

SAUDI ARABIA

The government of Saudi Arabia bans all forms of public religious expression, other than those that reflect the government's interpretation of one school of Sunni Islam. The government also prohibits churches, synagogues, temples, and other non-Muslim places of worship; continues to disseminate in schools and export internationally textbooks that espouse intolerance and incite violence; periodically interferes with private religious practice; and represses disfavored Muslims. Because of the Saudi government's systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, USCIRF again recommends in 2011 that Saudi Arabia be designated a "country of particular concern," or CPC; the State Department has designated Saudi Arabia a CPC since 2004.

BACKGROUND

Saudi Arabia contains a diversity of peoples and religions, despite decades of Saudi government coercion of religious conformity. The government's severe restrictions on all forms of public religious expression, other than its interpretation of its version of Sunni Islam, violates the human rights of large, indigenous 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, Ismaili Muslims, as well as both Muslim and non-Muslim expatriate workers. The government restricts the religious activity it does permit by limiting the building of mosques, appointing imams, regulating sermons and public celebrations, controlling the content of religious education in public schools, and suppressing the religious views of Saudi and non-Saudi Muslims who do not conform to official positions.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS

The Saudi government violates religious freedom by restricting dissidents and non-conforming Muslims; curtailing the rights of women based on the state's interpretation of Islam; empowering the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice (CPVPV) to commit abuses; and disseminating and exporting globally intolerant textbooks and other materials. USCIRF has noted some improvements in certain areas. 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.

Restrictions on Dissidents and Non-Conforming Muslims: The Saudi government uses criminal charges of apostasy and blasphemy to suppress discussion and silence dissidents. Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims face harassment, arrest, detention and discrimination. Since 2007, the government has detained Shi'a Muslims for participating in demonstrations or calling for reform; holding small religious gatherings in private homes; organizing religious events or celebrating religious holidays; and reading religious materials in private homes. In February 2010, six young Shi'a Muslims were detained by authorities for passing out sweets on a Shi'a religious holiday. The six were released on February 23, 2011 after USCIRF raised their cases during a visit earlier that month. Saudi authorities continue to discriminate against Ismaili Muslims. The government closed down several Ismaili places of worship in recent years and refuses to finance the building of mosques, although it does so for Sunni Muslims. An Ismaili Muslim, Hadi Al-Mutif, has been in prison since 1994 for an offhand remark he made as a teenager that was deemed blasphemous. Al-Mutif has alleged physical abuse and mistreatment during his 17 years of incarceration.

Women's Rights: The government's monopoly and its interpretation of Islamic doctrine adversely affects women's human rights, including freedom of speech, movement, association, and religion, access to education, and full equality before the law. While in the past few years there has been some increase in public space to discuss human rights practices affecting women, the Saudi government's discriminatory measures violate women's human rights. For example, hospitals may turn away women seeking medical care if they lack a male relative's consent. In public, women must adhere to a strict religious dress code, require written permission from a male relative to travel inside or outside the country, and cannot drive cars. The King set municipal elections for September 2011, but women are not permitted to vote. The Saudi justice system counts a woman's testimony as the equivalent to one-half of a man's.

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

The Dissemination and Global Exportation of Intolerant Materials: USCIRF's review of Saudi textbooks posted on the Saudi Ministry of Education's Web site found that books from the 2010-2011 school year continued 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 as "enemies." It does not appear that the government has revised the textbooks, despite having committed to do so by 2008. 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. Funding originating in Saudi Arabia reportedly is used globally to finance religious schools, mosques, the distribution of hate literature, and other activities that support religious intolerance and, in some cases, violence toward non-Muslims and disfavored Muslims. Saudi officials provided no details of government programs designed to halt the dissemination of intolerant literature and extremist ideology globally.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

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

- Continue to designate Saudi Arabia a CPC and lift the indefinite waiver on taking any action in consequence of the CPC designation, or at a minimum extend a limited 180-day waiver, during which time the Saudi government should complete reforms on textbooks and rein in the CPVPV;
- Call, at the highest levels, for the release of Hadi Al-Mutif and other religious prisoners, including Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims and Muslim and non-Muslim expatriate workers;
- 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;
- 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 five-year progress report on efforts and results achieved by the Saudi government to implement religious freedom reforms.

Please see USCIRF's 2011 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Saudi Arabia.