A similar pattern was found in Saudi youth, including Al-Qāsimī. Those who are accustomed to living in a strict and conservative environment in religion, will experience culture-shock when they meet other cultures from fellow Islamic countries. Moreover, with wide internet access and reaching various regions on Earth, they will feel that the existing regulations in their country and environment so far are different from the implementation

in other countries. This is where they start to have doubts. Fahd al-Fahd, a human rights activist, for example, said that Saudis are starting to get fed up with how religion controls their lives and only accept a single interpretation of Islamic teachings (Murphy, 2014). The same thing was also expressed by Jābir who began to question why music is forbidden and why women are required to wear the veil (Fisher, 2012b). Mohammed also questioned why the regulations applied, especially to women, were very strict and limited their mobility. Women must wear closed clothes and are not allowed to visit each other's houses or travel to the bazaar and its surroundings without being accompanied by a mahram (Mohammed, 2022). The same idea that prompted Rana Ahmad to decide to flee Saudi (VICE Asia, 2018). The three informants above are Saudi citizens who have declared themselves to be atheists. Mohammed herself has left Saudi Arabia and became a Canadian citizen (Mohammed, 2022). Besides Mohammed, Rana Ahmad also decided to become an atheist and left Saudi Arabia, currently become a German citizen (Hayward, 2019b). These various restrictions on women later became an important focus in Saudi Vision 2030 transformation (Sholihah et al., 2023).

Another factor that makes them doubt religious teachings is the repression by state and religious institutions. This idea was expressed by *Secular Humanism* in describing the growth of atheism among Saudi society (Wallace, 2020). Iman Willoughby, a Saudi atheist who currently lives in Canada, revealed that the second factor after doubting the application of Islam in Saudi is the oppression faced and felt by Saudi society and in the name of religion (Benchemsi, 2015). Moreover, the various *fatwas* issued by the *ulama* were all in order to justify and legitimize the oppression carried out by the government. The various *fatwas* issued did not favor the lower middle class and did not reduce the oppression they had experienced so far (Murphy, 2014). Therefore, 'Umar Hādī, in the Atheist Alliance stated that from the results of the survey above, it is possible to have more numbers in the field because of the disappointment and dislike of Saudi citizens towards the state and religious institutions (AAI, 2018). 'Abd Allāh al-Qāsimī also mentioned these two factors several decades ago. He stated that religion without morality and restrictions on women's rights were a setback that was preserved by the Arabs and got its legitimacy from Islamic scholars in the name of religion (Al-Qasimy, 2001a). These two things will make Saudi Arabia and in general the Arab nation increasingly lagging behind other civilizations that prioritize human reason and morals (Al-Qasimy, 2000a).

The same thing was also found in research conducted by Schielke in Egypt. Based on the interview results, Schielke concluded that there are two main issues that trigger someone to leave their religion and become an atheist. First, they feel that the Muslim community they encounter is full of hypocrisy, contradictions, and rejection of serious discussions about religion based on reason and scientific arguments. Second, the issues of justice and injustice have a key role in the inconvenience of embracing religion. This injustice can appear in the form of issues of gender equality, war, social inequality, and inconsistencies in the behavior of religious people (Schielke, 2012). These various things are also found in other studies which show a decline in religiosity in the Arab world and an increase in the choice to be irreligious or non-religious (Azedi, 2025; Elsässer, 2025; Yahya, 2022).

At this stage, they usually separate themselves from their surroundings and form bonds with those of one idea and one mind. Al Hariri et al. show that social media helps atheists in the Middle East region to connect and dare to appear in cyberspace (Al Hariri et al., 2019). As the case raised in the research of Al Hariri et al., the narratives that are often displayed by atheists on social media are about science, a logical question, unveiling is not moral breakdown, and violence against Saudi Women. In addition, they also talked about free thinkers who were arrested and punished such as Rā'if Badawī, Dīnā 'Alī, Sharīf Jābir, Usāmah al-Jāmi', and 'Abd Allāh al-Qāsimī. Social media has played a crucial role in

facilitating interaction among individuals experiencing religious doubt. Online platforms enable users to share experiences, access alternative viewpoints, and build supportive communities that normalize non-religious identities (Al Hariri et al., 2019).

Themes such as violence and violence against women are also often the cause of someone leaving Islam. This is as stated in the books of *New Atheist* figures, such as *The End of Faith* written by Sam Harris in 2004, *The God Delusion* written by Richard Dawkins in 2006, and *God is Not Great* written by Christopher Hitchens in 2007. The three books have some common points of view in the reasons a person leaves his religion. First, religion is understood as a set of devices that enable religious people to know the existence of God. Second, those who commit violence in the name of religion and use religious teachings as legitimacy for their actions are really excessive. Third, they instill the mindset that religion poisons everything in this world. Various religious rules that make this world not beautiful (Taira, 2016). It was these themes that had previously been a source of anxiety for ‘Abd Allāh al-Qāsimī. This shows that the issues that lead Saudis towards atheism are the same thing in al-Qāsimī's era and this digital age, such as Jābir, Rana Ahmad, Rahaf Mohammed, and another atheist Saudis said. One of the biggest factors is how strict and rigid religious teachings are implemented in various aspects of Saudi life.

Several state policies have directly influenced the emergence of religious doubt in Saudi Arabia. The 2014 counter-terrorism law, which classifies atheism as a form of extremism, criminalizes non-belief and limits freedom of expression. Additionally, the enforcement of religious norms through state institutions reinforces ideological conformity. While intended to preserve religious order, these policies may unintentionally encourage resistance and skepticism, particularly among younger generations exposed to alternative perspectives.

LeDrew (2013), in his research, tried to see the path of someone becoming an atheist in Toronto and Montreal, Canada. He stated that those who came from religious families would enter a skeptical phase which then gave birth to doubts about their religion. The results of this study were corroborated by Cox & Thomson-DeVeaux's work (2019) which shows that young generations begin to show doubts about their religion after leaving home for work, study and other purposes. In this context, the state can be understood as a major socializing institution that shapes religious attitudes and identity formation. Religious teachings, state authority, and cultural norms collectively function as structural conditions that influence the development of skepticism and the transition toward atheism. The three factors are religious teachings, religious and state institutions, and culture and mindset. These three factors are not only found in real life, but also through interaction and obtaining information in cyberspace. When they begin to feel doubts and search for answers online, they connect with a community of similar anxieties. It is at this time that their doubts begin to peak and make them decide to become atheists, both openly, and in cyberspace, giving rise to the numbers shown in the various surveys and polling above. The spread of religious doubt can also be viewed as a social diffusion process in which ideas circulate through communication networks and media channels, gradually influencing individual beliefs and collective attitudes (Taskin & Lazebnik, 2026). In this context, religious doubt and the decision to embrace atheism in Saudi Arabia may spread through various media channels and are influenced by the factors discussed above.

The current socio-cultural setting in Saudi Arabia represents an important enabling condition for the growth of atheism. Rapid digitalization, widespread internet access, and generational change have increased exposure to diverse worldviews beyond state-sanctioned interpretations of religion. From the perspective of Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), individuals may adopt new beliefs through observation and interaction within online environments. These contemporary conditions do not merely accompany the phenomenon of atheism but actively facilitate its emergence by expanding access to information and reducing social isolation.

## CONCLUSION

The discussion demonstrates that strict state policies toward atheism in Saudi Arabia may unintentionally generate forms of resistance, particularly among younger generations who increasingly engage with alternative ideas through digital platforms. Exposure to diverse interpretations of religion in cyberspace, combined with conservative regulations and perceived limitations on human rights, freedom of expression, and women's rights, contributes to the emergence of religious doubt and identity questioning. These dynamics reflect patterns similar to those experienced by 'Abd Allāh al-Qāsimī, where dissatisfaction with institutional authority and social constraints fosters scepticism toward established religious norms. In this sense, the contemporary socio-political environment—characterized by strong religious governance alongside rapid technological connectivity—constitutes a structural condition that may support the gradual growth of atheism or non-religious identities in Saudi society. At the same time, recent reforms under Saudi Vision 2030 have introduced significant social and cultural changes, including greater public engagement, expanded digital access, and evolving discussions on religious and social norms. These ongoing transformations represent an important contextual factor shaping the future trajectory of belief and non-belief in the country. Therefore, further research is needed to systematically examine how these changing social conditions, state policies, and public discourses interact to influence religious identity formation and the potential expansion of atheism in contemporary Saudi Arabia.

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