

February 14, 2012 | by USCIRF

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) expressed grave concern today for Hamza Kashgari, a 23-year-old blogger in Saudi Arabia who could face apostasy charges that carry the death penalty.

Earlier this month, Kashgari allegedly posted comments on his Twitter account that some in the Saudi religious establishment and public consider blasphemous. After receiving numerous death threats, Kashgari fled the Kingdom last Thursday for Malaysia. Malaysian authorities arrested him and this past Sunday deported him back to Saudi Arabia, where Saudi authorities immediately detained him. A committee of senior Saudi clerics appointed by Saudi King Abdullah reportedly declared Kashgari to be an apostate. According to reports, King Abdullah previously had called for Kashgari's arrest and a trial.

"Mr. Kashgari should not be charged with any crime. Laws against apostasy and blasphemy violate the internationally-guaranteed individual rights to freedom of religion and expression and, as evidenced by this case, exacerbate religious intolerance, discrimination, and violence and lead to grave human rights abuses," said USCIRF chair [Leonard Leo](#).

In an unrelated case, King Abdullah last week pardoned Hadi Al-Mutif, an Ismaili Muslim man who had been one of the longest held religious prisoners in the world.

“Hadi Al-Mutif had been in prison since 1994 on apostasy charges for an offhanded remark he made as a teenager. For years, USCIRF had pushed for Al-Mutif’s release with high-level Saudi officials. While USCIRF welcomes his release, Hadi suffered tremendously during his 18 years in prison, alleging physical and emotional abuse, in addition to his poor physical and mental health. We wish him a full recovery and reintegration into society,” said Leo.

“The Saudi government should release Hamza Kashgari and other prisoners of conscience held on blasphemy and other charges on the basis of religion or belief,” said Leo.

Since 2004, the U.S. State Department has designated Saudi Arabia a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, a designation that USCIRF has recommended since 2000.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Paul Liben at pliben@uscirf.gov or (703) 870-6041.