

May 16, 2001: Commission Issues Reports on Egypt and Saudi Arabia

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom today issued an Addendum to its May 1, 2001 Annual Report containing chapters on Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The reports on the Middle Eastern countries were compiled following a Commission trip to the region in late March, too late for inclusion in the Annual Report itself. On Egypt, the Commission found that despite some positive developments, serious problems of discrimination against a number of religious groups - particularly Christians and Baha'is - remain widespread. In addition, the government maintains tight control over all Muslim religious institutions. The Commission recommended that the U.S. government (1) monitor closely the conditions of religious freedom in Egypt; (2) raise these issues prominently in bilateral relations with the Egyptian government, including at the highest levels; and (3) urge the Egyptian government to accelerate progress on addressing these issues and promoting the religious freedom of all Egyptians. Commissioner Nina Shea issued a concurring opinion with reservations. On Saudi Arabia, the Commission remains concerned over the extremely poor conditions of religious freedom there. As the State Department has bluntly summarized the situation in Saudi Arabia in its annual reports on international religious freedom: "Freedom of religion does not exist." The Commission recommended that the U.S. government: designate Saudi Arabia as a "country of particular concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act; consistently press the Saudi government to expand and safeguard the freedom to worship privately of non-Muslims and of those Muslims who do not follow the government's interpretation and presentation of Islam; including permission for clergy to enter the country and perform private religious services for Saudi residents; urge the Saudi government to engage in dialogue with the international leaders of those religious communities represented in Saudi Arabia; encourage the Saudi government to promote religious tolerance and respect toward all religions in their education system; urge the Saudi government to grant access to human rights reporters from international and non-governmental organizations and to journalists. The Commission also recommended that reports by the State Department on religious liberty in Saudi Arabia should reflect more accurately the extreme difficulties for religious believers there. Commissioners Theodore Cardinal McCarrick and David Saperstein issued concurring views. The Commission sees its study of the situation in Israel and the Occupied Territories as a complex matter requiring additional work. Commissioners did not feel they were ready to make formal recommendations. Commissioner Laila Al-Marayati issued a dissenting view. The full text of the reports, recommendations, and individual opinions can be found on the Commission Web site at www.uscirf.gov or can be obtained by calling the Communications office at (202) 523-3240.

Hon. Elliott Abrams, Chair

- Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh, Vice Chair Rabbi David Saperstein Laila Al-Marayati, M.D. Hon. John R. Bolton Dean Michael K. Young Archbishop Theodore E. McCarrick Nina Shea Justice Charles Z. Smith Ambassador Robert Seiple, Ex-Officio Steven T. McFarland, Executive Director