

## September 20, 2004: Saudis' Religious Rights - Kansas City Star

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September 20, 2004 The State Department was long overdue in placing Saudi Arabia on its list of countries that severely limit religious expression. The decision will be meaningless, however, if it is not accompanied by sanctions. Under a U.S. law passed in 1998, nations that severely restrict religious freedoms could be designated by the State Department as "countries of particular concern." But despite repeated recommendations by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and acknowledgements by the State Department of Saudi Arabia's religious intolerance, it has not made the concern list. Until now. In announcing this year's repressive countries, the State Department noted that Saudi laws mandate religious conformity. Non-Muslims and Muslims who do not practice the officially sanctioned strain of Islam routinely face discrimination, arrest and even imprisonment. In addition, the State Department noted the Saudi government's support for religious leaders who preach extremism and intolerance. Of equal concern was the export of hate speech to countries where religious freedom for Muslims is respected. The designation for Saudi Arabia is complicated by its role as a staunch ally of the United States in the Middle East and in the war on terror. And no country on the list since it was established has faced sanctions. But that should not stop the United States from using whatever diplomatic tools it has to move the Saudi government toward a more tolerant view of religious practices. Religious freedom should be seen as a universal right. The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 mandated advocating religious freedom as part of our foreign policy. The Bush administration should keep that in mind as it deals with Saudis and all of the countries on the intolerance list.