

October 11, 2002: A State of Denial - Wall Street Journal

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October 11, 2002 Behold the bracing clarity of a simple declarative sentence. "Freedom of religion does not exist." The reference is to Saudi Arabia, and the sentence comes from the State Department's just-released index of religious freedom. So far so good. But the grim assessment raises a question: If Saudi Arabia has no freedom of religion, and if punishment for those outside the Wahhabi fold includes arrest and credible reports of torture, why has the State Department not designated Saudi Arabia one of its "countries of particular concern"?

After all, this is the same country where, during the first Gulf War, President Bush Sr. was forced to go offshore to a Thanksgiving prayer service with U.S. troops there, lest Saudi sensibilities be offended. Nor is it just Christians and Jews: The country's Shiite Muslim minority also suffers discrimination, harassment and imprisonment. For all these reasons, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (set up by the same law that requires the State Department to produce its religious-freedom index) has now, for the third straight year, asked the State Department to put Saudi Arabia on the official blacklist.

Why hasn't it been? When the question was put this week to John Hanford, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom, he said that it was "a tough call," admitted that Saudi Arabia is a problem but suggested that "you don't find the brutality on a regular basis" in Saudi Arabia that you do in other countries on the list. Must have been a great comfort to those Christians in Saudi jails who, according to a documentary earlier this year by Britain's Channel 4, were lashed by prison guards who urged them to confess to being priests and to convert to Islam. Nina Shea, who sits on the commission and runs the Center for Religious Freedom, isn't buying the State Department line. "The problem goes far deeper than persecution at home, because the Saudis are also exporting Wahhabi extremism abroad," Ms. Shea tells us. "And when we don't call them on it in our own reports, we just confirm to them that we are the bankrupt materialist culture they accuse us of being." In this post-9/11 world, we ought at least to have learned the consequences of not calling things by their rightful names. If the State Department is to have a list that designates countries as having "engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom," it ought to be an honest one. And it's hard to think of an honest list that wouldn't have Saudi Arabia near the top.