

SAUDI ARABIA

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom: 2013 Annual Report

Bottom Line: Despite improvements in religious freedom, Saudi Arabia remains unique in the extent to which it restricts the public expression of any religion other than Islam. Not a single church or other non-Muslim house of worship exists in the country. The government privileges its own interpretation of Sunni Islam over all other interpretations. It also arrests and detains Shi'i Muslim dissidents and continues to imprison individuals for apostasy, blasphemy, and sorcery.

The Saudi government made improvements in policies and practices related to freedom of religion or belief. However, the government continues to commit violations of freedom of religion or belief including banning most forms of public religious expression other than that of the government's own interpretation of one school of Sunni Islam; prohibiting any public non-Muslim places of worship; and periodically interfering with the private religious practice of non-Muslim expatriate workers in the country. Because of the government's systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, USCIRF again recommends in 2013 that Saudi Arabia be designated as a "country of particular concern" (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 is a Muslim country with a sizeable population of expatriate workers of various faiths. Nevertheless, the Saudi government persists in restricting most forms of public religious expression inconsistent with Sunni Islam and especially with its narrow interpretation. This policy violates the human rights of significant populations of Sunni Muslims who follow varying schools of thought, Shi'i and Ismaili Muslims, 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. There continued to be sporadic arrests and detentions of Shi'i Muslim dissidents, partly as a result of more frequent protests and demonstrations since early 2011. Saudi officials often cite national security concerns as a pretext for cracking down on religious minorities and Muslim dissidents. The Saudi government also continued to prosecute, convict, and imprison individuals charged with apostasy, blasphemy, and sorcery.

USCIRF has noted some improvements that include: curtailing the powers of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV); promoting a "culture of dialogue" and understanding between Muslim religious communities inside the Kingdom and advancing inter-religious dialogue in international fora; improving conditions for public religious expression by Shi'i Muslims in the Eastern Province; continuing efforts to counter extremist ideology inside the Kingdom; and making further revisions to remove intolerant passages from textbooks and curriculum.

Restrictions on Dissidents and Non-Conforming Muslims: The Saudi government uses criminal charges of apostasy and blasphemy to suppress discussion and debate and silence dissidents. Promoters of political and human rights reforms, and those seeking to debate the role of religion in relation to the state, its laws, and society, are typically the targets of such charges. 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. Hamza Kashgari, a 23-year old Saudi blogger, fled from Saudi Arabia in February 2012 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. Saudi officials have stated that Kashgari continues to be held for his own safety because many Saudi citizens have called for his death. Authorities also claimed to be “educating” Kashgari to express his opinions without arousing conflict or injuring the feelings of others.

Women’s Rights: The Saudi government’s adoption of a legal system that combines local tribal customs with 18th century jurisprudence of a conservative school of Islamic thought adversely affects the human rights of women, including their freedom of speech, movement, association, and religion; freedom from coercion; access to education; and full legal equality. While in the past few years there has been some increase in public space to discuss human rights practices affecting women, the 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. On a positive note, over the past few years, there has been an increase in the role of women in society and more public space to discuss human rights practices affecting women. In January 2013, for the first time ever, King Abdullah appointed 30 women to the previously all-male 150- member Shura Council. Women were not permitted to vote in the September 2011 municipal elections, although King Abdullah announced that women would be able to vote and run in the next round of municipal elections in 2015.

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. In recent years, including during the past year, the public presence of the CPVPV has diminished. Nevertheless, in some cases, members of the CPVPV periodically overstep authority. In January 2013, a new law was passed limiting the jurisdiction of the CPVPV. 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 over the past year of beating, whipping, detaining, and otherwise harassing individuals. USCIRF continues to call for the dissolution of the CPVPV.

The Dissemination and Global Exportation of Intolerant Materials: Saudi textbooks posted on the Ministry of Education’s website and in use during the 2011-2012 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.” During USCIRF’s 2013 visit, the Saudi government claimed that textbooks from grades one through nine have been revised to remove intolerant passages, and that the government is still working on revisions for grades 10-12, which they expect to complete by 2014. USCIRF has been unable to verify such claims. 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 response to inquiries about the Saudi government’s commitment to halting the global dissemination from the Kingdom of extremist ideology, literature, and other materials, government officials cite, among other things, the new activities of the Saudi government-funded King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) in Vienna, Austria.

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 replace the indefinite waiver of action with a limited 180-day waiver, during which time the Saudi government should advance and complete reforms, including those confirmed in July 2006 in U.S.-Saudi bilateral discussions.;

- 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 2013 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Saudi Arabia.