

SAUDI ARABIA

The government of Saudi Arabia bans all forms of public religious expression other than those that reflect the government's interpretation of one school of Sunni Islam. The government also prohibits churches, synagogues, temples, and other non-Muslim places of worship; continues to disseminate in schools and export textbooks that espouse intolerance and incite violence; periodically interferes with private religious practice; and represses disfavored Muslims. Because of the government's systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, USCIRF again recommends in 2012 that Saudi Arabia be designated a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Although the State Department has designated Saudi Arabia a CPC since 2004, an indefinite waiver on taking any action in consequence of the CPC designation has been in place since 2006.

Background

Saudi Arabia contains a diversity of peoples and religions despite decades of Saudi government coercive actions to enforce religious conformity. The government severely violates the human rights of large, indigenous communities of Muslims from a variety of schools of Islam, including significant populations of nonconforming Sunni Muslims Shi'a Muslims, including Ismailis, and both Muslim and non-Muslim expatriate workers. The government restricts the religious activities it permits by limiting the building of mosques, appointing imams, regulating sermons and public celebrations, controlling the content of religious education in public schools, and suppressing the religious views of Saudi and non-Saudi Muslims who do not conform to official positions.

Religious Freedom Conditions

The Saudi government violates religious freedom by restricting dissidents and non-conforming Muslims; curtailing the rights of women based on the state's interpretation of Islam; empowering the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice (CPVPV) to commit abuses; and disseminating and exporting intolerant textbooks and other materials. USCIRF has noted some improvements in certain areas. According to the Minister of Islamic Affairs, approximately 3,500 imams since 2004 have been relieved of their duties for espousing extremist views and more than 20,000 imams have been retrained, a higher number than cited in the past. However, it is unclear if the training programs for the CPVPV, teachers, and imams, which the National Dialogue Center administers, are in fact curbing extremist views and instilling religious tolerance.

Restrictions on Dissidents and Non-Conforming Muslims: The Saudi government uses criminal charges of apostasy and blasphemy to suppress discussion and silence dissidents. Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims face harassment, arrest, detention and discrimination. Since 2007, the government has detained Shi'a Muslims for participating in demonstrations or calling for reform; holding small religious gatherings in private homes; organizing religious events or celebrating religious holidays; and reading religious materials in private homes. The government in recent years closed down several Ismaili places of worship and refuses to finance the building of mosques, although it does so for Sunni Muslims. During the past year, Saudi security forces clashed with Shi'a Muslim demonstrators resulting in some deaths and numerous injuries. In February 2012, Hamza Kashgari, a 23-year old Saudi blogger, fled from Saudi Arabia to Malaysia amid possible apostasy and blasphemy charges for comments he posted on Twitter. Malaysian authorities deported him back to Saudi Arabia, where he remains in detention in Jeddah awaiting formal charges and a trial. In February 2012, after serving more than 18 years in prison, an Ismaili man, Hadi al-Mutif, was released after being pardoned by King Abdullah for a remark that was deemed blasphemous.

Women's Rights: The government's monopoly and interpretation of Islamic doctrine adversely affects women's human rights, including freedom of speech, movement, association, and religion, access to education, and full equality before the law. While in the past few years there has been some increase in public space to discuss human rights practices affecting women, the Saudi government's discriminatory measures violate women's human rights. For example, hospitals may turn away women seeking medical care if they lack a male relative's consent. In public, women must adhere to a strict religious dress code, require written permission from a male relative to travel inside or outside the country, and cannot drive cars. Women were not permitted to vote in the September 2011 municipal elections, although before the elections were held, King Abdullah announced that women would be able to vote and run in the next round of municipal elections to be held in 2015 and be appointed to the Shura Council.

Abuses by the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice (CPVPV): The CPVPV, which reports to the King and is not subject to judicial review, enforces public morality. It officially enforces restrictions on public religious manifestations and practice by both Saudis and non-Saudis. The CPVPV reportedly has raided private homes where non-Muslim expatriate workers worship, although the number of such incidents decreased over the past year. Members of the CPVPV over the years also have been accused of killing, beating, whipping, detaining, and otherwise harassing individuals. While many cases have gone to or are proceeding to trial, complainants report summary dismissals without due process. Thirty-five Ethiopian Christian expatriate workers remain in prison after being arrested in December 2011 for holding a private prayer gathering.

The Dissemination and Global Exportation of Intolerant Materials: Saudi textbooks posted on the Ministry of Education's Web site and in use during the 2010-2011 school year continue to teach hatred toward other religions and, in some cases, promote violence. For example, some justified violence against apostates and homosexuals and labeled Jews and Christians "enemies." The government does not appear to have revised the textbooks, despite having committed to do so by 2008. During USCIRF's 2011 visit, Saudi officials claimed that the government had thoroughly revised texts in grades one, four, and seven, is currently working on grades two, five, and eight, and will complete revisions for high school and other grades by 2013. Funding originating in Saudi Arabia reportedly is used globally to finance religious schools, mosques, the global distribution of hate literature, and other activities that support religious intolerance and in some cases, violence toward non-Muslims and disfavored Muslims. Despite requests, Saudi officials have provided no details of government programs designed to halt the dissemination of intolerant literature and extremist ideology.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

In response to the policies and practices of the Saudi government, the U.S. government should:

- Continue to designate Saudi Arabia a CPC and lift the indefinite waiver on taking any action in consequence of the CPC designation, or at a minimum extend a limited 180-day waiver, during which time the Saudi government should complete reforms on textbooks and rein in the CPVPV;
- Call at the highest levels for the release of Hamza Kashgari and other religious prisoners;
- Undertake and make public an assessment of the Ministry of Education textbooks used during the current school year to determine if they have removed passages that teach religious intolerance and urge the Saudi government to include the concepts of tolerance and respect for the human rights of all persons;
- Press the Saudi government to end state prosecution of individuals charged with apostasy, blasphemy, and sorcery; and
- Urge the Saudi government to address incitement to violence and discrimination against disfavored Muslims and non-Muslims, including by prosecuting government-funded clerics who incite violence against Muslim minority communities or individual members of non-Muslim religious minority communities.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Require the State Department to issue a public progress report on efforts and results achieved by the Saudi government to implement religious freedom reforms announced in July 2006.

Please see USCIRF's 2012 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Saudi Arabia.