



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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Annual Report 2010



**Annual Report of the  
United States Commission on International Religious Freedom**

**May 2010**  
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Front Cover: URUMQI, China, July 7, 2009 – A Uighur Muslim woman stands courageously before Chinese riot police sent to quell demonstrations by thousands of Uighurs calling for the government to respect their human rights. The Uighurs are a minority Muslim group in the autonomous Xinjiang Uighur region. Chinese government efforts to put down the ethnic and religious protest resulted in more than 150 dead and hundreds of arrests. (Photo by Guang Niu/Getty Images)

Back Cover: JUBA, Southern Sudan, April 10, 2010 – School children participate in a prayer service on the eve of Sudan's first national elections in more than two decades. Those elections are called for under the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between North and South Sudan, the full implementation of which is widely believed to be essential to averting another bloody civil war marked by sectarian strife. Although the elections were deeply flawed, many Southern Sudanese saw them as a necessary milestone on the road to a January 2011 referendum on Southern Sudan's political future--the final major step in the peace agreement. (Photo by Jerome Delay/Associated Press)

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## **Saudi Arabia**

**FINDINGS:** Systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom continue in Saudi Arabia. Almost 10 years since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, the Saudi government has failed to implement a number of promised reforms, including those related to religious practice and tolerance. Despite King Abdullah undertaking some limited reform measures and promoting inter-religious dialogue in international fora in recent years, 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 and also interferes with private religious practice. Ismaili Muslims continue to suffer severe discrimination and abuse on account of their religious identity and there is an ongoing crackdown on Shi'a Muslim dissidents, which has resulted in numerous arrests and detentions. Members of the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice (CPVPV or religious police) continue to commit abuses, overstep their authority with impunity, and are not subject to judicial oversight. Moreover, 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 2010 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.

Little discernible progress has been made nearly four years after the State Department publicly announced that, as a result of bilateral discussions, the Saudi government had confirmed that it would advance specific policies with the aim of improving religious freedom conditions. The Saudi government continues to engage in an array of severe violations of human rights as part of its repression of freedom of religion or belief. Abuses include: torture and cruel and degrading treatment or punishment imposed by judicial, security, and administrative authorities; prolonged detention without charges and often incommunicado; and blatant denials of the right to liberty and security of the person, including through coercive measures aimed at women and the broad jurisdiction and abusive actions of the CPVPV. The full implementation by the Saudi government of the July 2006 policies would diminish some of its institutionalized abusive practices that have resulted in severe violations of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief in Saudi Arabia and worldwide.

**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 have not resulted in substantial reforms by the Saudi government concerning religious freedom. Therefore, the U.S. government should 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 and rein in the CPVPV. In addition, Congress should fund USCIRF to conduct a study and report on progress by the Saudi government in implementing the religious freedom reforms announced by the State Department in July 2006 following bilateral discussions between the two countries. Additional recommendations for U.S. policy towards Saudi Arabia can be found at the end of this chapter.

## **Religious Freedom Conditions**

### *State Coercion of Religious Conformity*

The Kingdom of 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 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.

Conservative Sunni Muslim clerics approved by the government 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. In February 2010, a senior Sunni Muslim cleric, Sheikh Abdul-Rahman al-Barrak, issued a *fatwa* calling for the death of those who promote gender mixing at workplaces or educational institutions. In the past, Al-Barrak has issued *fatwas* denouncing Shi'a Muslims as infidels and calling for the death of two writers who questioned why Christians and Jews should be considered apostates. The State Department reports that inflammatory sermons have decreased in frequency since the Saudi government began encouraging moderation following a series of domestic terror attacks in 2003. Nevertheless, there were several instances in 2009 where mosque speakers prayed for the death of Jews and Christians.

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 rights for non-Saudi visitors to the country and inhibits the enjoyment of human rights of expatriate workers coming for temporary employment, particularly 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 to conform to Saudi religious customs and traditions, thereby forcing them to waive their inalienable human rights and submitting them to the limitations, and even human rights abuses, enforced by Saudi employers.

### *Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims*

Shi'a Muslims—approximately 10-15 percent of the population 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 in numerous areas, 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.

Moreover, in recent years *fatwas* have been issued by conservative Sunni clerics that justify committing violent acts against Shi'a Muslims. Over the past year, the Shi'a community has expressed a desire to see more active government intervention when clerics issue such provocative edicts. Furthermore, in many

cases, application of criminal law includes harsher punishments for Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims. Since many Saudi judges consider Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims to be "non-believers," they are frequently dealt with more severely by the courts.

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 2009-2010. Since early 2007, dozens of members, particularly prayer leaders, of the Shi'a community in the Eastern Province have been detained for up to 30 days and then released for holding small religious gatherings in private homes. None have been charged with any crime, nor have Saudi authorities offered any explanation other than suggesting that the short-term detentions were punishment for holding private religious gatherings. For example, in March 2010 three Shi'a religious leaders were detained for holding private religious services and allegedly for organizing an Ashura observance in December 2009 in Al Khobar in the Eastern Province. Reportedly, they each received a one month prison sentence. In addition, a number of Shi'a mosques were closed in the Eastern Province in the past year, including two in Al Khobar in August 2009 and two others in November. Authorities justified the closures by citing improper zoning and lack of mandated permits. According to press reports, in December 2009, the use of gravestones was officially banned in the Medina Governorate and all existing gravestones were removed. Marking gravestones is a Shi'a practice, whereas Sunni Muslims do not mark graves.

In November 2009, Shi'a Muslim activist Munir Jassas was arrested allegedly after being warned by Saudi authorities to stop blogging on the Internet about the Saudi government's poor treatment of Shi'a Muslims. Reportedly, he has spent at least four months in solitary confinement although no formal charges have been filed and currently he remains in prison.

In February 2009, members of the CPVPV reportedly videotaped female Shi'a Muslim pilgrims in Medina visiting a cemetery containing the graves of revered Shi'a figures. Some of the Shi'a pilgrims demanded the videotape from the religious police, claiming that it infringed the women's privacy and insulted their modesty. Saudi officials accused the Shi'a pilgrims of performing rituals offensive to other non-Shi'a pilgrims. Consequently, Shi'a pilgrims protested outside of CPVPV offices in Medina and nearly 20 were arrested, with some suffering injuries in the clashes; all were released after a week in detention. In March 2009, more than 40 Shi'a Muslims and 20 Sunni Muslims were arrested in Qatif, Safwa, and Awwamiya in the Eastern Province for "disturbing public order" in connection with protests related to the clashes described above in Medina. At least two dozen remained in prison until their release in early July. No charges were ever filed. Also in March 2009, a Shi'a cleric, Nimer Al-Nimer, publicly stated that Shi'a Muslims might one day secede from the country if authorities continue to discriminate against them. Saudi authorities issued an arrest warrant for the cleric, who remains in hiding.

In May 2008, at least 22 Sunni Muslim clerics released a statement accusing the Shi'a community of destabilizing Muslim countries and humiliating Sunni Muslims. According to human rights groups, at least 11 of the signatories were government-appointed clerics. In response, a Shi'a cleric, Sheikh Tawfiq Al-Amer, in Al-Ahsa in the Eastern Province criticized the statement, and within days, was arrested by Saudi authorities. He was released only after spending a week in detention. In September 2008, Sheikh Al-Amer was arrested again, this time for performing prayers according to Shi'a practice. He was released after 11 days in detention.

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 is limited

progress on a number of practical issues, such as the ability to teach Shi'a beliefs to Shi'a children in schools and the inability to re-open mosques and *hussainiyas* (Shi'a community centers) 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 discrimination and abuse by Saudi authorities, particularly in religious practice, government employment, the justice system, and education. Unlike support for other Muslim houses of worship, the government does not finance the building of mosques for Ismailis and has closed down several Ismaili places of worship in recent years. In 2000, after members of the CPVPV 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.

Another Ismaili Muslim, Hadi Al-Mutif, remains in prison after originally being sentenced to death for apostasy in 1994 for an offhand remark made as a teenager that was deemed blasphemous. In 1996, he was convicted and originally 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 has alleged physical abuse and mistreatment during his 16 years of incarceration. In September 2009, Al-Mutif received an additional five-year prison for criticizing the government's justice system and human rights record on a tape that was smuggled out of prison and later broadcast. During a 2007 visit to Saudi Arabia, USCIRF was told by high-level Saudi government officials that Al-Mutif's case would be resolved soon. Nearly three years after those assurances, Al-Mutif remains in prison, much of the time in solitary confinement. Al-Mutif has attempted to commit suicide, and his psychological and physical health remain a serious concern.

In May 2008, Ahmad Turki al-Saab, an Ismaili activist, was detained in Riyadh after he was summoned from Najran to the capital for organizing a petition campaign demanding the removal from office of Najran's governor, Prince Mishaal bin Saud, for alleged discrimination against Ismaili Muslims. After 18 months in detention, al-Saab was released in September 2009. In November 2008, King Abdullah issued a royal decree relieving Prince Mishaal of his post as governor of Najran; a subsequent statement issued by the Saudi Embassy in Washington, DC said Prince Mishaal himself requested to be relieved of the post. In March 2009, King Abdullah appointed his son, Prince Mashaal bin Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, as the new governor of Najran.

#### *Other Dissident Muslims*

The Saudi government uses criminal charges of apostasy, blasphemy, and criticizing the nature of the regime 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 January 2009, authorities arrested Hamoud Saleh Al-Amri, a Saudi blogger who described his conversion from Islam to Christianity on his Web site; he was released in March, after more than two months in prison, on condition that he not leave the country or speak to the media. After his conviction in 2007, a Turkish barber, Sabri Bogday, was sentenced to death for blasphemy in March 2008; in May, an appellate court upheld his conviction. In January 2009, after more than two years in prison, the barber was pardoned by King Abdullah after he allegedly repented. Bogday returned to Turkey upon his release.

In May 2008, Saudi writer and blogger Ra'if Badawi was charged by a Saudi court with "setting up an electronic site that insults Islam" after it became known that he had set up a website to document abuses



by the CPVPV and discuss the Saudi government interpretation of Islam. Facing a potentially lengthy prison sentence and fine, Badawi fled the country.

Several Sunni Muslims remain in prison on alleged sorcery charges. Historically, spurious charges of “sorcery” and “witchcraft” have been used by Saudi authorities against Muslims who do not adhere to the government’s interpretation of Islam. A lower court in Medina sentenced Ali Sabat, a Lebanese citizen, to death in November 2009 for practicing witchcraft. He was arrested by the CPVPV in May 2008 while visiting the country on pilgrimage. The charge was based on a Lebanese satellite television program, in which Sabat offered advice about general life questions as well as forecasts and predictions of the future. Sabat remains on death row. In October 2008, an appeals court confirmed the conviction of a Sudanese woman, who was charged with practicing sorcery and sentenced to three years in prison, 1500 lashes, and deportation.

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 and its violations of freedom of religion adversely affect the human rights of women in Saudi Arabia, including 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 admitted to a hospital for medical treatment only with the consent of a male relative. When appearing in public women must adhere to a strict 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. In addition, the Saudi justice system, in which courts apply Islamic law to the cases before them, does not grant a woman legal status equal to that of a man. Testimony by a woman is equivalent to 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.

In February 2008, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Yakin Ertürk, undertook a formal visit to Saudi Arabia and offered several observations and recommendations. Among them, the Special Rapporteur found that while there has been a “demystification of the taboo around violence against women” in recent years, there still exist “practices surrounding divorce and child custody, the absence of a law criminalizing violence against women and inconsistencies in the application of laws and procedures” that “continue to prevent many women from escaping abusive environments.” She urged the Saudi government to develop “a legal framework based on international human rights standards,” including a law criminalizing violence against women and a family law on marriage and divorce.

Furthermore, the Special Rapporteur found that members of the CPVPV were “responsible for serious human rights abuses in harassing, threatening and arresting women who ‘deviate from accepted norms,’” and she also highlighted the situation facing female migrant domestic workers who continue to suffer serious human rights abuses.

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

Non-Muslims are not permitted to be citizens of Saudi Arabia and no places of worship other than mosques 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. Qatar, another country on the Arabian Peninsula that shares the same religious ideology as Saudi Arabia, permits non-Muslim public places of worship. Nevertheless, some Saudi officials continue to assert that having non-Muslim places of worship on Saudi soil would be equivalent to building mosques on Vatican property in Italy. In previous meetings with Saudi officials, the Commission drew a distinction between a geographic entity in Italy of two square miles with 800-900 residents versus a country the size of Saudi Arabia with between two and three million non-Muslim residents.

In 2009, 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 continue to be 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 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 than elsewhere in the country.

Other than at a few compounds populated by foreign workers, where private worship is allowed to take place, expatriate workers continue to fear government interference with their private worship. This interference can occur for many reasons, such as if the worship service is too loud, has too many people in attendance, 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. Foreign religious leaders continue to be prohibited 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, largely as a result of U.S. government intervention. In March 2009, three Indian Christians were detained after their private religious gathering in the Eastern Province was raided by members of the CPVPV. Members of the CPVPV allegedly confiscated religious materials. The three were released within days. In January 2009, Yemane Gebriel, an Eritrean pastor, fled the country to an unknown location after multiple threats from the CPVPV. For 10 years, Gebriel led an underground church of more than 300 foreign-born Christians. In 2008, Saudi officials made several attempts to deport Gebriel and other church members, but each time higher authorities intervened to rescind the orders. In May 2008, government officials arrested 14 Indian Christians in the Qassim Province for conducting their religious worship in private. During the raid, a

CPVPV member reportedly beat the pastor, and Christian songbooks and Bibles were confiscated. All detainees were released after less than 24 hours in custody.

On a positive note, there has been a decrease in recent years in the practice by customs officials of confiscating personal religious materials when expatriate workers or visitors enter the Kingdom. Also, in recent years 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 2009, press reports confirmed that representatives of the Vatican were in negotiations with the Saudi government about building the first church in Saudi Arabia; the outcome of these discussions is presently unknown.

#### *Abuses by the Religious Police*

Restrictions on public 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 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. Saudi government officials claim it is the latter group, who are untrained and often over-zealous, who commit the most egregious violations of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief. 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, and ensuring that restaurants and shops are closed during daily prayers.

Members and volunteers of the CPVPV regularly overstep authority with impunity and 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. Saudi government officials claim to have dismissed and/or disciplined members of the CPVPV for abuses of power, although reports of abuse persist and no details have been provided demonstrating that CPVPV members are, in fact, held accountable for abusive conduct.

In June 2008, Saudi human rights lawyer Abdel Rahman al-Lahem appealed a Riyadh court’s acquittal of two members of the CPVPV in the beating death of Salman al-Huraisi, who was detained for possessing and selling alcohol in May 2007. The appeal is ongoing. In July 2007, the General Investigation and Prosecution Authority in the northern town of Tabuk cleared members of the CPVPV of any wrongdoing in the June 2007 case of Ahmad al-Bulaiwi, who died in CPVPV custody after officers arrested him on suspicion of being in “illegal seclusion” with an unrelated woman. It was later established that al-Bulaiwi was a part-time driver for the woman’s family. An autopsy revealed he had been beaten.

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 have gone to trial or are proceeding to trial, including alleged beatings and deaths of Saudi citizens. The number of investigations of abuses has increased, yet in the recent cases that have been prosecuted, CPVPV members have not been held accountable and complainants report summary dismissals of cases without due process.

*Intolerant References in Educational Materials and Textbooks*

The State Department's 2009 *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom* stated that during the past year, Saudi "textbooks continued to contain some overtly intolerant statements against Jews and Christians and subtly intolerant statements against Shi'a and other religious groups, notwithstanding Government efforts to review educational materials to remove or revise such statements." According to the State Department's 2009 human rights report released in March 2010, despite the government's efforts to remove intolerant and extreme language from these books, "prejudiced concepts and expressions remained." A January 26, 2010 op-ed by USCIRF Commissioners Talal Eid and Nina Shea in the *Huffington Post* highlighted the fact that textbooks posted on the Saudi Ministry of Education's website<sup>11</sup> continue to teach hatred toward other religions and, in some cases, promote violence. Furthermore, a 2009 study by a Saudi academic found that Saudi textbooks not only teach hatred and intolerance of non-Muslims, but also promote the "spread of hatred between Muslims."<sup>12</sup>

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, the Saudi government started in 2007 a multi-year project "to revise textbooks, curricula, and teaching methods to promote tolerance and remove content disparaging religions other than Islam." As of December 2009, more than 83 school districts in 27 different regions and provinces had participated in the project. The goal of the project is to supplement the religious curriculum with knowledge-based subjects. Nevertheless, there continues to be very little transparency regarding the textbook revision process, curriculum reform, and teacher training efforts.

During and after its visit to Saudi Arabia in 2007, USCIRF requested copies of Ministry of Education textbooks, which to date have not been provided. A July 2007 letter to USCIRF from the Saudi Human Rights Commission stated that textbooks currently were being reviewed and copies would be sent to USCIRF upon completion, although no completion date was given. Despite the promise of several officials to send the books to USCIRF's office in Washington, DC and additional written requests by USCIRF, as of this writing nothing has been received.

*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 has been 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 in the Middle East, parts of Africa, South, Central and Southeast Asia, and parts of Western and Eastern Europe, including the Balkans.

Over the past few years, the Saudi government has undertaken some measures to combat extremism inside the country, such as a rehabilitation program for convicted extremists and terrorists as well as retraining and/or dismissing imams and school teachers known to espouse extremist views. According to an October 2009 assessment by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, as part of the prevention program's "mindset" component the Saudi government is distributing to its public millions of pamphlets, tracts, messages and ads of religious opinions condemning terror, and warning against the hijacking of airplanes, bombings and assassinations. Significantly, many of these initiatives, implemented through the

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://www2.moe.gov.sa/ebooks/index.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.slate.com/id/2226874/entry/2226875/>.

Saudi Interior Ministry's guidance department, are designed to confront extremism through the propagation of a "more judicious interpretation of religious doctrine."<sup>13</sup> Examples include the dropping of the *takfir* doctrine, accusing another Muslim of being an apostate to justify his murder, and the insistence 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.

In 2009, the State Department reported that the Saudi government continued 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 as pledged in the July 2006 set of policies. The government also continued to screen and monitor government-paid clerics in mosques throughout the country, although a number of some public officials and clerics made discriminatory and intolerant statements.

During the past year, there were continued reports, including from the State Department, 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, despite having been disciplined for preaching extremist views.

In 2008, the Saudi government announced that the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and the King Abdulaziz National Center for Dialogue would carry out the retraining of 40,000 additional Muslim clerics in the Kingdom as part of a program to promote tolerance and moderation in Saudi society. Imams are reportedly provided special training that exposes them to more moderate views. According to the Saudi government, teachers, imams, or professors who promote hatred and intolerance are dismissed, although such assertions of government dismissals have not been supported by 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.

#### *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 membership of the HRC was not finalized until early 2007 and does not include any women, although in March 2008, the HRC's then-Chair, Turki Al Sudairy, announced that a new royal decree would allow women to be members. In September, the HRC announced the formation of a women's branch to look into human rights abuses against women and children. In February 2009, former Shura Council member Bandar Al Aiban was appointed by royal decree as the new chair. The HRC is mandated to "protect and promote human rights in conformity with international human rights standards in all fields, to propagate awareness thereof, and to help ensure their application in a manner consistent with the provisions of the Islamic Sharia." In March 2010, the HRC announced it had received more than 4,700 complaints during the past year, 24 per cent of which were domestic violence cases. 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.

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<sup>13</sup> See USCIRF January 26, 2010 op-ed at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/imam-talal-eid/saudi-government-extremis\\_b\\_436786.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/imam-talal-eid/saudi-government-extremis_b_436786.html).

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, and is chaired by a member of Saudi Arabia's Consultative Council, or *Shura*, a 150-member advisory body. The NSHR, which was originally endowed by King Fahd, submits its reports and recommendations directly to King Abdullah. At times throughout the year, the NSHR publicly criticized alleged human rights violations committed by the Saudi government. The NSHR released its second annual report in March 2009, detailing abuses in the Kingdom on most international human rights issues and offering numerous recommendations for the Saudi government. While the report praised the government for taking some positive steps in protecting human rights, the NSHR criticized the manner in which the CPVPV operates and the slow pace of judicial reforms, and highlighted wide-ranging restrictions on the rights of women.

*Other Developments Internationally and in the Kingdom*

In February 2009, at the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Saudi Arabia at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), there were a number of recommendations from countries related to freedom of religion or belief that the Saudi government agreed to follow up and respond to at the UNHRC's June 2009 session. At the June meeting, Saudi Arabia agreed to accept most of the recommendations contained in the final report. 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 July 2008, King Abdullah hosted an interfaith conference in Madrid, Spain which included representatives from Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu and other faith communities. In November of that year, the UN General Assembly hosted a special session on interfaith dialogue, an event initiated by King Abdullah as a follow-up to the Madrid conference. A USCIRF op-ed by Commissioners Don Argue and Leonard Leo was published on November 12, 2008 in the *Christian Science Monitor* outlining the Commission's concerns about the two-day session. A proposed Saudi resolution included language condemning the "mocking of religious symbols;" however, several European countries rejected the text, citing infringement on freedom of speech. The final declaration included no mention of defamation of religions or religious symbols. The most recent international conference on interfaith dialogue initiated by King Abdullah occurred in Geneva in October 2009.

The text of the final declaration is noteworthy for other reasons. The text noted that the General Assembly meeting was convened at the initiative of King Abdullah. The declaration next stated, *inter alia*, that, "[t]he meeting reaffirmed the purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights". The meeting further "recalled that all States have pledged themselves under the Charter to promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, including freedoms of belief and expression, without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion." The affiliation of King Abdullah to the declaration and its references to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the "freedoms of belief and expression" are significant, as Saudi Arabia abstained during the vote on the UDHR in 1948. The explicit linkage of religious freedom and freedom of expression to the UN Charter's language on human rights and fundamental freedoms, all under the name of King Abdullah, more directly ties the Kingdom to the international human rights framework. Saudi Arabia has affirmed the UDHR previously in other UN resolutions, instruments, and conferences. However, doing so explicitly at a conference focused on religion is noteworthy.

According to the State Department, as of December 2009, the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue conducted nearly 2,700 training programs in which more than 150,000 people were trained to increase tolerance and encourage moderation and understanding.

In February 2009, King Abdullah announced several changes among senior government officials. Among the King's new appointments are a new head of the CPVPV, a new Minister of Education, a new Minister of Justice, a new head of the Supreme Judicial Council, and a new deputy minister for women's education, the first woman in this post. Some observers have suggested that several of the appointees are known to be reform-minded, replacing some of the more conservative members among senior government leadership. To date, there has not been any clear indication that the new appointees have helped dismantle Saudi government policies that negatively impact religious freedom conditions in the country.

### **U.S. Policy**

U.S.-Saudi relations remain close despite strains following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States when it became known that 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi nationals. Nevertheless, U.S. 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 the U.S. government's ability to press for more significant improvement in the Saudi government's poor human rights record.

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, although substantial human rights improvements in the Kingdom have not resulted.

According to the State Department's 2009 *Advancing Freedom and Democracy Report*, the U.S. government works with government and civil society leaders "to encourage reforms that counter extremism and facilitate the development of a stable, responsive, transparent, and accountable state that embodies international human rights standards and welcomes civic participation in the political process." According to the report, the U.S. government regularly raises religious freedom issues with senior 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 by the Secretary of State 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 January 2009, the State Department re-designated Saudi Arabia a CPC but kept in place a waiver of any action to “further the purposes” of IRFA.

Notwithstanding the CPC designation, 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. 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. In fact, the State Department’s policy has been to address reform issues with the Saudis privately and not make public findings that would demonstrate inadequate progress by the Saudi government. USCIRF urges the U.S. government more actively and publicly to address religious freedom and other human rights issues with the Saudi government and report openly on the 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. Specific recommendations are presented below.

### **USCIRF Activities**

Over the past year, Saudi Arabia has been a high priority in the Commission’s work. USCIRF has spoken out numerous times about religious freedom concerns in Saudi Arabia, raising these issues with U.S. and Saudi officials as well as in the public sphere. In March 2010, USCIRF urged King Abdullah to release Hadi Al-Mutif, an Ismaili Shi’a Muslim who has been in prison for more than 16 years. On January 26, 2010, USCIRF published an op-ed in the *Huffington Post* by Commissioners Talal Eid and Nina Shea on Saudi exportation of extremist ideology and ongoing concerns about intolerance in Saudi textbooks. In November 2009, USCIRF was briefed by the Director of International Affairs and Trade at the Government Accountability Office (GAO) about a recently released report focusing on countering Saudi financing of terrorism. GAO representatives discussed findings about the Saudi rehabilitation program and the efforts to combat extremist ideology within Saudi Arabia. In September, Commissioners met with the new U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, James Smith, to discuss ongoing religious freedom issues in the Kingdom. In May, USCIRF urged President Obama to raise concerns about religious freedom and related human rights during his meetings with King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and President Mubarak of Egypt. With regard to Saudi Arabia, one of the world’s worst abusers of religious freedom, USCIRF urged the President to request that King Abdullah spearhead Saudi government efforts to halt the exportation of extremist ideology.

In February 2009, the Commission urged Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to direct U.S. representatives to ask tough and incisive questions about religious freedom and related human rights violations in Saudi Arabia at the UN Human Rights Council’s UPR of that country. In November 2008, an op-ed by Commissioners Don Argue and Leonard Leo was published in the *Christian Science Monitor* outlining the Commission’s concerns about the Saudi-sponsored two-day session on interfaith dialogue at the UN General Assembly. Also in November, the Commission wrote a private letter to then-President Bush urging him to raise some specific religious prisoner cases with Saudi King Abdullah at their meeting at the UN General Assembly event.

In addition, during the past year USCIRF met with members of non-governmental organizations representing various religious communities in Saudi Arabia, as well as Saudi experts, human rights groups, and policymakers. USCIRF also met with religious leaders and educators from Saudi Arabia as part of the State Department’s International Visitors Program.



## **Recommendations**

### **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;
  - ensure that members of the CPVPV, or religious police, do not detain or conduct investigations of suspects, implement punishment, violate the sanctity of private homes, conduct surveillance, or confiscate private religious materials;
- at the highest levels, call for the release of Hadi Al-Mutif, Munir Jassas, Ali Sabat, and other religious prisoners, including Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims, 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;
  - publicly and officially refuting 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;
  - rescinding *fatwas* issued by government-funded clerics that are discriminatory toward or incite violence against Muslim minority communities or non-Muslim religious minority communities;
- report to Congress, as part of the reporting required under H.R. 1, Section 2043 (c) (1(b)) ("Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007"), on progress by the Saudi government to implement the July 2006 previously identified and confirmed policies related to religious practice and tolerance; a description of such progress should include Saudi government transparency and any benchmarks and timetables established for implementation of the July 2006 confirmed policies;
- expand the religious educators program—which brings Saudi religious leaders and scholars to the United States through a three-week International Visitor Program to learn about religious freedom in the United States—to include visits to Saudi Arabia by appropriate American leaders and educators,

and increase the numbers and diversity and range of experience of visitors to both countries;

- 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 abiding by it, including penalties for failure to cooperate;
  - urging the HRC to study the situation of freedom of religion or belief in the Kingdom, based on universal human rights standards, and report its findings publicly;
  - urging the Saudi government to implement recommendations from the NSHR's May 2007 and March 2009 reports, which, if implemented, could be a welcome initial step towards improving overall human rights compliance in the Kingdom; and
- press Saudi Arabia to uphold the human rights norms found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, especially the freedoms of religion and expression, which Saudi Arabia affirmed, inter alia, in the declaration of the high-level meeting on the Promotion of Inter-Religious and Inter-Cultural Dialogue, Understanding and Cooperation for Peace in November 2008.

The U.S. Congress should:

- appropriate funds for USCIRF to conduct a study and report on progress by the Saudi government to implement the religious freedom reforms announced by the State Department in July 2006 following bilateral discussions between the two countries.

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

Given that official Saudi school textbooks continue to include language encouraging hatred and violence that adversely affects the interests of the United States and that the Saudi government, despite repeated requests over a period of several years, has failed to make its current textbooks available to support its claims that such language has been eliminated, 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;
- request that the Saudi government:
  - make publicly available teacher training manuals used in state primary and secondary schools inside the country;
  - 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 effort to monitor, regulate, and report publicly about the activities of Saudi charitable organizations based outside Saudi Arabia in countries throughout the world;
- cease granting diplomatic status to Islamic clerics and educators teaching outside Saudi Arabia;
- 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 continue to advance adherence to international human rights standards, including the freedom of everyone to “manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching” and prohibit coercion in matters of religion or belief. The Saudi government’s persistence in severely restricting all forms of public religious expression other than the government’s interpretation and enforcement of its version of Sunni Islam is a violation of the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief. As initial steps, the U.S. government should press for 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 UPR, including those related to freedom of religion or belief;
- establish genuine safeguards for the freedom to worship in accordance with international standards;
- end state prosecution of individuals charged with apostasy, blasphemy, sorcery, and criticism of the government;
- dissolve the CPVPV and entrust law enforcement to professionals in law enforcement agencies with a precise jurisdiction and subject to judicial review, and immediately ensure that members of the CPVPV are held accountable and prosecuted for abuses; 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;
- allow foreign clergy to enter the country to carry out worship services;

- review cases and release those who have been detained or imprisoned for violations of human rights including their religious belief or practices;
- permit independent non-governmental organizations to monitor, promote, and protect human rights;
- 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;
- ratify international human rights instruments, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and cooperate with UN human rights mechanisms; and
- implement the recommendations made in Section II (“Addressing Exportation of Extremist Ideology and Intolerance in Education Materials in Saudi Arabia and around the World”).