



# UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

## ANNUAL REPORT 2011





**Annual Report of the**  
**United States Commission on International Religious Freedom**  
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Front Cover: KHUSHPUR, Pakistan, March 4, 2011 – Pakistanis carry the coffin of Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan's slain minister of minorities, who was assassinated March 2 by the Pakistani Taliban for campaigning against the country's blasphemy laws. Bhatti, 42, a close friend of USCIRF, warned in a Washington visit just one month before his death that he had received numerous death threats. More than 15,000 persons attended his funeral. (Photo by Aamir Qureshi/AFP/Getty Images)

Back Cover: JUBA, Sudan, January 9, 2011 – Southern Sudanese line up at dawn in the first hours of the week-long independence referendum to create the world's newest state. The referendum vote was the final milestone in the implementation of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which ended more than 20 years of north-south civil war in Sudan. (Photo by Roberto Schmidt/AFP/Getty Images)

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The 2011 Annual Report is dedicated to the memory of Shahbaz Bhatti, the Pakistani Federal Minister for Minorities Affairs. Shahbaz was a courageous advocate for the religious freedoms of all Pakistanis, and he was assassinated on March 2 by the Pakistani Taliban for those efforts.

## Saudi Arabia

**FINDINGS:** During the reporting period, systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom continued in Saudi Arabia despite improvements. 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 related to religious practice and tolerance. 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; prohibits churches, synagogues, temples, and other non-Muslim places of worship; uses in its schools and posts online state textbooks that continue to espouse intolerance and incite violence; and periodically interferes with private religious practice. Ismaili Muslims continue to suffer repression on account of their religious identity and there have been numerous arrests and detentions of Shi'a Muslim dissidents, in part as a result of increasing regional unrest. Members of the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice (CPVPV) continue to commit abuses, although their public presence has diminished slightly and the number of reported incidents of abuse has decreased in some parts of the country. In addition, 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 2011 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.

USCIRF traveled to Saudi Arabia in January/February 2011 to assess the Saudi government's progress in advancing freedom of religion or belief. Despite King Abdullah undertaking some limited reform measures and promoting inter-religious dialogue in international fora, there has been little progress nearly five 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. During USCIRF's visit, Saudi officials often cited national security concerns as grounds for cracking down on minorities and dissidents; however, in some cases, such explanations served as a pretext to engage in an array of severe violations of freedom of religion or belief. USCIRF continues to find that full implementation by the Saudi government of the July 2006 policies would diminish some of its institutionalized abusive practices.

**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. Unrest in the region since early 2011 provides added leverage for the U.S. government to 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 require the State Department to issue a five-year progress 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. Additional recommendations for U.S. policy toward Saudi Arabia can be found at the end of this chapter.

## Religious Freedom Conditions

### *USCIRF 2011 visit*

A USCIRF delegation traveled to Saudi Arabia in January/February to determine if the Saudi government had made progress on policies related to religious practice and tolerance. The USCIRF delegation met in Riyadh, the Eastern Province, and Jeddah with a range of government and non-governmental interlocutors. In Riyadh, the delegation met with high-level government officials, including the Ministers of Justice, Education, and Islamic Affairs, and the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. The delegation also met with representatives of the National Dialogue Center, the chair and vice chair of the government-appointed National Human Rights Commission (HRC) and representatives from other regions, representatives of the National Society for Human Rights in each region, as well as a broad array of civil society leaders, scholars, activists, and members of Saudi and expatriate religious communities.

USCIRF noted improvements in certain areas. The CPVPV has less of a public presence in some areas of the country, particularly Jeddah and the Eastern Province, and the number of reported incidents of abuses committed by the CPVPV has decreased. Women and Muslim minorities have a more pronounced public presence to discuss human rights and religious freedom concerns. 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.

During its visit, USCIRF confirmed that many ongoing concerns remain. The Saudi government invokes national security to justify repression of minorities and dissidents. Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims continue to face discrimination, harassment, and imprisonment. Members of the CPVPV who allegedly committed abuses in the past, including killings, have gone unpunished by Saudi authorities. Textbook revisions are limited and incomplete and content espousing intolerance and even inciting violence remains. Saudi officials claim to have a plan in place to complete revisions for grades one to 12 by 2013, although revisions of textbooks have been "in progress" for nearly 10 years and, in 2006, the Saudi government confirmed to the State Department a policy to remove by 2008 all remaining textbook references that were religiously intolerant or promoted hatred toward other religions or religious groups. The government also has made little progress on halting the global dissemination from Saudi Arabia of extremist ideology, literature, and other materials, some of which is published by the government itself, or by publishing houses that are tightly monitored by the government.

### *State Coercion of Religious Conformity*

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.

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'a Muslims, Jews, and Christians. Saudi officials acknowledged that some clerics continue to preach such views. However, during the reporting period, the Saudi government has taken some initial steps to address indiscriminate *fatwas*. In September 2010, several Web sites containing intolerant and inciteful *fatwas* were blocked, following a decree by King Abdullah. The decree was issued to reduce controversial *fatwas* issued by ultra-conservative clerics, some of which have been a serious embarrassment to Saudi authorities. The decree restricts the right to issue *fatwas* to members of the officially approved Council of Senior Islamic Scholars. Also, in May 2010, the Council issued a *fatwa* condemning terrorist financing as forbidden by Islamic law.

Moreover, in January 2011, in an effort to curb extremism in mosques in the Kingdom, prominent Saudi scholar Sheikh Abdul-Aziz Al-Fouzan joined other religious scholars in calling for Saudi government-supported imams to end the practice of prayers that incited violence against non-Muslims. Al-Fouzan, a member of the Saudi Human Rights Commission, said supplications were an act of aggression against non-Muslims and were "against the spirit of Islam."

During USCIRF's 2011 visit, officials at the Ministry of Islamic Affairs (MIA) claimed that at least 3,500 imams have been dismissed for espousing extremist views and more than 20,000, of a total of 75,000 imams in the country, have been re-trained, a higher number than cited in the past. The MIA estimates that approximately 70 percent of all imams in the country are "free of fanaticism" and meet the necessary qualifications to be a cleric. The MIA claims to be making efforts to re-train the remaining 30 percent of imams.

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 by expatriate workers coming for temporary employment, particularly the religious freedom 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, including female domestic laborers, 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 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 government restrictions on public religious practices and official discrimination, 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. In predominantly Sunni Muslim areas of the country outside the Eastern Province, Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims face harassment, arrest, and detention. Furthermore, since many Saudi judges consider Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims to be "non-believers," they are frequently dealt with more severely by the courts. In addition, children of Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims are indoctrinated in public schools with the government's interpretation of Sunni Islam and there is no alternative option for instruction according to the wishes of the parents.

Over several weeks in February and March 2011, Saudi authorities cracked down on Shi'a demonstrators who were calling for the release of religious and political prisoners. Dozens were arrested, particularly in March, and several were injured during clashes with Saudi security forces, primarily in the Eastern Province. According to human rights groups, during peaceful protests of several hundred to a few thousand Shi'a youth and activists in mid March in the Eastern towns of Safwa, Qatif, and Al-Ahsa, nearly 150 protesters were arrested and remain in detention. In early March, the Interior Ministry and the Council of Senior Islamic Scholars announced a ban on protests ahead of demonstrations for a "Day of Rage" that had been called for March 11.

In recent years *fatwas* have been issued by conservative Sunni clerics that justify committing violent acts against Shi'a Muslims. During USCIRF's 2011 visit, the Shi'a community expressed a desire to see more active government intervention when clerics issue such provocative edicts.

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 2010-2011. Some of the reasons cited by the Shi'a community for arbitrary arrests include: reading of religious materials in private homes; congregating outside *hussainiyas* (Shi'a community centers), using a loud speaker outside a community center; refusal to close down a makeshift place of worship; taking part in religious celebrations; and distributing sweets during religious occasions. For example, in February 2010, six young Shi'a Muslims, between the ages of 17 and 22, from Al-Ahsa were detained by authorities allegedly for passing out sweets on a Shi'a religious holiday. Authorities reportedly claim the youths defaced a Saudi flag and threw stones at police. In January 2011, the six youths were transferred to a state security detention facility in Riyadh. The six were released on February 23 after USCIRF had raised their cases during its visit earlier that month. The six had been held for a year in detention without charges, despite a limit of six months for pre-trial detention under the Saudi criminal procedure code.

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 June 2010, Saudi authorities arrested Saudi activist Sheikh Mikhliif al-Shammari for articles he wrote criticizing Sunni clerics who had disparaged the Shi'a community. 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.

On February 27, 2011, Saudi Shi'a cleric Tawfiq Al-Amer was detained by police after calling for the country to become a constitutional monarchy and for an end to corruption and discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in a sermon in the Eastern Province town of Hofuf. The cleric previously had been detained for calling for greater religious freedom for the Shi'a community. Al-Amer was released on March 6 after hundreds of people took to the streets in Hofuf and near Qatif in the Eastern Province to protest his arrest. At least 26 Shi'a Muslims were arrested by authorities for taking part in the peaceful demonstrations.

During the reporting period, authorities shut down several Shi'a mosques in the Eastern Province and refused a mosque permit for the Al-Khobar Shi'a community. In April 2010, the Minister of Interior Prince Naif reportedly said publicly that Shi'a mosques which were closed in the past would not be permitted to be re-opened for security reasons. Authorities also justify the closures by citing improper zoning and lack of mandated permits. According to press reports, 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 many Sunni Muslims in the country do not mark graves.



In November 2009, Shi'a Muslim activist Munir Al Jassas was arrested after being warned by Saudi authorities to stop blogging on the Internet about the Saudi government's poor treatment of Shi'a Muslims. Although no formal charges were filed, he spent at least four months in solitary confinement during his detention. Two other Shi'a rights activists, Muhammad Al Libad and Ramzi Jamal, were arrested and held without charge in January 2010 and November 2010, respectively. All three men were released on February 20, 2011.

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* 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 abuse and discrimination by Saudi authorities, particularly in religious practice, government employment, the justice system, and education. The government does not finance the building of mosques for Ismailis, although it does so for other Sunni Muslim houses of worship, and it has closed down several Ismaili places of worship in recent years in Al Khobar, Abqaiq, Jubail, Dammam, and Al Khafji. 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.

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. In 1996, he was convicted and 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 2009, Al-Mutif received an additional five-year prison term for criticizing the government's justice system and human rights record on a tape that was smuggled out of prison and later broadcast. During USCIRF's 2011 visit, Saudi authorities stated that Al-Mutif had exhausted all legal appeals and his fate now is in the hands of King Abdullah, who could pardon him at anytime. Al-Mutif repeatedly has attempted to commit suicide during his incarceration, and his psychological and physical health remain a serious concern.

#### *Other Dissident Muslims*

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 appropriate role of religion in relation to the state, its laws, and society, are typically the target of such charges. In January 2009, Hamoud Al-Amri, a Saudi convert to Christianity, was arrested for discussing his Christian faith on his blog. In March 2009, Al-Amri was released from prison on the condition that he not leave the country or appear in the media. The case received international attention and advocacy groups campaigned for his release. Al-Amri was previously detained for nine months in 2004 and a month in 2008. He is banned from leaving the country and fears for his safety.



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. During its 2011 visit, USCIRF was informed by Ministry of Justice officials that Sabat committed acts “damaging to others” and violated moral values inside Saudi Arabia. According to officials, Sabat’s death sentence was overturned although he allegedly pleaded guilty to several charges leveled against him, including sorcery and blasphemy. Sabat remains in prison while his case is ongoing.

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 adversely affects 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 turned away from medical treatment by hospitals if they lack the consent of a male relative. When appearing in public, women must adhere to a strict religious 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. The King set municipal elections for September 2011, but like the first municipal elections in 2005, women will not be permitted to vote.

In addition, the Saudi justice system, in which courts apply the Saudi government interpretation of 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. During USCIRF’s 2011 visit, Ministry of Justice officials stated that women have equal justice under the law and independent legal personalities, although these claims were not substantiated. Officials also claimed that women are granted guardianship of children under the law, although Saudi women’s rights activists and human rights groups dispute this claim.

During a 2008 visit to Saudi Arabia by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, the 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.” The Rapporteur 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 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.” To date, the Saudi government has not implemented the Rapporteur’s recommendations.



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

Non-Muslims are not allowed to have nationality in Saudi Arabia and no churches, synagogues, temples, or other 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.

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. During USCIRF's 2011 visit, some Saudi officials continued to assert that having non-Muslim places of worship on Saudi soil would be equivalent to building mosques on Vatican property in Italy. As in previous meetings with Saudi officials, USCIRF drew a distinction between a geographic entity in Italy of two square miles with 800 to 900 residents versus a country the size of Saudi Arabia with between two and three million non-Muslim residents.

In 2010 and early 2011, 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 are still 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 some 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 and Jeddah 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. On February 12, 2011 an Eritrean Christian, Mussie Eyob, was detained after allegedly preaching Christianity at a mosque in Jeddah. Eyob remains in detention without charge. In January 2011, two Indian Christians, Yohan Nese and Vasantha Sekhar Vara, were arrested when members of the CPVPV raided a private residence where the two attended a prayer gathering. The CPVPV interrogated and allegedly physically abused the two men. The CPVPV also reportedly put pressure on the men to convert to Islam. A Saudi court in



Riyadh reportedly sentenced the two men to 45 days in prison, allegedly for proselytizing, although no formal charges have been filed. At the end of the reporting period, the two men remain in detention.

In October 2010, approximately a dozen Filipino Christians were detained for eight days on charges of proselytizing. After being released, they were reinstated in their jobs. On March 19, 2010, four CPVPV officers and one uniformed police officer raided an Indian Christian prayer service in a private residence. The CPVPV confiscated Bibles and religious materials. Police arrested the pastor and two worshippers and detained them until March 23. By July, seven Indian Christians involved with the private prayer service were deported.

During USCIRF's 2011 visit, non-Muslim interlocutors stated that it takes several weeks for the bodies of deceased non-Muslim expatriate workers to be shipped by Saudi authorities to their home country. Saudi authorities almost never permit non-Muslims to be buried in the Kingdom. Despite going to great lengths to urge Saudi officials to expedite the process, non-Muslim workers have had little success. In some cases, religious obligations of expatriate workers require deceased bodies to be buried within a period of days, not weeks. Nevertheless, it remains nearly impossible to fulfill such requirements.

According to the State Department, in recent years, there were fewer 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. 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 recent years, press reports confirmed that representatives of the Vatican were in negotiations with the Saudi government about building the first church in Saudi Arabia, so far to no avail.

#### *Abuses by the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice (CPVPV)*

Restrictions on public religious manifestations and 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, although Saudi officials claim that the CPVPV no longer accepts volunteers. 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 daily prayers, and enforcing other restrictions on behavior.

Members of the CPVPV periodically overstep authority but despite numerous documented infractions, they 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.

During USCIRF's 2011 visit, non-governmental interlocutors stated that the public presence of the CPVPV has diminished over the past couple of years. Several activists, particularly women, claimed that Saudi citizens respond to members of the CPVPV when they are harassed. For example, interlocutors cited examples where members of the CPVPV would instruct women to adhere better to a newly-devised aspect of the dress code but women would either ignore the advice or counter it with learned arguments.

Saudi government officials claim to have dismissed, disciplined, and criminally tried members of the CPVPV for abuses of power. During USCIRF's 2011 visit, Ministry of Justice 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 compensated by Saudi administrative courts for damages 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.

In December 2010, the director of the CPVPV, Abdul Aziz al-Humain, announced that the CPVPV had begun to implement a strategic plan to combat extremist ideology promoted by terrorist and other similar groups in the Kingdom. It is not clear what, if any, progress the CPVPV has made since the announcement. USCIRF's request to meet with the CPVPV during its 2011 visit was not granted.

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 went to trial or are proceeding to trial, including alleged beatings and deaths of Saudi citizens. However, in most of the cases that have been prosecuted, CPVPV members have not been held accountable and complainants report summary dismissals of cases without due process. During USCIRF's visit, Ministry of Justice officials claimed that one CPVPV member was found guilty of killing a citizen and sentenced to death by beheading, but would not provide details because the case is on appeal.

#### *Intolerant References in Educational Materials and Textbooks*

USCIRF's review of Saudi textbooks posted on the Saudi Ministry of Education's Web site found that books in use during the 2010-2011 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 and homosexuals and labeled Jews and Christians "enemies of the believers." The State Department's 2010 religious freedom report stated: "[a]lthough some overtly intolerant statements in textbooks were removed or modified following stated government intention to reform educational materials to remove or revise such statements, textbooks continued to contain overtly intolerant statements against Jews and Christians and subtly intolerant statements against Shi'a and other religious groups."

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." Nevertheless, there continues to be very little transparency regarding the textbook revision process, curriculum reform, and teacher training efforts.

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.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Ministry of Education officials claim that the number of subjects taught in public schools textbooks will decrease as a result of the revisions. It is not clear when these revised texts will be used in Saudi schools throughout the country.

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<sup>1</sup> During USCIRF's 2011 visit, Saudi Ministry of Education officials provided the USCIRF delegation with the link to the new Ministry of Education website that included revised textbooks from grades one, four and seven: [http://www.cpfdc.gov.sa/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=55&Itemid=61](http://www.cpfdc.gov.sa/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=55&Itemid=61)



During its meeting with the Minister of Education, USCIRF was promised two sets of textbooks currently used in Saudi schools. By the end of the reporting period eight weeks after its visit, USCIRF had not received copies of the textbooks despite follow-up.

*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 is used globally to finance religious schools, mosques, hate literature, and other activities that support religious intolerance and, in some cases, violence toward non-Muslims and disfavored Muslims. In 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. In November 2010, a British press report showed that Saudi textbooks and literature that promote intolerance and incitement to violence continue to be used in at least 40 Saudi schools in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

Over the past few years, the Saudi government has undertaken some 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 is distributing 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 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.

Saudi officials claim that they continue 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. According to Saudi officials, the government also continues 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.

During its 2011 visit, USCIRF was informed that the Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs and the King Abdulaziz National Center for Dialogue have been retraining 40,000 additional Muslim clerics as part of a program to promote tolerance and moderation in Saudi society. Imams reportedly receive special training that exposes them to more moderate views. The Saudi government also asserts that teachers, imams, or professors who promote hatred and intolerance are dismissed, but has not supported this assertion with 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.

During USCIRF's 2011 visit, Saudi officials provided no details of programs or initiatives that have been undertaken over the past year by the government to halt the dissemination of intolerant literature and extremist ideology globally.

### *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. In 2008, the HRC formed 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." The HRC receives thousands of complaints a year, one-third of which are 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. During USCIRF's 2011 visit, members and staff of the HRC stated that religious tolerance had improved over the past few years and that women's empowerment programs had resulted in significant strides for women in all aspects of society. Members of the HRC also suggested that the attitudes of members of the CPVPV toward women had changed over the past three years as a result of training programs and a change in CPVPV leadership.

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 publicly criticized alleged human rights violations committed by the Saudi government. The NSHR released its third annual report in 2010, 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. During USCIRF's 2011 visit, members and staff of the NSHR downplayed religious freedom concerns by asserting that NSHR offices rarely, if ever, receive complaints about violations of freedom of religion or belief.

### *Other Developments Internationally and in the Kingdom*

In 2009, at the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Saudi Arabia, the Saudi government accepted a number of recommendations related to freedom of religion or belief. 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 2008, King Abdullah initiated a series of international interfaith conferences and events in Europe and at the United Nations which included representatives from Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu and other faith communities. During USCIRF's 2011 visit, representatives of the National Dialogue Center stated that an interfaith office is being set up in Vienna, Austria, in part to follow up on King Abdullah's initiatives. According to officials from the Dialogue Center, representatives from various religious communities will have representation at the offices in Vienna.

In early 2011, in response to the uprisings in the Middle East and the increasing number of demonstrations in the Kingdom, King Abdullah announced a number of economic and political reforms, including: social, unemployment, and housing benefits totaling approximately \$36 billion, wage increases for government workers, the creation of 60,000 security-related jobs, and anti-corruption measures. The King also set municipal elections for September 2011 only for male voters. None of the announced reforms address Saudi government policies that negatively impact religious freedom conditions in the country.

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

U.S.-Saudi relations remain close, but 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 willingness and/or ability of the U.S. government to press for more significant improvement in the Saudi government's poor human rights record. 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, despite opportunities emerging as a result of demonstrations calling for increased reforms and greater rights throughout the Arab world in early 2011.

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.

In October 2010, the Obama Administration informed Congress of its intent to sell approximately \$60 billion in arms to Saudi Arabia over a period of 10 years. In November, nearly 200 members of Congress wrote to Secretary of State Clinton raising concerns and questioning the impact of such sales on the national security interests of the United States and its allies. Nevertheless, the letter did not address concerns about the Saudi government's poor human rights and religious freedom record.

According to the State Department's 2010 *Advancing Freedom and Democracy Report*, the U.S. government works with government and civil society leaders in the country "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 Saudi 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.

## **Recommendations**

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. The State Department in practice has addressed reform issues with the Saudis privately, and not made 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.

### **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; and
  - ensure that members of the CPVPV do not investigate or detain suspects, implement punishment, violate the sanctity of private homes, conduct surveillance, or confiscate private religious materials;
- seek from the Saudi Ministry of Justice the names of those members of the CPVPV who have been investigated, prosecuted, convicted, dismissed, disciplined or otherwise punished for past abuses and provide information about each alleged offense and an update about the current status of each case;
- dissolve the CPVPV and entrust law enforcement to professionals in 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 Hadi Al-Mutif, Ali Sabat, and other religious prisoners, including Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims and Muslim and non-Muslim expatriate workers, 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;

--refuting, publicly and officially, 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; and

--rescinding *fatwas* issued by government-funded clerics that are discriminatory toward or incite violence against Muslim minority communities or non-Muslim religious minority communities;

- 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 religious leaders and educators, and increase the numbers, diversity, and range of experience of visitors to both countries;
- press the Saudi government to permit the expeditious transport of bodies of deceased non-Muslim expatriate workers to their home countries, a process that, at present, can take several weeks;
- 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;
  - urging the Saudi government to implement recommendations from the NSHR's reports, which, if implemented, could be a welcome initial step towards improving human rights compliance in the Kingdom; and

The U.S. Congress should:

- require the State Department to issue a public five-year progress report by December 31, 2011 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 between U.S. Members of Congress and members of the Saudi Consultative Council (*Shura*) on specific issues, especially human rights and religious freedom.

## **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;
- 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 standards set out in 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 universities in the country;
- 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 on 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; and
  - 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 to be free of 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, and sorcery;
- allow foreign clergy to enter the country to carry out worship services and to bring into the country religious materials for such services;
- permit independent non-governmental organizations to monitor, promote, and protect human rights;
- convene a public interfaith conference inside Saudi Arabia with Muslim and non-Muslim faiths represented, and continue the Kingdom’s interfaith activities globally;
- 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; and
- ratify international human rights instruments, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and cooperate with UN human rights mechanisms.