

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – A Saudi diplomat, who is seeking asylum in the United States, could very well face an extremely hostile and potentially life-threatening environment if he is returned to Saudi Arabia, cautioned the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) yesterday.

“The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has spent over 10 years studying conditions in Saudi Arabia, and there is no doubt that imprisonment, torture, cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment are very real possibilities if you publicly disagree with or criticize the country’s cultural and social policies, which are driven by particular, government-picked religious tenets,” said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. “There is no tolerance for views or beliefs outside the official line.”

Ali Ahmad Asseri, who has been the first secretary at the Saudi consulate in Los Angeles, has served in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for approximately 12 years. He claims that, at least in part, he was terminated from his job, and that the Saudi government refuses to renew his diplomatic passport, because he openly criticized the Saudi religious establishment on the Internet. According to published reports, Asseri does not subscribe to the official Saudi government view of Islam and his close friendship with a Jewish woman in Los Angeles has caused concern with Saudi consulate officials.

Asseri is openly gay, which, according to the U.S. Department of State, is punishable by flogging or death in Saudi Arabia. Earlier this year, USCIRF confirmed that textbooks posted on the Saudi Ministry of Education’s website continue to teach hatred toward faiths and beliefs other than the Saudi government-backed version of Islam, and, in some cases, actually promote violence. For example, tenth and twelfth grade school books justify killing a homosexual, an apostate, a polytheist, and an adulterer, and a ninth grade text teaches that “Jews and Christians are enemies of the believers....”

During the past year, there also were continued reports of virulently anti-Semitic sentiments expressed in the Kingdom’s official media and in sermons delivered by Saudi government-appointed clerics, who in some cases continue to pray for the death of Jews and Christians, despite having been disciplined for preaching extremist views.

“The Saudi government uses criminal charges of apostasy and criticizing the regime to silence dissidents and persists in severely restricting all forms of public religious expression, other than

the government's interpretation of its version of Sunni Islam. Promoters of political and human rights reforms, as well as those seeking to debate the appropriate role of religion in relation to the state and society, are typically the target of such charges," said Mr. Leo.

As recommended by USCIRF, Saudi Arabia has been designated a "country of particular concern," or CPC, by the U.S. Department of State for engaging in systematic and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief. Although so designated by the State Department since 2004, an indefinite waiver on taking any action as a consequence of the CPC designation has been in place since 2006. USCIRF has recommended that the U.S. government should lift the indefinite waiver of action, or at a minimum extend a limited 180 day waiver, during which time the Saudi government should make measurable progress on religious freedom reforms.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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