

May 19, 2003: Tolerating Saudi Bigotry - The Washington Post

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May 19, 2003 WHEN THE STATE DEPARTMENT issued its list of countries "of particular concern for religious freedom" in March, the absence of Saudi Arabia from the rogues' gallery of persecutors stood out. America's favorite brutal, theocratic monarchy had escaped designation in the past as well, so it was not a surprise. Nor was the desert kingdom the only notable absence: Another ally, Uzbekistan, which systematically oppresses Muslims who don't toe the government's official line, also got left off the list. But Saudi Arabia's escape was particularly striking, given that the discussion of Saudi religious liberty in the State Department's human rights report begins with "freedom of religion does not exist." Last week, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom -- an independent bipartisan federal agency -- released its report on the state of religion in the kingdom. The report is a welcome rebuke to the department and rightly calls on the administration to add Saudi Arabia to its list. "How could a country where religious freedom does not exist fail to qualify for . . . designation?" the commission asks. In Saudi Arabia, no religion other than the officially sanctioned form of Islam may be practiced in public, and foreign Christians have been beaten or detained for long periods without charge or trial. Muslims who convert to other religions can be executed. In January, a Yemeni national received a death sentence for "insulting the religion of his roommate." His fate is "unknown." Shiites are discriminated against, and their clerics have been detained. Keeping a list of countries of "particular concern" makes no sense if Saudi Arabia is excluded for political reasons. The commission has recommended Saudi Arabia's designation before, to no avail. This time the State Department ought to listen. Leaving Saudi Arabia off the list year after year sends a message that such bigotry is tolerable in an ally. Better not to have a list at all than to have one so patently dishonest.