

## Saudi Arabia

**FINDINGS:** During the reporting period, systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom continued in Saudi Arabia despite improvements. More than 10 years since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, the Saudi government has failed to implement a number of promised reforms related to promoting freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief. The Saudi government persists in banning all forms of public religious expression other than that of the government's own interpretation of one school of Sunni Islam; prohibits churches, synagogues, temples, and other non-Muslim places of worship; uses in its schools and posts online state textbooks that continue to espouse intolerance and incite violence; and periodically interferes with private religious practice. There have been numerous arrests and detentions of Shi'a Muslim dissidents, partly as a result of increasing protests and demonstrations related to 2011 uprisings in the region, and Ismaili Shi'a Muslims continue to suffer repression on account of their religious identity. Members of the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice (CPVPV) continue to commit abuses, although their public presence has diminished slightly and the number of reported incidents of abuse has decreased in some parts of the country. In addition, the government continues to be involved in supporting activities globally that promote an extremist ideology, and in some cases, violence toward non-Muslims and disfavored Muslims.

USCIRF again recommends in 2012 that Saudi Arabia be designated as a "country of particular concern," or CPC. Although so designated by the State Department since 2004, an indefinite waiver on taking any action in consequence of the CPC designation has been in place since 2006.

Despite King Abdullah undertaking some limited reform measures and promoting inter-religious dialogue in international fora, there has been little progress more than five years after the State Department publicly announced in July 2006 that, as a result of bilateral discussions, the Saudi government had confirmed that it would advance specific policies to improve religious freedom conditions. During a USCIRF 2011 visit, Saudi officials often cited national security concerns as grounds for cracking down on religious minorities and dissidents; however, in some cases, such explanations served as a pretext to engage in an array of severe violations of freedom of religion or belief. USCIRF continues to find that full implementation by the Saudi government of the July 2006 policies would diminish some of its institutionalized abusive practices.

**PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS:** USCIRF has concluded that U.S. policy in Saudi Arabia does not adequately prioritize issues of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief. The CPC designation and subsequent U.S.-Saudi bilateral discussions, including the July 2006 confirmation of policies, have not resulted in substantial reforms by the Saudi government concerning religious freedom. Unrest in the region since early 2011 and lack of progress on reforms provide added incentive for the U.S. government to lift the indefinite waiver of action, or at a minimum extend a limited 180-day waiver, during which time the Saudi government should complete reforms on textbooks, ensure that members of the CPVPV do not exceed their jurisdiction, and hold CPVPV members accountable for abuses. In addition, Congress should require the State Department to issue a public report within 180 days on efforts and results achieved by the Saudi government to implement reforms in the Saudi curriculum and textbooks announced in July 2006. Additional recommendations for U.S. policy toward Saudi Arabia can be found at the end of this chapter.

## Religious Freedom Conditions

### *Uprisings in the Arab World & USCIRF 2011 visit*

The uprisings in the Arab world in 2011 did not bring political and human rights reforms to Saudi Arabia as they did to several other countries in the region. In early March, the Ministry of Interior, the Shura Council, the Council of Senior Ulema, and the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice (CPVPV) announced a ban on all public protests. In response to protests throughout the year in the Kingdom, the Saudi government forcibly dispersed several demonstrations, particularly by the Shi'a community in the Eastern Province. Some of these incidents resulted in a few deaths, dozens of injuries, and hundreds of arrests. Most of those arrested were released after signing pledges not to take part in further protests, but several face travel bans and some were dismissed from their jobs. In response to the uprisings and the increasing number of demonstrations in the Kingdom, King Abdullah announced in March 2011 a number of economic reforms, including: social, unemployment, and housing benefits totaling approximately \$36 billion, wage increases for government workers, the creation of 60,000 security-related jobs, and anti-corruption measures.

During its visit to the Kingdom in January/February 2011, USCIRF confirmed many of its ongoing concerns. The Saudi government invokes national security to justify repression of minorities and dissidents. Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims continue to face discrimination, harassment, and imprisonment. Members of the CPVPV, also known as the *mutaween*, who allegedly committed abuses in the past, including killings, have gone unpunished by Saudi authorities. Despite the Saudi government's 2006 confirmation to the State Department of a policy to remove by 2008 all remaining textbook references that were religiously intolerant or promoted hatred toward other religions or religious groups, textbook revisions are limited and incomplete and content espousing intolerance and even inciting violence remains. Saudi officials claim to have a plan in place to complete revisions for grades one to 12 by 2013, although revisions of textbooks have been "in progress" for over 10 years. The government also has made little progress on halting the global dissemination from Saudi Arabia of extremist ideology, literature, and other materials, some of which is published by the government itself, or by publishing houses that are tightly monitored by the government.

USCIRF noted improvements in certain areas. The CPVPV had less of a public presence in some areas of the country, particularly Jeddah and the Eastern Province, and the number of reported incidents of abuses committed by the CPVPV has decreased. Women and Muslim minorities have had a more pronounced public presence to discuss human rights and religious freedom concerns. According to the Minister of Islamic Affairs, since 2004, approximately 3,500 imams have been relieved of their duties for espousing extremist views and more than 20,000 imams have been re-trained, a higher number than cited in the past. However, it is unclear if the training programs for the CPVPV, teachers, and imams, which are administered by the National Dialogue Center, are in fact curbing extremist views and instilling religious tolerance.

*State Coercion of Religious Conformity*

Saudi Arabia contains a diversity of peoples and religions, despite decades of Saudi government coercion of religious conformity. The Saudi government persists in severely restricting all forms of public religious expression, other than the government's interpretation of its version of Sunni Islam. This policy violates the human rights of large, indigenous Saudi communities of Muslims from a variety of schools of Islam, including significant populations of Sunni Muslims who follow variant schools of thought, Shi'a Muslims, and Ismaili Muslims, as well as both Muslim and non-Muslim expatriate workers. The government enforces its tight controls by heavily restricting the religious activity it does permit—through limits on the building of mosques, the appointment of imams, the regulation of sermons and public celebrations, and the content of religious education in public schools—and suppresses the religious views of Saudi and non-Saudi Muslims who do not conform to official positions. In addition, the Saudi government continues its systematic practices of short-term detentions, without trial, of minority Muslims, particularly Shi'a Muslims, for religious observance not in accordance with the government's interpretation of Islam. Such practices are intended to intimidate and harass these groups.

Some government-approved Sunni Muslim clerics continued to issue *fatwas* (religious edicts) and delivered sermons during the past year that justify committing violent acts against dissident Sunni Muslims, Shi'a Muslims, Jews, and Christians. Saudi officials acknowledged that some clerics continue to preach such views. However, in recent years, the Saudi government has taken some initial steps to address intolerant *fatwas*. In September 2010, several Web sites containing intolerant *fatwas* were blocked, following a decree by King Abdullah. The decree was issued to reduce controversial *fatwas* issued by ultra-conservative clerics, some of which have been a serious embarrassment to Saudi authorities. The decree restricts the right to issue *fatwas* to members of the officially-approved Council of Senior Islamic Scholars. Also, in May 2010, the Council issued a *fatwa* condemning terrorist financing as forbidden by Islamic law.

Moreover, in January 2011, in an effort to curb extremism in mosques in the Kingdom, prominent Saudi scholar Sheikh Abdul-Aziz Al-Fouzan joined other religious scholars in calling for Saudi government-supported imams to end the practice of prayers that incited violence against non-Muslims. Al-Fouzan, a member of the Saudi Human Rights Commission, said that such supplications were an act of aggression against non-Muslims and were “against the spirit of Islam.”

During USCIRF's 2011 visit, officials at the Ministry of Islamic Affairs (MIA) claimed that at least 3,500 imams had been dismissed for espousing extremist views and more than 20,000, of a total of 75,000 imams in the country, had been re-trained, a higher number than cited in the past. The MIA estimates that approximately 70 percent of all imams in the country are “free of fanaticism” and meet the necessary qualifications to be a cleric. The MIA claims to be making efforts to re-train the remaining 30 percent of imams.

The Saudi government's policy toward expatriate workers, particularly non-Muslim workers, reflects the view that they have come to Saudi Arabia only to work. As a result, the government curtails universal human rights for non-Saudi visitors to the country and inhibits the enjoyment of human rights by expatriate workers coming for temporary employment, particularly religious

freedom for the two to three million non-Muslim workers, including Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and others. Restrictions are often included in labor contracts requiring expatriate workers, including female domestic laborers, to conform to Saudi religious customs and traditions, thereby forcing them to waive their inalienable human rights and submitting them to limitations, amounting to human rights abuses, enforced by Saudi employers.

### *Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims*

Shi'a Muslims—approximately 10 to 15 percent of the population and most heavily concentrated in the Eastern Province—and members of indigenous Muslim communities who follow schools of thought other than that favored by the government are subject to government restrictions on public religious practices and official discrimination, particularly in government employment and education. There are no Shi'a ministers in the government, only five of the 150-member *Shura* (Consultative Council) are Shi'a Muslims, and there are very few Shi'a Muslim leaders in high-level government positions, particularly in the security agencies. In predominantly Sunni Muslim areas of the country outside the Eastern Province, Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims face harassment, arrest, and detention. Furthermore, since many Saudi judges consider Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims to be “non-believers,” courts frequently treat them more severely. In addition, children of Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims are indoctrinated in public schools with the government's interpretation of Sunni Islam, and there is no alternative option for instruction according to the wishes of the parents.

In January 2012 in the Qatif region, Saudi security forces clashed with Shi'a Muslims who were celebrating Arbaeen, which marks the end of the 40-day mourning period after the anniversary of the death of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson. The clashes resulted in the death of a 22 year-old Shi'a man and injuries to at least three people. In November 2011, security forces killed four Shi'a men and wounded nine during protests in the same region. Saudi authorities have started an investigation into the deaths, which is ongoing.

Between February and April 2011, Saudi authorities cracked down on Shi'a demonstrators who were calling for the release of religious and political prisoners. Dozens were arrested, particularly in March, and several were injured during clashes with Saudi security forces, primarily in the Qatif area of the Eastern Province. According to human rights groups, during peaceful protests of several hundred to a few thousand Shi'a youth and activists in mid-March in the Eastern towns of Safwa, Qatif, and Al-Ahsa, nearly 150 protesters were arrested and remain in detention. In early March, the Interior Ministry and the Council of Senior Islamic Scholars announced a ban on protests ahead of demonstrations for a “Day of Rage” that had been called for March 11.

Over the past few years, Saudi authorities have carried out a series of short-term detentions of members of the Shi'a community, a pattern which continued in 2011. Generally, none of the individuals is charged with any crime, nor do Saudi authorities offer any explanation other than suggesting that the short-term detentions are punishment for holding private religious gatherings. Some of the reasons cited by the Shi'a community for arbitrary arrests include: reading of religious materials in private homes; congregating outside *hussainiyas* (Shi'a community centers), using a loud speaker outside a community center; refusing to close down a makeshift

place of worship; taking part in religious celebrations; and distributing sweets during religious occasions.

In addition, some Shi'a and other dissident Muslims who travel to Saudi Arabia to perform the *hajj* (pilgrimage) have been harassed, detained, or arrested by authorities. For example, in December 2011, an Australian Shi'a Muslim man, Manor Almaribe, was sentenced to 500 lashes and a year in jail after being convicted of blasphemy. Almaribe was detained in Medina in November during pilgrimage after being accused of insulting the companions of the Prophet Muhammad. After receiving a reduced punishment of 75 lashes, Almaribe was released and returned to Australia after nearly two months in detention.

On February 27, 2011, Saudi Shi'a cleric Tawfiq Al-Amer was detained by police after calling for the country to become a constitutional monarchy and for an end to corruption and discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in a sermon in the Eastern Province town of Hofuf. The cleric previously had been detained for calling for greater religious freedom for the Shi'a community. Al-Amer was released on March 6, 2011 after hundreds of people took to the streets in Hofuf and near Qatif in the Eastern Province to protest his arrest. Al-Amer was rearrested on August 3 in connection with his calls for reform in the Kingdom. He has been charged with "inciting public opinion" and remains in detention.

During the reporting period, authorities shut down several Shi'a mosques in the Eastern Province and refused a mosque permit for the Al-Khobar Shi'a community. In April 2010, the Minister of Interior Prince Naif reportedly said publicly that Shi'a mosques which were closed in the past would not be permitted to be re-opened for security reasons. Authorities also justify the closures by citing improper zoning and lack of mandated permits.

On a positive note, there have been some improvements for the Shi'a community in the Eastern Province, particularly regarding the public expression of religious practice. Members of the Shi'a community in Qatif, where they represent the majority of the population, have held large public gatherings since 2007 in observance of Ashura without government interference. However, authorities continue to prohibit observance in other areas of the Eastern Province, such as in Al-Ahsa and Dammam. While there has been increased dialogue between the Shi'a community and the Saudi government, there has not been progress on a number of practical issues, such as teaching Shi'a beliefs to Shi'a children in schools and re-opening mosques and *hussainiyas* in Al-Ahsa and Dammam that have long been closed by the government.

Ismaili Muslims, a Shi'a sect numbering some 700,000 in Saudi Arabia, continue to suffer severe abuse and discrimination by Saudi authorities, particularly in religious practice, government employment, the justice system, and education. The government does not finance the building of mosques for Ismailis, although it does so for Sunni Muslim houses of worship, and it has closed down several Ismaili places of worship in recent years in Al Khobar, Abqaiq, Jubail, Dammam, and Al Khafji. In 2000, after CPVPV members raided and closed down an Ismaili mosque in the Najran region, approximately 100 Ismailis, including clerics, were arrested. Many were released after serving reduced sentences, but dozens remained in prison for several years. In August 2009, King Abdullah ordered the early release of the last group of 17 Ismailis associated with the Najran incident after they served more than nine years of a 10-year sentence.

In February 2012, after serving more than 18 years, Hadi al-Mutif, an Ismaili Muslim man, was released from prison after being pardoned by King Abdullah. Al-Mutif had been in prison since 1994 for an offhand remark he made as a teenager that was deemed blasphemous. In 1996, he was convicted and sentenced to death for apostasy, despite the fact that he remains a Muslim. Lawyers and experts familiar with the case have said that the judge was biased against Ismaili Muslims and that Al-Mutif's trial was neither fair nor transparent. Al-Mutif had alleged physical abuse and mistreatment during his incarceration. In 2009, al-Mutif received an additional five-year prison term for criticizing the government's justice system and human rights record on a tape that was smuggled out of prison and later broadcast. During USCIRF's 2011 visit, Saudi authorities stated that al-Mutif had exhausted all legal appeals and his fate was in the hands of King Abdullah, who could pardon him at anytime. During his time in prison, al-Mutif repeatedly attempted to commit suicide. His psychological and physical health remain a concern.

### *Other Dissidents*

The Saudi government uses criminal charges of apostasy and blasphemy to suppress discussion and debate and to silence dissidents. Promoters of political and human rights reforms, as well as those seeking to debate the appropriate role of religion in relation to the state, its laws, and society, are typically the target of such charges.

In February 2012, after receiving numerous death threats, 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. After a few days, Malaysian authorities deported him back to Saudi Arabia, where he remains in detention in Jeddah awaiting formal charges and a trial. In October 2011, a Filipino expatriate worker was arrested and charged with blasphemy after his employer told authorities he insulted the Prophet Muhammad. His current status is unknown. In January 2009, Hamoud al-Amri, a Saudi convert to Christianity, was arrested for discussing his Christian faith on his blog. In March 2009, after his case received international attention, al-Amri was released from prison on the condition that he not leave the country or appear in the media. Al-Amri was previously detained for nine months in 2004 and a month in 2008. He is banned from leaving the country and fears for his safety.

Historically, Saudi authorities have used spurious charges of "sorcery" and "witchcraft" against Muslims who do not adhere to the government's interpretation of Islam. Anti-sorcery departments exist in CPVPV branches across the country, responsible for investigating and reporting incidents of "sorcery" to local police. Several Sunni Muslims remain in prison on alleged sorcery charges and others have been executed. In December 2011, a Sudanese woman was executed for witchcraft. Reportedly, others suffered a similar fate during the reporting period. According to Saudi officials, Lebanese national Ali Sabat's 2009 death sentence for witchcraft was overturned, although he allegedly pleaded guilty to several charges leveled against him, including sorcery and blasphemy. Sabat remains in prison while his case is ongoing.

In addition, over the past few years, members of the Sufi and Ahmadi Muslim communities have been harassed, arrested, and detained because of their non-conforming religious views, but no such incidents were reported in the past year.

### *Women's Rights*

The government's monopoly on the interpretation of Islam adversely affects the human rights of women in Saudi Arabia, including their freedom of speech, movement, association, and religion; freedom from coercion; access to education; and full equality before the law. Over the past few years, there has been some increase in public space to discuss human rights practices affecting women. Nevertheless, the Saudi government has continued discriminatory measures that violate women's human rights. For example, women seeking medical care, whether emergency or not, may be refused medical treatment by hospitals if they lack the consent of a male relative. When appearing in public, women must adhere to a strict religious dress code. Women require written permission from a male relative to travel inside or outside the country and are not permitted to drive motor vehicles. Women were not permitted to vote in the September 2011 municipal elections, although the week before the elections were held, King Abdullah announced that women would be able to vote and run in the next round of municipal elections in 2015 and be appointed to the Shura Council.

In addition, Saudi courts, which apply the Saudi government's interpretation of Islamic law to the cases before them, do not grant women equal legal status to men. A woman's testimony is treated as one-half the testimony of a man; daughters receive half the inheritance that their brothers receive; and women have to demonstrate legally-specified grounds for divorce, while men may divorce without giving cause. During USCIRF's 2011 visit, Ministry of Justice officials stated that women have equal justice under the law and independent legal personalities, although these claims were not substantiated. Officials also claimed that women are granted guardianship of children under the law, although Saudi women's rights activists and human rights groups dispute this claim.

### *State Harassment of Private Worship and Restrictions on Religious Materials*

Non-Muslims are not allowed to have Saudi nationality and no churches, synagogues, temples, or other non-Muslim places of worship are permitted in the country. In addition, the Saudi government enforces and limits public worship to its sanctioned version of Sunni Islam.

For years, Saudi officials have argued that it is impossible to have places of worship other than mosques in the Kingdom because Saudi Arabia is home to Islam's two holiest sites: Mecca and Medina. Moreover, government officials point to a *hadith* (oral tradition) from the Prophet Muhammad which says that only Islam can exist on the Arabian Peninsula, although other Islamic experts contend that this *hadith* is subject to differing interpretations. During USCIRF's 2011 visit, some Saudi officials continued to assert that having non-Muslim places of worship on Saudi soil would be equivalent to building mosques on Vatican property in Italy. As in previous meetings with Saudi officials, USCIRF drew a distinction between a geographic entity in Italy of two square miles with 800 to 900 residents versus a country the size of Saudi Arabia with between two and three million non-Muslim residents.

In 2011, Saudi officials reiterated the government position that non-Muslim expatriate workers are permitted to worship in private. However, guidelines as to what constitutes "private"

worship remain unclear and vague. The Saudi government has said that as long as non-Muslims practice their religion in small groups in private homes, no security entity would interfere, since there is no law that prohibits non-Muslims from practicing in this manner.

Nevertheless, the Saudi government continues in practice to violate its public position about permitting private worship. There are still instances in which members of the CPVPV have entered and raided private homes where non-Muslim expatriate workers were worshipping, although the number of such incidents reportedly decreased over the past year. Expatriate workers from the Philippines, India, Pakistan, and several African countries continue to be subject to surveillance and raids by Saudi authorities, despite the fact that CPVPV members technically are not permitted to conduct such surveillance. In fact, representatives of some non-Muslim communities continue to assert that, in practice, religious freedom simply does not exist in the Kingdom. In the Nejd region in the central part of the country, private religious services continue to be surveilled and, in some cases, raided by Saudi authorities. Conditions for private worship are better in the Eastern Province and Jeddah than elsewhere in the country.

Other than at a few compounds populated by foreign workers, where private worship is allowed, expatriate workers continue to fear government interference with their private worship. This interference can occur for many reasons, such as if a worship service is too loud, has too many attendees, or occurs too often in the same place. Furthermore, Saudi officials do not accept that for members of some religious groups, the practice of religion requires more than an individual or a small group worshipping in private, but includes the need for religious leaders to conduct services in community with others. The government continues to prohibit foreign religious leaders from seeking and obtaining visas to enter Saudi Arabia and minister to local religious communities.

During the past year, a number of people were detained for non-public, non-Muslim worship. Several cases involving non-Muslim detentions were not publicized in order to secure releases. On December 15, 2011, approximately 35 Ethiopian Christians were detained for holding a private prayer gathering and formally charged with “mixing with the opposite sex.” Some have alleged physical abuse during interrogations. All 35 remained in detention at the end of the reporting period and at risk of imminent deportation. In January 2011, two Indian Christians, Yohan Nese and Vasantha Sekhar Vara, were arrested when members of the CPVPV raided a private residence where the two attended a prayer gathering. The CPVPV interrogated and allegedly abused the two men physically. After more than six months in detention, they were deported to India in July. On February 12, 2011, an Eritrean Christian man, Mussie Eyob, was detained and charged with preaching Christianity at a mosque in Jeddah. In July, Eyob was deported to Eritrea after approximately five months in detention.

During USCIRF’s 2011 visit, non-Muslim interlocutors stated that it takes several weeks for the bodies of deceased non-Muslim expatriate workers to be shipped by Saudi authorities to their home country. Saudi authorities almost never permit non-Muslims to be buried in the Kingdom. Despite going to great lengths to urge Saudi officials to expedite the process, non-Muslim workers have had little success. In some cases, religious obligations of expatriate workers require deceased bodies to be buried within a period of days, not weeks. Nevertheless, it remains nearly impossible to fulfill such requirements.



According to the State Department, in recent years, there were fewer reports of government officials confiscating religious materials and no reports that customs officials confiscated religious materials from travelers, whether Muslims or non-Muslims. Individuals were able to bring personal religious materials into the country without difficulty. Also, during the reporting period, senior Saudi government officials, including King Abdullah and the Grand Mufti, have made statements with the reported aim of improving the climate of tolerance toward other religions; both also continued publicly to call for moderation. In recent years, press reports confirmed that representatives of the Vatican were in negotiations with the Saudi government about building the first church in Saudi Arabia, so far to no avail.

*Abuses by the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice (CPVPV)*

Restrictions on public religious manifestations and practice by both Saudis and non-Saudis are officially enforced in large part by the CPVPV, a government entity that includes a force of approximately 5,000 field officers and 10,000 employees in over 500 offices throughout the country. There are also hundreds of “unofficial” volunteers who take it upon themselves to carry out the work of the CPVPV, although Saudi officials claim that the CPVPV no longer accepts volunteers. The CPVPV, which reports to the King, is tasked with enforcing public morality based on the Saudi government’s interpretation of Islamic law. Members of the CPVPV patrol the streets enforcing dress codes, maintaining the strict separation of men and women, ensuring that restaurants and shops are closed during daily prayers, and enforcing other restrictions on behavior.

Members of the CPVPV periodically overstep authority but despite numerous documented infractions, they are not subject to judicial review. Despite the fact that the CPVPV is not allowed to engage in surveillance, detain individuals for more than 24 hours, arrest individuals without police accompaniment, or carry out any kind of punishment, its members have been accused in recent years of killing, beating, whipping, detaining, and otherwise harassing individuals.

In recent years, the public presence of the CPVPV has diminished. Several activists, particularly women, have stated that Saudi citizens have challenged members of the CPVPV when they were harassed. For example, interlocutors cited examples where members of the CPVPV would instruct women to adhere better to a newly-devised aspect of the dress code but women would either ignore the advice or counter it with learned arguments.

Saudi government officials claim to have dismissed, disciplined, and criminally tried members of the CPVPV for abuses of power. Saudi Ministry of Justice officials confirmed that there have been cases where members of the CPVPV have been accused of abuse. Officials claimed that several individuals already have been compensated by Saudi administrative courts for damages and that there are cases before the criminal courts alleging that members of the CPVPV were responsible for the death or injury of Saudi citizens.

In December 2010, the director of the CPVPV, Abdul Aziz al-Humain, announced that the CPVPV had begun to implement a strategic plan to combat extremist ideology promoted by

terrorist and other similar groups in the Kingdom. It is not clear what, if any, progress the CPVPV has made since the announcement.

Over the past few years, CPVPV abuses were the subject of numerous articles in the Arabic and English press, garnering unprecedented attention by the public and in international media. Numerous cases went to trial or are proceeding to trial, including alleged beatings and deaths of Saudi citizens. However, in most of the cases that have been prosecuted, CPVPV members have not been held accountable and complainants report summary dismissals of cases without due process. During USCIRF's 2011 visit, Ministry of Justice officials claimed that one CPVPV member was found guilty of killing a citizen and sentenced to death by beheading, but would not provide details because the case is on appeal.

### *Intolerant References in Educational Materials and Textbooks*

Saudi textbooks posted on the Saudi 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 high school texts justified violence against apostates and homosexuals and labeled Jews and Christians "enemies of the believers." The State Department's July-December 2010 religious freedom report stated: "Although many intolerant statements had been removed, some school textbooks continued to contain overtly intolerant statements against Jews and Christians and intolerant references by allusion against Shi'a and Sufi Muslims and other religious groups." For example, they stated that apostates from Islam should be killed if they do not repent within three days of being warned and that treachery is a permanent characteristic of non-Muslims, especially Jews. A September 2011 report by the U.S.-based Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom also confirmed that textbooks continue to promote violent jihad and hatred and violence against Jews, Christians, and infidels.

In July 2006, the State Department stated that the Saudi government had confirmed that it planned to "revise and update textbooks to remove remaining intolerant references that disparage Muslims or non-Muslims or that promote hatred toward other religions or religious groups, a process the Saudi government expects to complete in one to two years [by July 2008]." According to the State Department's 2009 human rights report, in 2007, the Saudi government started a multi-year project "to revise textbooks, curricula, and teaching methods to promote tolerance and remove content disparaging religions other than Islam." Nevertheless, there continues to be very little transparency regarding the textbook revision process, curriculum reform, and teacher training efforts.

During USCIRF's 2011 visit, Saudi government 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 in high school and other grades by 2013.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Ministry of Education officials claim that the number of subjects taught in public schools textbooks will decrease as a result of the revisions. In January 2012, the Minister of Education stated publicly that the government needed an additional three years to revise textbooks, and that the Ministry is "developing curricula that would absorb new visions and promote citizenship, tolerance, and openness towards others..." It is not clear when these revised texts will be used in Saudi schools throughout the country.

During its February 2011 meeting with the Minister of Education, USCIRF was promised two sets of textbooks currently used in Saudi schools. More than a year later, USCIRF has not received any copies of the textbooks despite follow-up.

*The Dissemination of Extremist Ideology and Intolerant Literature in Saudi Arabia and its Exportation around the World*

There continue to be reports that funding originating in Saudi Arabia is used globally to finance religious schools, mosques, hate literature, and other activities that support religious intolerance and, in some cases, violence toward non-Muslims and disfavored Muslims. In recent years, reports continue to surface about Saudi funding of intolerance throughout the Middle East, parts of Africa (e.g., Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya), South, Central, and Southeast Asia (e.g., Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Indonesia, Philippines), and parts of Western and Eastern Europe including the Balkans (e.g., Germany, United Kingdom, Russia, Bosnia, and Kosovo). Reports also surfaced in 2011 alleging that funding from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries helped to finance Salafi groups in Egypt.

Over the past few years, the Saudi government has undertaken some measures to combat extremism inside the country, such as rehabilitation and prevention programs for convicted extremists and terrorists, as well as retraining and/or dismissing imams and school teachers known to espouse extremist views. As part of the prevention program's "mindset" component, the Saudi government is distributing to the public millions of pamphlets, tracts, messages, and ads of religious opinions condemning terror and warning against the hijacking of airplanes, bombings, and assassinations. Many of these initiatives, implemented through the Saudi Interior Ministry's guidance department, are designed to confront extremism through the propagation of a "more judicious interpretation of religious doctrine." Examples include dropping the *takfir* doctrine, which involves accusing another Muslim of being an apostate to justify his murder, and insisting on strict jurisprudence of recognized authorities. However, these efforts appear to be designed to address security concerns rather than to implement reforms to protect human rights, including religious freedom.

Saudi officials claim that they continue to screen and monitor prospective and current teachers who espoused extremist religious views. However, there were reports of teachers who, in defiance of government policy, promoted intolerant views in the classroom and did not face disciplinary measures. According to Saudi officials, the government also continues to screen and monitor government-paid clerics in mosques throughout the country, although some public officials and clerics continued to make discriminatory and intolerant statements.

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

In 2011, the Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs stated that the King Abdulaziz National Center for Dialogue has been retraining 40,000 additional Muslim clerics as part of a program to promote

tolerance and moderation in Saudi society. Imams reportedly receive special training that exposes them to more moderate views. The Saudi government also asserts that teachers, imams, or professors who promote hatred and intolerance are dismissed, but has not supported this assertion with any statistics or details.

Islamic Affairs sections in Saudi embassies worldwide reportedly have been responsible for both distributing extremist and intolerant materials and providing diplomatic status to Muslim, even non-Saudi, clerics. According to the Saudi government, these sections have been closed temporarily due to such reports. Their current status is unknown.

During USCIRF's 2011 visit, Saudi officials provided no details of programs or initiatives that had been undertaken over the past year by the government to halt the dissemination of intolerant literature and extremist ideology globally.

#### *Empowerment of Officially Sanctioned Human Rights Institutions*

In September 2005, the Council of Ministers, chaired by King Abdullah, approved the establishment of a government-appointed, 24-member Human Rights Commission (HRC) that reports directly to the King. The HRC continues to engage the Saudi government on a variety of human rights concerns, although evidence of specific actions on religious freedom issues has been limited. During USCIRF's 2011 visit, members and staff of the HRC stated that religious tolerance had improved over the past few years and that women's empowerment programs had resulted in significant strides for women in all aspects of society. Members of the HRC also suggested that the attitudes of members of the CPVPV toward women had changed over the past three years as a result of training programs and a change in CPVPV leadership.

In March 2004, the Saudi government approved the formation of a National Society for Human Rights (NSHR), the country's first and only independent, legally-recognized human rights body. The NSHR is comprised of 41 members, including 10 women. The NSHR, which was originally endowed by King Fahd, submits its reports and recommendations directly to King Abdullah. Over the years, the NSHR has publicly criticized alleged human rights violations committed by the Saudi government. During USCIRF's 2011 visit, members and staff of the NSHR downplayed religious freedom concerns by asserting that NSHR offices rarely, if ever, receive complaints about violations of freedom of religion or belief.

#### *Other Developments Internationally and in the Kingdom*

In 2009, at the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Saudi Arabia, the Saudi government accepted a number of recommendations related to freedom of religion or belief. In its response, the Saudi government stated that non-Muslims in the Kingdom have a "fully guaranteed" right to private worship which "in no way detracts from the freedom of religion of non-Muslims in the Kingdom, nor does it indicate any lack of respect for other Faiths," and that "no one has the right to interfere in their individual religious observances or compel them to renounce their beliefs." However, these assertions are contrary to the facts on the ground, as discussed above. In addition, requests from five UN human rights special rapporteurs or working groups for in-country visits have not been answered since 2005.

In 2008, King Abdullah initiated a series of international interfaith conferences and events in Europe and at the United Nations which included representatives from Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu and other faith communities. In October 2011, foreign minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal inaugurated the Saudi government-funded International King Abdullah Center for Dialogue (IKACD) in Vienna, Austria. According to the Saudi government, IKACD “will support dialogue among followers of religions and cultures, enhance understanding, respect and cooperation among all peoples, promote justice, peace and reconciliation, and confront the use of religion as a cover to hide violence and aggression.”

## **U.S. Policy**

Despite a series of challenges in recent years, U.S.-Saudi relations remain close; however, U.S. government efforts to encourage political reform and the protection of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, in Saudi Arabia continue to face significant obstacles. Many experts agree that Saudi leaders seek to preserve their political authority by maintaining their legitimacy among the conservative religious establishment. For years, the U.S. government’s reliance on the Saudi government for cooperation on counterterrorism, regional security, and energy supplies has limited its willingness and/or ability to press the Saudi government to improve its poor human rights record. Many observers contend that, even now, the United States does not want to jeopardize important bilateral security and economic ties by pushing for political and human rights reforms, despite opportunities emerging as a result of demonstrations calling for increased reforms and greater rights throughout the Arab world in 2011.

The United States-Saudi Arabia Strategic Dialogue, inaugurated in November 2005, has constituted a high-level institutionalized forum for coordinating U.S. and Saudi interests. The Strategic Dialogue consists of six working groups focusing on human development, economy, energy, consular affairs, military cooperation, and counterterrorism. The Strategic Dialogue working groups have met periodically to address issues, including human rights and religious freedom, but substantial human rights improvements in the Kingdom have not resulted.

In October 2010, the Obama administration informed Congress of its intent to sell approximately \$60 billion in arms to Saudi Arabia over a period of 10 years. In November, nearly 200 members of Congress wrote to Secretary of State Clinton raising concerns and questioning the impact of such sales on the national security interests of the United States and its allies. The letter did not address concerns about the Saudi government’s poor human rights and religious freedom record, and the sale continues to move forward. Moreover, in December 2011, the U.S. government announced that it had agreed to sell Saudi Arabia \$29.4 billion worth of advanced F-15SA fighter aircraft. This deal also includes upgrades to Saudi Arabia’s current fleet of 70 F-15 aircraft, as well as munitions, spare parts, training, maintenance, and logistics.

According to the State Department, the U.S. government regularly raises religious freedom issues with senior Saudi government officials and encourages them to protect private religious worship, eliminate discrimination against religious minority communities, and promote tolerance towards non-Muslims and those Muslims who do not adhere to the government’s interpretation of Sunni Islam. The U.S. government supports King Abdullah’s interfaith and intercultural

initiative to promote religious dialogue and tolerance and continues to encourage the government's efforts to revise and update its textbooks and remove intolerant passages advocating violence. Several exchange programs and U.S. speaker programs promote religious tolerance and interfaith understanding.

Since 2000, USCIRF has recommended that Saudi Arabia be designated as a CPC for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief. In September 2004, the State Department followed the Commission's recommendation and designated Saudi Arabia a CPC for the first time. In 2005, a temporary waiver was put in place, in lieu of any action as a consequence of CPC designation, to allow for continued diplomatic discussions between the U.S. and Saudi governments and "to further the purposes of the International Religious Freedom Act" (IRFA). In July 2006, the waiver was left in place when the State Department announced that ongoing bilateral discussions with Saudi Arabia had enabled the U.S. government to identify and confirm a number of policies that the Saudi government "is pursuing and will continue to pursue for the purpose of promoting greater freedom for religious practice and increased tolerance for religious groups." In September 2011, the State Department re-designated Saudi Arabia a CPC but kept in place a waiver of any action to "further the purposes" of IRFA.

## **Recommendations**

USCIRF continues to conclude that the CPC designation and subsequent U.S.-Saudi bilateral discussions have not resulted in the Saudi government making substantial reforms concerning religious freedom. The State Department in practice has addressed reform issues with the Saudis privately, and not made public findings that would demonstrate the Saudi government's inadequate progress. USCIRF urges the U.S. government to address religious freedom and other human rights issues actively and publicly with the Saudi government and to report openly on the government's success or failure to implement genuine reforms in these areas, in order to ensure that initiatives by the Saudi government will result in substantial, demonstrable progress.

### **I. Strengthening U.S. Human Rights Diplomacy as Part of the Bilateral Relationship**

The U.S. government should:

- continue to designate Saudi Arabia a CPC for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief;
- lift the waiver, in place since 2005, or at a minimum extend a temporary 180-day waiver, as a consequence of CPC designation, during which time the Saudi government should complete the following religious freedom reforms agreed to in the July 2006 confirmed policies:

--revise and update textbooks to remove remaining intolerant references that disparage Muslims or non-Muslims or that promote hatred toward other religions or religious groups;  
and

--ensure that members of the CPVPV do not abuse the right of freedom of religion or belief of those individuals living in Saudi Arabia or exceed their jurisdiction, such as to investigate or detain suspects, implement punishment, violate the sanctity of private homes, conduct surveillance, or confiscate private religious materials;

- press the Saudi government to: dissolve the CPVPV and entrust law enforcement to professionals in law enforcement agencies with a precise jurisdiction and subject to judicial review; conduct prompt and independent investigations into reported abuses; ensure complainants due process and other rights under international law, including the right to challenge the lawfulness of his/her detention and be released if it is not lawful; and provide the right to a remedy, including an enforceable right to compensation;
- call, at the highest levels, for the release of Hamza Kashgari, Ali Sabat, and other religious prisoners, including Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims and Muslim and non-Muslim expatriate workers, who have been convicted and remain in prison on charges of apostasy, blasphemy, sorcery, or criticizing the government;
- press the Saudi government to address incitement to violence and discrimination against disfavored Muslims and non-Muslims by:
  - prosecuting government-funded clerics and other officials who incite violence against Muslim minority communities or individual members of non-Muslim religious minority communities;
  - dismissing or disciplining government-funded clerics who espouse intolerance;
  - refuting, publicly and officially, incitement to violence and discrimination by clerics, government officials, and the government-controlled media against Muslim minority communities, such as Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims, and members of non-Muslim religious minorities; and
  - rescinding *fatwas* issued by government-funded clerics that are discriminatory toward or incite violence against Muslim minority communities or non-Muslim religious minority communities;
- press the Saudi government to permit the expeditious transport of bodies of deceased non-Muslim expatriate workers to their home countries, a process that, at present, can take several weeks; and
- address the work of the Human Rights Commission (HRC) and National Society for Human Rights (NSHR) by:
  - urging the Saudi government to ensure that all government agencies cooperate fully with the HRC and the NSHR, including by publishing the decree requiring cooperation and imposing penalties for failure to cooperate;

--urging the HRC and NSHR to study the situation of freedom of religion or belief in the Kingdom with regard to majority and minority faiths, using universal human rights standards as a benchmark, and report its findings publicly; and

--urging the Saudi government to implement recommendations from the NSHR's reports, which, if implemented, could be a welcome initial step toward improving human rights compliance in the Kingdom.

The U.S. Congress should:

- require the State Department to issue a public progress report within 180 days of the publication of this report on efforts and results achieved by the Saudi government to implement religious freedom reforms announced in July 2006 following bilateral discussions between the two countries; and
- fund and develop regular exchanges between U.S. Members of Congress and members of the Saudi Consultative Council (*Shura*) on human rights and religious freedom.

## **II. Addressing Publicly the Exportation of Extremist Ideology and Intolerance in Education Materials in Saudi Arabia and around the World**

The U.S. government should:

- undertake and make public an assessment of the Ministry of Education textbooks used during the current school year in Saudi Arabia to determine if they have been revised to remove passages that teach religious intolerance or hatred, which the Saudi government confirmed in July 2006 that it would do within one to two years;
- urge the Saudi government to include in all school curricula, in school textbooks, and in teacher training the concepts of tolerance and respect for the human rights of all persons, including religious freedom, consistent with the standards set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- urge the Saudi government to end its restriction permitting only the teaching of the government's interpretation of Sunni Islam at public and private universities in the country;
- request that the Saudi government:

--make publicly available teacher training manuals used in state primary and secondary schools inside the country;

--upon receipt by the U.S. government of credible information about incitement to violence, and consistent with U.S. law, provide an accounting of what kinds of Saudi official support have been and continue to be provided to which religious schools, mosques, centers of learning, and other religious organizations globally, including in the United States;



- make public the content of educational and other materials sent abroad to demonstrate whether such activities promote hatred, intolerance, or justify or encourage other human rights violations;
- establish a transparent public program to monitor, regulate, and report on the activities of Saudi charitable organizations based outside Saudi Arabia in countries throughout the world;
- cease granting diplomatic status to Muslim clerics and educators teaching outside Saudi Arabia; and
- ensure that Islamic affairs sections in Saudi embassies throughout the world remain closed indefinitely in accordance with past promises;
- report publicly to Congress on all the above areas as part of the reporting on progress of Saudi government implementation of the July 2006 confirmation of policies, referred to in the recommendation above; and
- communicate and share information with other concerned governments related to Saudi exportation of hate literature and extremist ideology.

### **III. Pressing for Immediate Improvements in Other Areas Related to Freedom of Religion or Belief**

The U.S. government should press for other immediate improvements in respect for religious freedom, including by urging the Saudi government to:

- comply with the recommendations from the UN Human Rights Council's February 2009 Universal Periodic Review, including those related to freedom of religion or belief, and ratify international human rights instruments, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;
- establish genuine safeguards for the freedom to worship in accordance with international standards, and end state prosecution of individuals charged with apostasy, blasphemy, and sorcery;
- allow foreign clergy to enter the country to carry out worship services and to bring into the country religious materials for such services;
- convene a public interfaith conference inside Saudi Arabia with Muslim and non-Muslim faiths represented, and continue the Kingdom's interfaith activities globally;
- broadcast inside Saudi Arabia activities and programs of the International King Abdullah Center for Dialogue in Vienna, Austria; and

- permit independent non-governmental organizations to monitor, promote, and protect human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, and invite the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief to conduct a visit to Saudi Arabia in accordance with the standard terms for such a UN visit.

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<sup>1</sup> During USCIRF's 2011 visit, Saudi Ministry of Education officials provided the USCIRF delegation with the link to the new Ministry of Education website that included revised textbooks from grades one, four and seven: [http://www.cpfdc.gov.sa/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=55&Itemid=61](http://www.cpfdc.gov.sa/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=55&Itemid=61)