

SAUDI ARABIA



USCIRF STATUS:

Tier 1 Country of Particular Concern

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.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FINDINGS: During the reporting period, the Saudi government made improvements in policies and practices related to freedom of religion or belief, but remains a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for violations of freedom of religion or belief. During a February 2013 visit to the Kingdom, an array of nongovernmental interlocutors told USCIRF that King Abdullah continued to make concerted efforts to advance an agenda of reform that has positively impacted religious freedom. The areas of progress 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.

Nevertheless, the Saudi government continues to ban most forms of public religious expression other than that of the government’s own interpretation of one school of Sunni Islam; prohibits any public non-Muslim places of worship; and periodically interferes with the private religious practice of non-Muslim expatriate workers in the country. 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. In addition, the Saudi government continued to prosecute, convict, and imprison individuals charged with apostasy, blasphemy, and sorcery.

Despite progress by the Saudi government on certain policies and practices, USCIRF again recommends in 2013 that Saudi Arabia be designated as a CPC for systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. 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.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS: USCIRF has concluded that full implementation by the Saudi government of policies it confirmed in July 2006 would diminish significantly the government’s institutionalized practices that negatively affect freedom of religion and belief. Religious freedom in Saudi Arabia has not been a U.S. priority in the bilateral relationship and, as a consequence, the U.S. government has not adequately held to account the Saudi government on its implementation of reforms confirmed in 2006 to advance freedom of religion and belief in the Kingdom. The U.S. government should 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. The U.S. government should call, at the highest levels, for the release of prisoners convicted and imprisoned on charges of apostasy, blasphemy, or sorcery. In addition, Congress should require the State Department to issue a public report 180 days after the publication of this report on the Saudi government’s efforts and results achieved in implementing reforms related to freedom of religion or belief. Additional recommendations for U.S. policy toward Saudi Arabia can be found at the end of this chapter.

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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS

USCIRF FEBRUARY 2013 VISIT

In February, a USCIRF delegation traveled to Jeddah, Dhahran, and Riyadh to assess the Saudi government's progress on policies and practices related to freedom of religion or belief. The delegation met with high-level Saudi government officials, including the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Justice, Education, Culture and Information, as well as the Assistant Minister of Islamic Affairs. The delegation also met with representatives from the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue (KACND), the government-appointed National Human Rights Commission, the quasi non-governmental National Society for Human Rights, the Shi'i community, and Christian expatriate community, as well as lawyers, scholars, and women's rights activists. In addition, the delegation met with the U.S. Ambassador in Riyadh, the Consuls General in Jeddah and Dhahran, and U.S. Embassy staff.

IN FEBRUARY, A USCIRF DELEGATION TRAVELED TO JEDDAH, DHAHRAN, AND RIYADH TO ASSESS THE SAUDI GOVERNMENT'S PROGRESS ON POLICIES AND PRACTICES RELATED TO FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF.

During the visit, an array of non-governmental interlocutors asserted that Saudi Arabia is in the midst of a series of positive changes—although very slowly because the general population is still very conservative—and also asserted that King Abdullah is making every effort to advance an agenda of reform and modernization that has positive implications on a range of human rights concerns, including freedom of religion and belief.

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

During the reporting period, conditions for public religious practice for Shi'i and Ismaili Muslims in certain parts of the country improved. The Shi'i community openly performed Ashura and other religious processions in Qatif and some other towns in the Eastern Province. In addition, the government temporarily shut down various media entities, particularly satellite television channels, which promoted intolerance and sometimes violence against the Shi'i community through their programming. Nevertheless, there continued to be some reports of limitations on religious practice and discrimination targeting members of the Shi'i community.

The Saudi government reiterated that in recent years approximately 3,550 government-appointed imams were fired for promoting an extremist ideology and more than 20,000 out of 75,000 imams and prayer leaders have been re-trained to espouse tolerance. In addition, according to the Saudi government, much of the language promoting intolerance and violence in Saudi textbooks and curriculum has been removed in grades one through nine and they continue to work on grades 10-12, which are expected to be completed by 2014. USCIRF was unable to confirm these assertions.

Furthermore, women and Muslim minorities have had a more pronounced public presence to discuss human rights and religious freedom concerns. In January 2013, for the first time ever, King Abdullah appointed 30 women to the previously all-male 150-member Shura Council.

STATE ENFORCEMENT OF A PARTICULAR INTERPRETATION OF ISLAM

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

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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 also tightly restricts 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. The Saudi King's official title is “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques” in Mecca and Medina.

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'i Muslims, Jews, and Christians. Saudi officials acknowledged to USCIRF that some clerics continue to preach such views. However, in recent years, the Saudi government has taken steps to address intolerant *fatwas*. In 2010, several websites containing intolerant *fatwas* were blocked, following a decree by King Abdullah. The decree was issued to reduce controversial *fatwas* issued by ultra-conservative clerics. The decree restricts the right to issue *fatwas* to members of the officially-approved Council of Senior Islamic Scholars. Also, in 2010, the Council issued a *fatwa* condemning terrorist financing as forbidden by Islamic law. During USCIRF's 2013 visit, Saudi officials estimated that at least 3,550 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.

Muslim holy places in Mecca and Medina in the Hejaz region continue to be destroyed under the direction of the General Presidency's office, which reports directly to the King. The process has intensified over the past 10 years, and Saudi authorities have said that it has become necessary to raze areas surrounding the holy sites to accommodate a significant increase in the number of pilgrims visiting Mecca and Medina annually. The demolition has focused on mosques, burial sites, homes, and locations associated with Islamic history. During USCIRF's visit, some interlocutors suggested that this ongoing phenomenon is part of a state-endorsed policy to reject practices or habits that may lead to idolatry and polytheistic association (*shirk*) surrounding or near the holy sites.

MUSLIM HOLY PLACES IN MECCA AND MEDINA IN THE HEJAZ REGION CONTINUE TO BE DESTROYED UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE GENERAL PRESIDENCY'S OFFICE, WHICH REPORTS DIRECTLY TO THE KING.

The Saudi government's policy toward expatriate workers, particularly non-Muslim workers, reflects the view that they have contracted to work in the Kingdom with advance knowledge of the special conditions in Saudi Arabia. As a result, the government curtails human rights, including religious freedom, for non-Saudis in the country and temporarily-employed expatriates. This affects two to three million non-Muslim workers, including Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and others. Restrictions are often included in labor contracts requiring expatriate workers, including female domestic laborers, to conform to Saudi religious customs, thereby forcing them to waive their inalienable human rights protections, and submitting them to limitations, amounting to human rights abuses, enforced by Saudi employers.

CLASHES WITH SHI'I MUSLIM DEMONSTRATORS

In March 2011, after unrest began to envelope the Arab world including Saudi Arabia, the Ministry of Interior banned public protests as contrary to Shari'ah. Despite this ban, periodic small-scale demonstrations and protests have continued, some of which have resulted in violence, injuries, and deaths. In January 2012 in the Qatif region, Saudi security forces clashed with Shi'i Muslims 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 one death and at least three injuries. In July and August 2012, protests in the Qatif region intensified after Shi'i cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr was wounded

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and arrested by police on July 8. Three men were killed in a protest on the evening of the arrest, and another killed five days later in nearby al-Awamiyah. Al-Nimr reportedly was physically abused while detained. Protest organizers in al-Awamiyah stated their support for al-Nimr and insisted on the use of non-violent resistance. One protester, Mohamed al-Shakhouri, reportedly was shot in the back and neck and arrested in late July after calling for al-Nimr's release. Further protests called for all Shi'i and Sunni detainees to be freed, including al-Shakhouri.

In addition, according to interlocutors in Saudi Arabia, approximately 180 Shi'i Muslims remain in prison for involvement in demonstrations since early 2011. Reportedly there have been no prosecutions for the deaths of least 15 Shi'i protestors killed in clashes with Saudi security forces during demonstrations. Authorities have compensated families of some of the victims.

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST SHI'I AND ISMAILI MUSLIMS

Shi'i 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 official discrimination, particularly in government, education, political representation, the judiciary, and the media. This exclusion is partly political in motivation.

During USCIRF's February 2013 visit, representatives from the Shi'i community stated that conditions for public religious practice in parts of the Eastern Province had improved. Members of the Shi'i community in Qatif, where they represent the vast majority of the population, have held large public gatherings since 2007 in observance of Ashura and other religious processions without government interference. In addition, Shi'i interlocutors stated that most discriminatory language denigrating Shi'i Muslims in Saudi textbooks has been removed, although USCIRF was unable to confirm these assertions.

However, authorities continue to prohibit Shi'i observance in other areas of the Eastern Province, such as in al-Ahsa and Dammam. According to interlocutors, there are no Shi'i mosques in Dammam or Khobar. While dialogue between the Shi'i community and the Saudi government has increased, there has not been progress on re-opening mosques and *hussainiyas* (Shi'i meeting halls) in al-Ahsa and Dammam that have long been closed by the government.

Problems also remain in areas of the Eastern Province where the population is more evenly split. Over the past five years, Saudi authorities have carried out a series of short-term detentions of members of the Shi'i community, a pattern which continued in 2012. Generally, the individuals are not charged with any crime, nor do Saudi authorities offer any explanation other than suggesting that the detentions are punishment for holding private religious gatherings.

According to interlocutors, over the past five year, at least 600 Shi'i worshippers were detained for up to 30 days for worshipping in private homes or makeshift *hussainiyas* or for displaying various Shi'i symbols. Some of the other reasons cited for the arrests include: using a loud speaker outside a meeting hall; refusing to close down a makeshift place of worship; taking part in religious celebrations; and distributing sweets during religious occasions.

There are no Shi'i ministers in the government, only six of the 150-member *Shura* (Consultative Council) are Shi'i Muslims, and there are very few Shi'i Muslim leaders in high-level government positions, particularly in the security agencies. Since many Saudi judges consider Shi'i and Ismaili Muslims to be "non-believers," courts frequently treat them more severely. In addition, public schools indoctrinate children of Shi'i and Ismaili Muslims with the government's interpretation of Sunni Islam, and there is no alternative option in these schools for instruction according to the wishes of the parents.

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Ismaili Muslims, a Shi'i sect numbering some 700,000 in Saudi Arabia, continue to face discrimination by Saudi authorities, particularly in religious practice, government employment, the justice system, and education. There were also reports that the government has relocated some Ismailis from the southwest of the country to other areas in the Kingdom, as well as encouraged them to emigrate. The government does not finance the building of mosques for Ismailis, although it does so for Sunni Muslim houses of worship.

APOSTASY, BLASPHEMY, AND SORCERY CHARGES

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 role of religion in relation to the state, its laws, and society, are typically the target of such charges.

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During USCIRF's 2013 visit, Saudi officials asserted that there are limits on free speech, particularly when it comes to the Prophet Muhammad or Islam in general. Officials stated that unrestricted speech which transgresses "moral values" is unacceptable. One official suggested that Saudi media entities regularly criticize the government but they are not permitted to offend the feelings of individual members of the government or to criticize Islam. Saudi officials also stated that the government is making efforts to promote responsible and accountable expression.

In February 2012, after receiving numerous death threats, Hamza Kashgari, a 24-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. During USCIRF's visit, Saudi officials stated that Kashgari was detained because he wrote statements online which "disturbed the public order," a crime in the Kingdom. Saudi officials said that an individual can be held for up to six months without charge, and that Kashgari could, in fact, sue the government if he is not formally charged because he has been held for more than one year. Several officials claimed that Kashgari continues to be held for his own safety because many Saudi citizens have called for his death. In addition, authorities claimed to be "educating" Kashgari to express his opinions without arousing conflict or injuring the feelings of others.

In June 2012, Raif Badawi, the editor of the *Free Saudi Liberals* website which encourages religious debate, was arrested in Jeddah and reportedly charged with apostasy, "insulting Islam through electronic channels," and "going beyond the realm of obedience." In January 2013, a Saudi court decided not to pursue the apostasy charge, which carries the death penalty. However, Badawi continues to face the other two charges and remains in prison. In December 2012, Saudi writer Turki al-Hamad was arrested after reportedly publishing a series of tweets calling for reform of Islamist teachings. He remains in detention without charge.

Historically, Saudi authorities have used charges of "sorcery" and "witchcraft" against individuals, including handing down severe punishments for those who are convicted. During USCIRF's visit, Saudi officials explained that sorcery is forbidden in Islam because it is considered a deceptive practice that preys on ignorant and vulnerable individuals and inflicts psychological or physical harm, including death. Saudi authorities explained that the practice of "witchcraft" is a lesser offense. Anti-sorcery departments exist in CPVPV branches across the country, responsible for investigating and reporting incidents of "sorcery" to local police. Several Muslims remain in prison on alleged sorcery charges and others have

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been executed over the past few years. In June 2012, a Saudi man, Muree bin Issa al-Asiri, reportedly was executed in Najran for sorcery and adultery.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

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.

Nevertheless, the 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 in Saudi Arabia, including their freedom of speech, movement, association, and religion; freedom from coercion; access to education; and full legal equality.

Women face discrimination both in law and in practice. 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 conservatively-interpreted religious dress code. Women must obtain written permission from a male relative to travel inside or outside the country and are not permitted to drive motor vehicles. In addition, Saudi courts, which apply the Saudi government's mix of laws 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 and divorce laws are interpreted to require a woman to demonstrate legally-specified grounds for divorce, while men may divorce without cause.

STATE HARASSMENT OF PRIVATE WORSHIP

Non-Muslims are not allowed to have Saudi nationality and no 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.

In March 2012, Saudi Grand Mufti Abdulaziz Al al-Sheikh was quoted in the Arabic press as saying it is "necessary to destroy all the churches of the region" in response to a visiting Kuwaiti delegation who asked him if churches should be banned in Kuwait. For years, and also during USCIRF's February 2013 visit, Saudi government officials argued that places of worship other than mosques cannot exist in the Kingdom because Saudi Arabia is home to Islam's two holiest sites: Mecca and Medina. In addition, government officials pointed 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* can be interpreted differently.

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In 2012 and 2013, Saudi officials reiterated the government position that non-Muslim expatriate workers are permitted to worship in private. However, what constitutes "private" worship remains 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 no law prohibits non-Muslims from practicing

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in this manner. During USCIRF's visit, some non-Muslim interlocutors said they are able to worship in rented compounds with as many as 300 or more participants. In one case, the congregation voluntarily affirmed to Saudi authorities that they do not proselytize and do not permit any Saudi citizens to attend their gatherings.

Saudi authorities continue to subject expatriate workers from South Asia and several African countries to surveillance and raids. In fact, representatives of some non-Muslim communities continue to assert that, in practice, religious freedom does not exist in the Kingdom, but some others disagree. During USCIRF's 2013 visit, Saudi officials stated that no one is arrested for private worship, but some gatherings are raided because foreign workers' residency permits have expired. Some expatriate workers dispute this assertion. Outside the 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, including if there are too many vehicles in front of a compound, or occurs too often at the same place.

During the year, there continued to be public reports of incidents in which Saudi authorities entered and raided private homes where non-Muslim expatriate workers were worshipping in private. Several other cases were not publicized in order to secure releases. In February 2013, police and CPVPV members reportedly arrested nearly 50 Ethiopian and Eritrean expatriate workers conducting a religious fellowship gathering in a private home. At least five have since been released, although more than 40 remain in detention at the end of the reporting period. Several reportedly do not have residence permits and risk deportations, but more than 20 possess valid work permits. In December 2011, approximately 35 Ethiopian Christians reportedly were detained for holding a private prayer gathering and charged with "mixing with the opposite sex." Some alleged physical abuse during interrogations. By August 2012, all 35 had been deported. Saudi officials stated that the group was arrested not because of religious beliefs but because they were monitoring the home of an Ethiopian citizen suspected of housing expatriate workers without valid permits. According to Saudi authorities, at least 20 individuals did not have valid residency permits and were deported.

During the past year, there were no 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.

In addition, in September 2012, the Saudi government eased the rules and regulations for non-Muslim expatriates to bury their dead in their home countries as well as at a designated cemetery in Riyadh. Also, during the reporting period, senior Saudi government officials, including King Abdullah, made statements with the reported aim of improving the climate of tolerance toward members of non-Muslim religions.

THE DIMINISHING ROLE OF THE COMMISSION TO PROMOTE VIRTUE AND PREVENT VICE (CPVPV)

Restrictions on religious 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, nearly 2,000 administrative workers, and more than 3,500 field offices throughout the country. In the past, there were hundreds of "unofficial" volunteers who took it upon themselves to carry out the work of the CPVPV, although in 2012, the Saudi government disbanded the volunteer force. Furthermore, in January 2012, King Abdullah appointed a new director of the CPVPV, Abdullatif al-Alsheikh. 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

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daily prayers, and enforcing other restrictions on behavior. USCIRF continues to call for the dissolution of the CPVPV.

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. Despite the fact

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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.

In January 2013, a new law was passed limiting the jurisdiction of the CPVPV. According to reports, members of the CPVPV will no longer have the power to interrogate or press charges against individuals. In 2012, the CPVPV director banned searches without prior agency approval, delegated arrest and interrogation power to other agencies, and prohibited officers from patrolling outside shopping malls to prevent people from entering. During USCIRF's 2013 visit, several activists, including women, stated that Saudi citizens have challenged members of the CPVPV when they were harassed.

Saudi government officials claim to have dismissed, disciplined, and criminally tried members of the CPVPV for abuses of power. During USCIRF's 2013 visit, Saudi 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 awarded damages by Saudi administrative courts 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.

INTOLERANT REFERENCES IN EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS AND TEXTBOOKS

In July 2006, the State Department publicly 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 [no later than July 2008].” Several years later, the revisions remain incomplete.

During USCIRF's 2013 visit, Saudi officials stated 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. By the end of the reporting period, despite efforts to access the textbooks on a website provided by the Saudi government, USCIRF was unable to download the books and review the revisions for grades one through nine¹. Nevertheless, Saudi high school textbooks in use during the 2011-2012 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, sorcerers, and homosexuals and labeled Jews and Christians “enemies of the believers.” In addition, one high school textbook continues to present the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” —a notorious forgery designed to promote hostility toward Jews—as an authentic document.

In October 2012, past and current leaders of prominent American publishing companies published an op-ed expressing “profound disappointment that the Saudi government continues to print textbooks inciting

¹ The following Web Site of the Ministry of Education's textbooks was provided by the Saudi Embassy in Washington, DC: <http://www.ed.edu.sa/books/>.

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hatred and violence against religious minorities.” The article also cited two examples of passages from the “most recent” eighth and ninth textbooks which incite hatred and intolerance.

The State Department’s latest report on religious freedom, released in July 2012, stated: “The [Saudi] government reported completing revisions in half the grades, but Arabic and religion textbooks continued to contain overtly intolerant statements against Jews and Christians as well as intolerant references by allusion against Shi’i and Sufi Muslims and other religious groups...Reform programs for the other grades were being developed at year’s end, but most school children used textbooks that retained language intolerant of other religious traditions, especially Jewish, Christian, and Shi’i beliefs, and included commands to hate infidels for their kufr (unbelief) and kill apostates.”

In early 2012, the Saudi 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....”

COUNTERING EXTREMISM INSIDE THE KINGDOM AND HALTING ITS EXPORTATION

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.

Over the past several years, the Saudi government has undertaken 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 distributed 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.

Saudi officials assert that they continue to screen and monitor prospective and current teachers who espoused extremist religious views. During USCIRF’s 2013 visit, representatives of the government-funded KACND stated that it had trained hundreds of teachers on “Educational Dialogue in the Classroom.” 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 still make discriminatory and intolerant statements. In rural areas, the KACND “Caravan of Dialogue” program worked with local imams to include the concepts of dialogue in their Friday sermons and is in the process of retraining 40,000 additional Muslim clerics as part of a program to promote tolerance and moderation in Saudi society.

DURING THE PAST YEAR, THERE WERE CONTINUED REPORTS OF VIRULENTLY ANTI-SEMITIC, ANTI-CHRISTIAN, AND ANTI-SHI’I SENTIMENTS IN THE OFFICIAL MEDIA AND OCCASIONALLY IN SERMONS DELIVERED BY CLERICS.

During the past year, there were continued reports of virulently anti-Semitic, anti-Christian, and anti-Shi’i sentiments in the official media and occasionally in sermons delivered by clerics. This continues despite some clerics having been disciplined for preaching extremist views. According to the State Department,

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the Ministry of Islamic Affairs supervised clerics through “regular inspections, surprise inspections, complaints received from worshipers, and investigations of accusations in the press.” Representatives from the Ministry of Culture and Information stated that the Saudi government is working on promoting “responsible and accountable freedom” through government-controlled media outlets.

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 cited, 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 as a counter measure. After its inauguration in October 2011, the KAICIID opened its offices in November 2012. KAICIID’s stated objective is “to enhance inter-religious and intercultural dialogue thus fostering respect, understanding and cooperation among people, promote justice, peace and reconciliation, and counter-act the abuse of religion to justice oppression, violence and conflict.”

In the past, Islamic Affairs sections in Saudi embassies worldwide reportedly were responsible for both distributing extremist and intolerant materials and providing diplomatic status to Muslim clerics, including non-Saudi clerics. According to the Saudi government, these sections have been closed due to such reports.

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. During USCIRF’s 2013 visit, HRC members and staff stated that the climate for freedom of religion and belief had improved over the past few years and that there had been significant progress for women in all aspects of society. In particular, the HRC cited progress on public religious practice for Shi’i and Ismaili Muslims in the Kingdom and, also, that a high percentage of Saudi Shi’i students were studying aboard on scholarships, including in the United States, when compared to the overall percentage in the population.

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, including violations of freedom of religion or belief.

U.S. POLICY

Despite a series of challenges in recent years, U.S.-Saudi relations remain close. 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 to press the Saudi government to improve its poor human rights record. Many experts agree that Saudi leaders seek to preserve their political authority by maintaining their legitimacy among the conservative religious establishment. Many observers contend that the United States does not want to jeopardize important bilateral initiatives 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.

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Security cooperation continues to be a foundation of official U.S.-Saudi relations, bolstered by major new arms sales, continued security training arrangements, enhanced counterterrorism cooperation, and shared concerns about potential threats posed by Iran and al-Qaeda. New joint efforts to build stronger economic and educational ties are intended to broaden the basis of the bilateral relationship and help meet the economic demands and aspirations of the Kingdom's growing young population.

In late December 2011, the Obama administration publicly announced that Saudi Arabia had agreed to terms to proceed with a \$29 billion sale of advanced F-15 fighter aircraft. In March 2012, the Pentagon announced that Boeing had been selected for another contract worth \$11.4 billion to supply 84 new F-15s along with related systems and weaponry as part of the sale. Congress was notified of the proposed sale in October 2010, and Saudi Arabia received the formal letter of offer and approval for consideration in April 2011.

According to the State Department, U.S. policy seeks to press the Saudi government to “respect religious freedom and honor its public commitment to permit private religious worship by non-Muslims, eliminate discrimination against minorities, promote respect for non-Muslim religious belief, and combat violent extremism.” 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. The U.S. government included Saudi officials in several exchange and U.S. visitor programs to promote religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue.

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.” Among the measures that were confirmed by Saudi Arabia as state policies were:

- 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 [no later than July 2008].
- Prohibit the use of government channels or government funds to publish or promote textbooks, literature, or other materials that advocate intolerance and sanction hatred of religions or religious groups.
- Control distribution of Saudi educational curricula to ensure that unauthorized organizations do not send them abroad.
- Ensure Saudi embassies and consulates abroad review and destroy any material given to them by charities or other entities that promote intolerance or hatred.
- Guarantee and protect the right to private worship for all, including non-Muslims who gather in homes for religious practice.

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- Address grievances when the right to private worship is violated.
- Ensure that customs inspectors at borders do not confiscate personal religious materials.
- Ensure that members of the CPVPV do not detain or conduct investigations of suspects, implement punishment, violate the sanctity of private homes, conduct surveillance, or confiscate private religious materials.
- Hold accountable any CPVPV officials who commit abuses.
- Bring the Kingdom's rules and regulations into compliance with human rights standards.

In August 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 has concluded that full implementation by the Saudi government of the previously-confirmed policies in July 2006 would diminish significantly the government's institutionalized practices that negatively affect freedom of religion and belief. 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 the Saudi government's initiatives 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 and as a consequence replace the indefinite waiver with a temporary 180-day waiver, during which time the Saudi government should complete the religious freedom reforms agreed to in the July 2006 confirmed policies;
- press the Saudi government to dissolve the CPVPV and continue efforts to ensure that law enforcement is entrusted to professionals from 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, Raif Badawi, Turki al-Hamad, and other prisoners who have been convicted and remain in prison on charges of apostasy, blasphemy, or sorcery;
- press the Saudi government to address incitement to violence and discrimination against disfavored Muslims, such as Shi'i and Ismaili Muslims, and non-Muslims by:

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- prosecuting government-funded clerics and other officials who incite violence against members of Muslim or non-Muslim minority communities, and dismiss or discipline those espousing intolerance;
- refuting, publicly and officially, incitement to violence and discrimination by clerics, government officials, and the government-controlled media against members of Muslim or non-Muslim minority communities; and
- rescinding *fatwas* issued by government-funded clerics that are discriminatory toward or incite violence against members of Muslim or non-Muslim minority communities; 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 would improve 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 with members of the Saudi Consultative Council (*Shura*) on human rights and religious freedom.

II. ADDRESSING 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 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 schools and universities in the country;

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- request that the Saudi government make publicly available teacher training manuals used in state primary and secondary schools inside the country or sent abroad, to evaluate whether materials promote hatred, intolerance, or justify or encourage human rights violations; and
- 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 Part I above.

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:

- ratify international human rights instruments, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and without reservations that would undermine the Covenant;
- 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 non-Muslim religious practices to occur more openly and allow foreign clergy to enter the country to carry out worship services and to bring 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 King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Vienna, Austria; and
- permit independent non-governmental organizations to monitor and promote 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.