



# SAUDI ARABIA

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## Key Findings

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 has arrested individuals for dissent, apostasy, blasphemy, and sorcery. Based on these continuing violations of religious freedom, despite some areas where progress has been made, USCIRF again recommends in 2014 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 officially an Islamic state with a sizeable population of expatriate workers of various faiths. In recent years, the Saudi government has made improvements in policies and practices related to freedom of

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religion or belief. Nevertheless, the Saudi government persists in restricting most forms of public religious expression inconsistent with its particular interpretation

of Sunni Islam. Saudi officials say they base this on their interpretation of *hadith* and state that they believe this is what is expected of them. This policy violates the rights of other Sunni Muslims who follow varying schools of thought, Shi’a and Ismaili Muslims, and both Muslim and non-Muslim expatriate workers. While the government has taken some steps to address its legitimate interest in limiting advocacy of violence in sermons and educational materials, other steps the government has taken continue to restrict legitimate and peaceful religious activities and expression in other ways by suppressing the legitimate religious views and practices of Saudi and non-Saudi Muslims who do not conform to official positions. It also prohibits any public non-Muslim places of worship and has not fully protected the private religious practice of non-Muslim expatriate workers in the country.

## Religious Freedom Conditions 2013–2014

### Recent Improvements

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’a 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, including Blasphemy and Apostasy Charges

Sporadic arrests and detentions of Shi’a Muslim dissidents continued. 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. Saudi officials often cite national security concerns as a pretext for cracking down on religious minorities and Muslim dissidents.

The Saudi government has used 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, typically have been the targets of such charges. Hamza Kashgari, a Saudi blogger – who had been held since February 2012 on blasphemy charges for comments he posted on Twitter – was released without explanation in October 2013. In May 2012, the Saudi government detained two Saudis, Sultan Hamid Marzooq al-Enezi and Saud Falih Awad al-Enezi, allegedly for becoming members of the Ahmadi community in the Kingdom. While they could face the death penalty for apostasy, their current whereabouts and status are unknown. From information USCIRF has received, they remain detained without charge and they have had no access to legal counsel. In June 2012, Raif Badawi, the founder and editor of the *Free Saudi Liberals* website, which encourages religious and political debate, was arrested in Jeddah and charged with apostasy, “insulting Islam through

### **Abuses by the CPVPV**

The CPVPV, which reports to the King and is not subject to judicial review, officially enforces public morality and 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 2013, members of the CPVPV periodically overstepped their authority in parts of the country. 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**

During USCIRF’s 2013 visit to Saudi Arabia, the Saudi government claimed that textbooks from grades one through nine have been revised to remove intolerant passages, and that revisions for grades 10-12 would be completed in 2014. From reports USCIRF has received, high school textbooks in use during the 2013–2014

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electronic channels,” and “parental disobedience.” In January 2013, a Saudi court elected not to pursue the apostasy charge, which carries the death penalty in the Kingdom. In July 2013 Badawi was sentenced by the court to 600 lashes and seven years in prison, and his website was ordered closed. Badawi received five years for insulting Islam and violating provisions of Saudi Arabia’s 2007 anti-cybercrime law through his liberal website and for promoting “unbelief” and two years for insulting both Islam and the CPVPV in comments during television interviews.

school year continue to teach hatred toward members of other religions and, in some cases, promote violence. For example, some justified violence against apostates and polytheists and labeled Jews and Christians “enemies.” In recent years, a Saudi royal decree banned the financing outside Saudi Arabia of religious schools, mosques, hate literature, and other activities that support religious intolerance and, in some cases, violence toward non-Muslims and disfavored Muslims; however, there continue to be reports that some hate literature and other intolerant materials remain

in distribution. 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 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 July 2006, 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." USCIRF has concluded that full implementation by the Saudi government of these policies 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.

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

- Continue to designate Saudi Arabia a CPC and press the Saudi government to take concrete action towards completing reforms confirmed in July 2006 in U.S.-Saudi bilateral discussions, and provide a detailed report on progress and lack of progress on each of the areas of concern;
- At the highest levels, press for and work to secure the release of Raif Badawi, Sultan Hamid Marzooq al-Enezi, Saud Falih Awad al-Enezi, and other prisoners of conscience, and press the Saudi government to end state prosecution of individuals charged with apostasy, blasphemy, and sorcery;
- Undertake and make public an assessment of the Ministry of Education textbooks used during the current school year to determine if passages that teach religious intolerance have been removed, 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 continue 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;
- Press the Saudi government to ensure equal rights and protection under the law for Shi'a Muslim citizens; and
- Work with the Saudi government to allow non-Muslim religious practices to occur with greater security and permit foreign clergy to enter the country to carry out worship services and to bring religious materials for such services.

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.