



Saudi Arabia

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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The country is a monarchy with a legal system based on its interpretation of Shari'a (Islamic law). Islam is the official religion. There is no legal recognition of, or protection under the law for, freedom of religion, and it is severely restricted in practice. The Government confirmed that as a matter of public policy it guarantees and protects the right to private worship for all, including non-Muslims who gather in homes for religious services. However, this right was not always respected in practice and is not defined in law. Moreover, the public practice of non-Muslim religions is prohibited. While the Government also confirmed its policy to protect the right to possess and use personal religious materials, it did not provide for this right in law.

While overall, Government policies continued to place severe restrictions on religious freedom, there were some improvements in specific areas during the period covered by this report. In addition, there were some positive developments in government policy that, if fully implemented, could lead to important improvements in the future.

While the majority of citizens support a government and society based on Islamic law, there are varying views on its interpretation and implementation. Despite this diversity of views, the Government continued to enforce a conservative interpretation of Sunni Islam. Non-Muslims and Muslims who do not adhere to this interpretation faced significant political, economic, legal, social, and religious discrimination, including limited employment and educational opportunities, underrepresentation in official institutions, and restrictions on the practice of their faith and on the building of places of worship and community centers. There were also charges of harassment, abuse, and killings at the hands of the mutawwa'in, or religious police, who work for the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice (CPVPV). In addition, scores of foreign workers and their family members were arrested for practicing their faith and deported. These incidents caused many non-Muslims to worship in fear of, and in such a manner as to avoid discovery by, the police and mutawwa'in. There were also concerns about Saudi textbooks that continued to contain statements of intolerance towards Shi'a, Ismailis, Jews, Christians, and other religious groups, and such statements were also made by public officials, teachers, and government-paid imams.

Even so, the Government reiterated its policy to halt the dissemination of intolerance, and combat extremism, both within Islam and toward non-Muslim religious groups, within the country and abroad. The Government confirmed that it was reviewing educational materials to remove or revise disparaging references to other religious traditions; it was monitoring sermons at government-supported mosques and will dismiss or retrain imams whose preaching promotes religious extremism; and it was undertaking to screen out prospective teachers who hold extremist religious views and would dismiss teachers who espouse such views. The Government also announced several policies and initiated various measures intended to curb religious freedom violations committed by the mutawwa'in, and there were fewer reports of harassment by the mutawwa'in than in the past.

During the reporting period, the Government announced several policies and began to undertake various measures that would allow greater freedom for religious minorities. The Government continued progress toward implementation of its announced policy of "balanced development" by promising infrastructure development in predominantly Shi'a and Ismaili areas of the Eastern Province and Najran Province, respectively. The Government appointed more Shi'a judges to the Ja'afari courts in the Eastern Province and one Shi'a and one Sulaimani Ismaili Shi'a to the board of the Government's Human Rights Commission (HRC). There were fewer reports of confiscation of religious materials at the airports in Jeddah and Dhahran, and fewer mutawwa'in raids of religious gatherings in the Western Hijaz region and in the Eastern Province. In addition, there were reports of larger public and private celebrations of Shi'a holidays within the Eastern Province.

In response to growing concerns about the mutawwa'in, the Government allowed for unprecedented media coverage and criticism of the mutawwa'in. In addition, the Majlis Al-Shura (Consultative Council) voted against expanding the jurisdiction of the mutawwa'in and voted for additional training for them.

Senior U.S. officials discussed a number of key policies concerning religious practice and tolerance with the Government,

as well as specific cases involving the infringement of the right of religious freedom. The U.S.-Saudi Strategic Dialogue continued with other meetings of its working groups, notably the Partnership, Education, Exchange, and Human Development Working Group. The dialogue raised the profile of key issues, including the promotion of religious freedom and tolerance.

In November 2006 Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice redesignated Saudi Arabia as a Country of Particular Concern, and the Government was issued a waiver of sanctions "to further the purposes of the Act."

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 1,225,000 square miles and a population of more than 27 million, including an estimated foreign population of more than 8 million. The foreign population reportedly includes 1.5 million Indians, 1.5 million Bangladeshis, 1.2 million Filipinos, 1 million Pakistanis, 1 million Egyptians, 600,000 Indonesians, 400,000 Sri Lankans, 350,000 Nepalese, 250,000 Palestinians, 150,000 Lebanese, 100,000 Eritreans, and 30,000 Americans.

The majority of citizens are Sunni Muslims who predominantly subscribe to the Government-sanctioned interpretation of Islam. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowment, Call, and Guidance (MOIA) is responsible for 72,000 Sunni mosques and employs 120,000 persons, including 72,000 imams. The grand muftis of the two holiest mosques in Mecca and Medina report directly to the King.

Comprehensive statistics for the religious denominations of foreigners are not available; however, they include Muslims from the various branches and schools of Islam, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and others. The Shi'a Muslim minority of reportedly two million persons lives mostly in the Eastern Province, although a significant number also reside in Mecca and Medina in the Western Hijaz region. There are also 700,000 Sulaimani Ismaili Shi'a, a minority group found primarily in the Najran Province.

In addition to European and North American Christians, there are Christian East Africans, Indians, Pakistanis, Lebanese, Syrians, and Palestinians residing in the country, including as many as one million Roman Catholics. Ninety percent of the Filipino community is Christian. It is reported that there are private Christian religious gatherings throughout the country. There is no information on the number of atheists in the country.

In January 2007 the country hosted more than two million Muslim pilgrims from around the world and from all branches of Islam for the annual Hajj to Mecca.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

According to the country's Basic Law, the Qur'an and the Sunna (traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) constitute the country's constitution, and Islam is the official religion. It is the Government's policy that non-Muslims are permitted to practice their religion freely within their homes without interference. However, under the Government's interpretation of Islam, there is no legal recognition or protection of religious freedom, which is severely restricted in practice.

As custodian of Islam's two holiest sites, Mecca and Medina, the Government considers its legitimacy to rest largely on its interpretation and enforcement of Islam, which is based on the writings and teachings of 18th-century Sunni religious scholar Muhammad ibn Abd Al-Wahhab. The country's Basic Law establishes the system of government, rights of citizens and residents, and powers and duties of the Government. Neither the Government, nor society in general, accepts the concept of separation of religion and state in terms of governance.

Non-Muslims and Muslims whose beliefs do not adhere to the government-approved interpretation of Islam must practice their religion in private and are vulnerable to discrimination, harassment, detention, and if a non-citizen, deportation. Although no law requires citizens or passport holders to be Muslim, almost all citizens are Muslims. Proselytizing by non-Muslims is illegal, and conversion by Muslims to another religion (apostasy) carries the death penalty, although there have been no reported executions for apostasy in years.

The judicial system is based on Shari'a, the traditional system of interpreting laws derived from the Qur'an, the Sunna, and other religious sources. The Government recognizes all four Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence and the Shi'a Ja'afari school of jurisprudence. However, while government universities provide training on the other Sunni schools, they focus on the Hanbali school. Consequently, most judges adhere to the Hanbali school, which is considered the most conservative of the Sunni schools.

The Council of Senior Ulema (religious scholars) is an advisory body of reportedly 21 Sunni religious jurists, including the Minister of Justice, which reports to the King. The Ulema meet periodically to interpret Shari'a and establish the legal principles that guide lower court judges. There were no Shi'a Ulema members during the period covered by this report.

The Government permits Shi'a judges to use their own version of Shari'a to adjudicate cases limited to family law, inheritance, and endowment management. However, there were only seven Shi'a judges, all of whom were located in the Eastern Province. Three of these seven judges served on a Court of Appeals. Unlike the Shi'a in the Eastern Province, Shi'a living in other parts of the country, including the western Hijaz region and central Riyadh region, did not have access to local, regional, or national Shi'a Courts of Appeals. Instead, they had to appeal their cases to Sunni courts. The Sunni Shari'a courts could, and did, overrule judgments of Shi'a judges, and other government departments could choose not to implement judgments rendered by Shi'a judges. The Government also replaced unexpectedly at least one Shi'a judge during the reporting period.

In accordance with the country's official interpretation of Islam, it is considered acceptable to discriminate against religions held to be polytheistic. Christians and Jews, who are classified as "People of the Book," are also discriminated against, but to a lesser extent. This discrimination is manifested, for example, in calculating accidental death or injury compensation. For example, according to the country's interpretation of Shari'a, in the event a court renders a judgment in favor of a plaintiff who is a Jewish or Christian male, the plaintiff is only entitled to receive 50 percent of the compensation a Muslim male would receive, and all others (including Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs) are only entitled to receive 1/16 the amount a male Muslim would receive. Furthermore, judges may discount the testimony of nonpracticing Muslims or individuals who do not adhere to the official interpretation of Islam. For example, testimony by Shi'a can be ignored in courts of law or is deemed to have less weight than testimony by Sunnis, despite official government statements that judges do not discriminate based on religion when hearing testimonies. Moreover, a woman's testimony is worth only half that of a man's, and a non-Muslim's testimony is worth less than that of a Muslim's.

The CPVPV is a semiautonomous agency with the authority to monitor social behavior and enforce morality consistent with the Government's interpretation of Islam primarily, but not exclusively, within the public realm. The CPVPV reports to the King through the Royal Diwan, or royal court. The Ministry of Interior coordinates with, but does not have authority over, the CPVPV or the mutawwa'in. The CPVPV is one of eight Government entities with the authority under the Criminal Code to arrest and detain persons. However, the mutawwa'in are not allowed to engage in surveillance, detain individuals for more than 24 hours, arrest individuals without police accompaniment, or administer any kind of punishment. Nevertheless, the Government was investigating several incidents that occurred during the reporting period where the mutawwa'in were accused of violating these restrictions. Mutawwa'in enforcement of social standards of appearance and behavior included insisting upon compliance with conservative dress standards, forced observance of the five daily calls to prayer, disrupting the production and consumption of alcohol and narcotics, and dispersing some public religious gatherings.

According to an official report issued by the CPVPV in January 2007, there were 3,227 mutawwa'in working in 1,310 centers in all 13 provinces. The report also indicated that during the Muslim calendar year that crosses 2005-06, there were 390,117 incidents involving 402,725 persons, of whom only 101,143 were citizens. The mutawwa'in referred only 6.4 percent of these incidents to the "relevant authorities," supposedly to protect the privacy of those involved. There were also reports that few cases were referred to the police, so as to reduce the burden on the overstretched police force.

The MOIA supervises and finances the construction and maintenance of most Sunni mosques, although approximately 30 percent of Sunni mosques are built and endowed by private persons, either as acts of charity or at private residences. The MOIA does not register or support Shi'a mosques.

The majority of Sunni imams are full-time MOIA employees, receiving on average between \$533 and \$800 (SAR 2,000-3,000) per month, which is considered low, compared to other full-time Saudi civil servants. Shi'a imams are not funded by the MOIA and instead rely on community contributions, which can vary widely depending on the size of the mosque. Like many Saudis, imams tend to have separate businesses to supplement their salaries. An MOIA committee defines the qualifications of Sunni imams, while the Ministry of Interior is responsible for investigating complaints against imams for promoting intolerance, violence, or hate. The Government's policy is to counsel imams who issue intolerant fatwas or who make religious statements that promote intolerance, violence, or hatred, especially of non-Sunnis.

The Government's stated policy is to permit private worship for all, including non-Muslims who gather in homes for religious practice, and to address violations of this policy by government officials. However, the mutawwa'in sometimes did not respect this policy. Individuals whose ability to worship privately had been infringed could address their grievances through the Ministry of the Interior, the HRC, the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR--a quasi-autonomous nongovernmental organization (NGO)), and when appropriate, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The HRC reported that it received and acted on complaints against the mutawwa'in. Otherwise, during the reporting period, there was no information available on the number of complaints filed or the Government's response to these complaints.

The government-stated policy is that religious materials for personal private use are allowed in the country, and customs

officials and the mutawwa'in do not have the authority to confiscate personal private religious materials. The mutawwa'in did not always respect this policy, though, and there were signs in the airports warning visitors to declare all religious paraphernalia to the customs officials. It is also the Government's policy to inform foreign workers at its missions abroad that they have the right to worship privately and possess personal religious materials, and to provide the name of the appropriate offices where grievances could be filed. However, during the reporting period there was no evidence the Government carried out this policy, either orally or in writing, and there were no reports of any grievances filed by such workers.

The HRC was created to address human rights abuses and promote human rights within the country. The 24-member HRC board, which does not include women, was established in December 2006. Two HRC board members appointed during this reporting period were Shi'a and Sulaimani Ismaili Shi'a, respectively. The HRC reported that it received more than 8,000 human rights complaints, including infractions by mutawwa'in. The HRC was also given the mandate to improve human rights awareness in the country, including the promotion of tolerance. In this endeavor, the HRC was working with the Ministry of Education and providing materials and training to the police, security forces, and mutawwa'in on protecting human rights. The HRC reportedly advised the CPVPV leadership in May 2007 not to interfere with non-Saudi nationals' private religious activities. The King also issued a decree that ministries had 3 weeks to respond to complaints filed by the HRC.

The Ministry of Education is responsible for primary and secondary public education, while the Ministry of Higher Education is responsible for tertiary public education. Both ministries also monitor private education. In 2006 the Government formed the High Commission for Education (HCE) to oversee the ongoing reform of the primary and secondary educational system. The HCE reports to the King and is chaired by the Crown Prince. Its members include the Ministers of Justice, Islamic Affairs, Education, Higher Education, and Labor; two members of the Shura Council; the Secretary General of the Islamic League; and a representative of the Council of Senior Ulema. The HCE's mandate is to oversee the effort to improve textbooks (including the removal of intolerant language), educational curricula (including the promotion of human rights), and teacher training.

In addition to the secular National Day on September 23, the Islamic religious feasts of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha are recognized as national holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Public religious practice is generally limited to that which conforms to the teachings of the 18th-century Sunni religious scholar Muhammad ibn Abd Al-Wahhab. Practices contrary to this interpretation, such as the celebration of Maulid al-Nabi (Birthday of the Prophet Muhammad) and visits to the tombs of renowned Muslims, are forbidden, although in some places enforcement was more relaxed than in others. Similarly, the Government also prohibits the public propagation of Islamic teachings that differ from the officially accepted interpretation of Islam.

Regardless of their personal religious traditions, public school students at all levels receive mandatory religious instruction based on the Government's interpretation of Sunni Islam. Non-Muslim students in private schools are not required to study Islam. However, private religious schools are not permitted for non-Muslims or for Muslims adhering to unofficial interpretations of Islam.

In higher education the Government discriminated against Shi'a in the selection process for students, professors, and administrators at public universities. For example, it was estimated that Shi'a comprise 2 percent of professors at a leading university in Al-Ahsa, an area that is at least 50 percent Shi'a. Also in Al-Ahsa, it was estimated that there were five Shi'a principals at the several hundred boys' schools and no Shi'a principals at the several hundred girls' schools. Although Shi'a principals were also underrepresented in Qatif, it was reported during the reporting period that the Government started appointing Shi'a principals at girls' schools. In addition, Shi'a teachers are not permitted to teach certain courses in schools, such as history or religion, even in predominantly Shi'a areas.

In addition to discrimination in education, members of the Shi'a minority were also subjected to political discrimination tacitly approved by the Government. For example, although Shi'a comprise 10 to 15 percent of the citizen population and approximately half of the citizens in the Eastern Province, Shi'a were underrepresented in senior government positions. There were no Shi'a governors, mayors, or ministry branch directors in the Eastern Province, and only 3 of the 59 government-appointed municipal council members were Shi'a. However, the Shi'a are well-represented among the elected members of the municipal councils. The municipal council at Qatif was headed by an elected Shi'a. At the national level, there were only 4 Shi'a in the 150-member Majlis Al-Shura.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Shi'a also faced considerable employment discrimination in other parts of the public as well as in the private sector. While some Shi'a occupied high-level positions in government-owned companies and government agencies, many Shi'a believed that openly identifying themselves as Shi'a would have a negative impact on

career advancement. While there was no formal policy concerning the hiring and promotion of Shi'a, anecdotal evidence suggested that in some companies, including in the oil and petrochemical industries, well-qualified Shi'a were passed over for less-qualified Sunni compatriots. In the public sector, Shi'a were significantly underrepresented in national security related positions.

Many Shi'a were subjected to systemic religious discrimination, too. For example, the Government does not finance construction or maintenance of Shi'a mosques. Shi'a who wished to build a new mosque were required to obtain the permission of the MOIA, the municipality, and the governorate, which is functionally part of the Ministry of Interior; the latter office's approval was not necessary for Sunni mosques. While the Government approved construction of new Shi'a mosques in Qatif and some areas of Al-Ahsa, sometimes after lengthy delays, it did not approve construction of Shi'a mosques in Dammam, home to a significant number of Shi'a.

Furthermore, the Government does not officially recognize several hawzat (centers of Shi'a religious instruction) located in the Eastern Province, provide financial support to them, recognize certificates of educational attainment for their graduates, or provide their graduates employment, all of which it does for Sunni religious training institutions. Religious training for all other religious groups is prohibited.

The Government refused to approve construction or registration of husseiniyat, which serve as Shi'a community centers. Shi'a were forced to build areas in private homes to serve as husseiniyat, which did not enjoy legal recognition. These husseiniyat sometimes did not meet safety codes, and the lack of legal recognition made their long-term financing and continuity considerably more difficult.

While the authorities allowed Shi'a in the Eastern province city of Qatif greater freedom in their religious practices, in other areas with large Shi'a populations, such as Al-Ahsa and Dammam, the authorities continued to restrict Shi'a religious practices. The Government imposed restrictions on public observances of Ashura (commemoration of the martyrdom of Hussayn ibn Ali, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad) in Al-Ahsa, Dammam, and other mixed areas where Shi'a and Sunni live, banning public marches, loudspeaker broadcast of clerics' lectures from husseiniyat, and, in some instances, gatherings within husseiniyat. In addition, the Government continued to exclude Shi'a perspectives from the state's extensive religious media and broadcast programming and appeared to enforce more sporadic restrictions such as banning the importation and sale of Shi'a books and audio and video products.

Since the government-approved interpretation of Islam holds that the veneration of humans, including the Prophet Muhammad, is idolatrous, public and sometimes private celebrations of Maulid al-Nabi were forbidden. For example, on April 16, 2007, two Shi'a men in Al-Ahsa were arrested for planning a large private Maulid al-Nabi celebration. However, many Sunnis, Shi'a, and Sufis celebrated the Prophet's birthday publicly without government interference.

The Government officially did not permit non-Muslim clergy to enter the country to conduct religious services, although some did so under other auspices, and the Government generally allowed their performance of discreet religious functions. Such restrictions made it difficult for most non-Muslims to maintain contact with clergy, particularly Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians who require a priest on a regular basis to receive the sacraments required by their faiths. However, many non-Muslims continued to gather for private worship.

The Government required non-citizens to carry iqamas, or legal resident identity cards, which contained a religious designation for "Muslim" or "non-Muslim." There were unconfirmed reports that some mutawwa'in pressured sponsors and employers not to renew iqamas of non-Muslims they had sponsored for employment if it was discovered or suspected that those individuals had either led, sponsored, or participated in private non-Muslim worship services. Similarly, there were reports that mutawwa'in pressured employers and sponsors to reach verbal agreements with non-Muslim employees that they would not participate in private or public non-Muslim worship services.

Abuses of Freedom of Religion

The Government continued to commit abuses of religious freedom; however, many reported abuses were difficult or impossible to corroborate. Fear, and the resulting secrecy surrounding any non-Sunni religious activity, contributed to reluctance to disclose any information that might harm persons under government investigation. Moreover, information regarding government practices was generally incomplete because judicial proceedings usually were closed to the public, despite provisions in the 2002 Criminal Procedural Law that requires court proceedings to be open.

While the Government prohibited public non-Muslim religious activities, the Government's stated policy is that people are free to practice their faith in the privacy of their own homes. However, inconsistent enforcement of this policy caused many non-Sunnis to worship in fear of harassment, intimidation, or detention at the hands of the police or mutawwa'in.

While mutawwa'in have the authority to confront individuals violating social standards of dress and behavior, the Government also requires them to follow established procedures and to offer instruction in a polite manner. However, the mutawwa'in often failed to comply with these requirements, and there was no evidence that the Government took any action against mutawwa'in who violated these regulations, except in a few cases, all but one of which resulted in the deaths of citizens.

For example, a number of people were detained for nonpublic, non-Muslim worship. Others were abused while in mutawwa'in custody. Some were likely surveilled both prior to their arrest and subsequent to their release. In yet other cases, the mutawwa'in failed to comply with the requirement that they have a police escort during investigations and arrests. There were several incidents where mutawwa'in entered private homes and confiscated personal religious materials, which were not returned to the owners, although such items are supposedly not considered contraband. The fear of surveillance and targeting of leaders and organizers of non-Sunni religious groups, the fear of arbitrary detention for religious reasons, and the fear of abuse while in mutawwa'in custody deterred some non-Sunnis from gathering in any significant numbers to hold private worship services.

There were also numerous reports of mutawwa'in harassing, improperly arresting, abusing, and detaining for longer than 24 hours both citizens and foreigners. These reports were most prevalent in the central Nejd region, which includes the capital, Riyadh.

Women, and especially foreign women, were frequently harassed by the mutawwa'in for failure to observe strict dress codes, particularly failure to wear headscarves. Mutawwa'in enforcement of strict standards of social behavior included closing commercial establishments during the five daily prayer observances and detaining men and women found together who were not related. In the past, the press reported that mutawwa'in warned shopkeepers not to sell New Year's or Christmas gifts or decorations. The warning also reminded employees not to allow their staff to celebrate either holiday openly. There were reports during the reporting period that CPVPV leadership had instructed its members to confiscate any materials associated with Valentine's Day, although non-Muslims celebrating this holiday privately would not be targeted.

Although there was an increasing degree of public discussion of conservative religious traditions and their enforcement during the reporting period, including in the press, discussion of many sensitive religious issues, including sectarian differences, remained limited, and criticism of Islam was forbidden. Writers and other individuals who publicly criticized the official interpretation of Islam, including those who favored a more moderate interpretation than the Government's, risked mutawwa'in harassment, intimidation, detention, and if a foreigner, deportation. Several journalists who wrote critically about the religious leadership or who questioned theological dogma were banned from writing or traveling abroad.

There were reports during the reporting period that some Shi'a experienced discrimination within the primary and secondary school systems. Some religious education teachers told their students that Shi'a practices were un-Islamic and that Shi'a students must follow Sunni traditions to be true Muslims. Some teachers allegedly told their students that Shi'a were not Muslims, but rather kuffaar (unbelievers) or rafidah (rejectionists).

During the reporting period, some textbooks containing prejudicial religious statements were revised somewhat to remove content disparaging of religious groups other than Islam. However, many books reportedly retained language that was intolerant of Jewish, Christian, and Shi'a religious beliefs and espoused hatred of other religious traditions, especially Christianity and Judaism. There were also reports in Al-Ahsa and Qatif of prejudicial questions on exams and reports that some teachers continued to use anti-Shi'a rhetoric, such as calling Shi'a students infidels or polytheists.

The Government blocked access to some Internet websites with religious material that the Government considered offensive or sensitive. The Government continued to block the Shi'a website rasid.com.

Shi'a mosques in mixed neighborhoods were required to recite the Sunni call to prayer, which is distinct from their own, during prayer times. In addition, although Shi'a combine two of the daily five Sunni prayers, Shi'a businessmen were often forced to close their shops during all five prayer times, in accordance with Sunni practices.

The Government also arrested and detained a Shi'a cleric in Al-Ahsa for 1 week in January 2007 for operating a hussainiya without a license.

There were also reports that the Government discriminated against Sulaimani Ismailis by prohibiting them from having their own religious books, allowing religious leaders to declare them unbelievers, denying them government employment, restricting them to lower-level jobs, and relocating them from the southwest to other parts of the country or encouraging them to emigrate.

During the reporting period, there continued to be instances in which Sunni imams, who are paid government stipends, used anti-Jewish, anti-Christian, and anti-Shi'a language in their sermons. Although this language declined in frequency after the Government began encouraging moderation following the 2003 terror attacks, there continued to be instances in which mosque speakers prayed for the death of Jews and Christians, including from the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. The HRC complained to the Government about such sermons, and reportedly some offending imams were disciplined. There were unconfirmed reports that MOIA had dismissed some imams but allowed other imams to continue to espouse intolerant ideas.

On June 23, 2007, Senior Council of Ulema member Sheikh Saleh Al-Fawzan issued a fatwa that seemed to define "liberals" as non-Muslims, which many viewed as grounds for violence against liberals. On June 26, 2007, although he did not retract the fatwa, he clarified his statement as nonviolent.

On June 1, 2007, Ahmad Al-Bulawi, a 50-year-old retired border patrol guard, died at a CPVPV center in the northern town of Tabuk, allegedly of a heart attack. Al-Bulawi's family demanded an autopsy to determine the cause of his death. The mutawwa'in arrested Al-Bulawi and brought him to their center because he had a Saudi woman who was not his relative in his car. Both Al-Bulawi's family and the family of the woman in the car stated that he was working as a driver for the woman and her family. At the end of the reporting period, three mutawwa'in and a policeman were scheduled to go to trial in August 2007 for their alleged involvement in Al-Bulawi's death.

On May 23, 2007, 28-year-old Suleiman Al-Huraisi fell unconscious in a CPVPV office and never recovered. According to his father and brother, who were arrested with him for suspicion of alcohol production, at least 18 mutawwa'in raided their home in Riyadh. Some mutawwa'in allegedly beat Al-Huraisi in his home and at their office. At the end of the reporting period, officials stated that one member of the mutawwa'in would be tried at an unspecified date for assaulting Al-Huraisi.

In May 2007 the U.S. consulate general in Jeddah received a report that a Saudi citizen was arrested, later released, and then rearrested because he had converted from Islam to Christianity. He also claimed that security forces had tortured him. The consulate general received information that he was scheduled for a trial, but no further information was available at the end of the reporting period.

In May 2007 an Asian maid was severely injured after jumping out of her fourth-story apartment in Jeddah during a mutawwa'in raid.

In March 2007 there were media reports that the CPVPV interfered with that month's Riyadh Book Fair; the Ministry of Culture and Information denied these reports.

In February 2007 newspapers reported that the CPVPV stated its members had instructions to confiscate gifts associated with the "pagan feast" of Valentine's Day and punish those who market them in the Kingdom. The mutawwa'in noted they would not "assault non-Muslims" celebrating this "feast" if celebrated in their homes and warned Muslims about participating in any such celebrations.

On December 29, 2006, the mutawwa'in raided a private gathering of the Ahmadiyya religious group. Reportedly, the mutawwa'in detained 49 members, including at least 19 women and children (including a 6-month-old infant), and 14 youths. There were 25 Indians, 23 Pakistanis, and 1 Syrian. Nine other Ahmadiyya foreign workers were arrested in early January 2007. All of these individuals and their families were deported to their countries of origin. The Government claimed the group consisted of up to 150 persons and implied that the Government was concerned about the size of the gathering. In February 2007 two more Ahmadiyya guest workers were arrested in Riyadh and deported. The Government did not provide an explanation for their arrests or for the earlier deportations. There was no indication that the Ahmadiyya foreign workers, some of whom lived in the country for as long as 25 years, were guilty of breaking any laws.

On October 30, 2006, Al Hayat reported that the mutawwa'in chased a car containing a girl and her boyfriend, which led to an accident and the girl's death. The paper demanded that CPVPV Director General Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Sheikh hold those responsible accountable. However, after the accident no official news was published that indicated any official investigation or action.

On October 15, 2006, the mutawwa'in raided a hall in Tabuk where a Filipino priest was preaching. The mutawwa'in confiscated Bibles and detained the priest, who was turned over to the "concerned authorities" to complete the investigation. He was released a week later.

In October 2006 police arrested a Filipino Christian man in Jeddah and falsely charged him with drug possession. The police later dropped those charges and then formally charged him with proselytizing. He was detained for 8 months, received 60 lashes, and deported in May 2007.

In 2006 there were also reports of several raids on Filipino Christian services in Riyadh. Mutawwa'in raided services and confiscated religious materials such as Bibles and Christian symbols but typically did not detain non-Muslims.

According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), during August and September 2006, a Sulaimani Ismaili Shi'a, Hadi Al-Mutif, conducted a hunger strike to protest his continued imprisonment for "insulting the Prophet Muhammad." In his first trial, Al-Mutif was sentenced to death. Reportedly the sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, and Al-Mutif has served at least 12 years. According to NGOs, Al-Mutif twice attempted suicide, and as a response to his suicide attempts, the Government has kept him in isolation since January 2007. At the end of the reporting period, Al-Mutif remained in prison because he had been sentenced under haad (a punishment mandated by the Qur'an) and not under ta'azir (a punishment not mandated by the Qur'an). The HRC took his case, and the Supreme Judicial Council was reviewing it. If the case is changed to ta'azir, then the King may pardon him.

In September 2006 300 Sulaimani Ismaili Shi'a in Najran reportedly protested their "repression" and demanded the release of Ismailis held in jail since 2000 and an apology from a cleric and judge who labeled them "infidels." They also demanded the cessation of attempts by local authorities to settle Yemeni tribesmen given citizenship on land owned by Ismailis.

On June 9, 2006, the police arrested four church leaders at a private Christian worship service in Jeddah, two Ethiopians and two Eritreans. They were deported in July 2006.

In March 2006 Ala' Amin Al-Sadeh claimed a Sunni judge refused his testimony because he is Shi'a. At the recommendation of the Dammam branch of the NSHR, Al-Sadeh filed a complaint with the Ministry of Justice and the NSHR. There was no additional information from the NSHR or the Ministry of Justice about this case during the reporting period.

In April 2006, the Government arrested an Indian Roman Catholic priest. He was released and left the country.

Also in April 2006, the mutawwa'in arrested a female Shi'a student in Riyadh, allegedly for proselytizing other students. She was released several days later.

In April 2005, 20 Pakistani Christians were arrested and later released. That same month, five East African Christians were also arrested and released one month later.

In March 2005, mutawwa'in destroyed a makeshift Hindu shrine in Riyadh and three worshippers were deported.

In March 2005 mutawwa'in arrested Indian Christian Samkuty Varghese, who was released in July 2005 and deported. Eight others were arrested, and six were deported. Further details on the status of the two who remained were not known.

In February 2005 mutawwa'in raided a Filipino Christian worship service in Riyadh; those detained and arrested were released within hours of the raid. There was no further information about the status of these individuals.

In September 2004 seven Filipino Christian leaders were arrested and detained by the mutawwa'in. All were released within one month, and six were deported in July 2005. There were no reports on the status of the one not deported.

In 2003 a woman filed the first lawsuit against the CPVPV. She alleged that mutawwa'in recklessly drove her car into an electrical post and left her and her daughter, both in the backseat, at the scene of the accident. The hearing for the woman's third appeal is scheduled for September 2007.

At least 17 Sulaimani Ismailis Shi'a who were jailed after riots in the Najran Province in the year 2000 remain imprisoned. The Government asserted the men were arrested and imprisoned for disturbing public order and threatening the safety of the Najran governor, not for religious reasons.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to return to the United States. Under the law, children of male citizens are considered Muslim, regardless of the country or the religious tradition in which they have been raised. While the Government's application of this law discriminates against non-Muslim, noncitizen mothers and denies their children the freedom to choose their religion, in practice some children of mixed marriages were raised in other religions. There were reports of non-Muslims who faced considerable pressure by work colleagues to convert to Islam.

Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitic comments were often conflated with anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist rhetoric. According to the Anti-Defamation League, there was anti-Semitism in the media, characterized by stereotypical images of Jews along with Jewish symbols, and comparisons of Israeli Government actions to those of the Nazis.

Anti-Semitic editorial comments appeared in the print and electronic media. For example, on January 13, 2007, an anti-Semitic cartoon in the Al-Yawm newspaper depicted Jews as thieves, calling them "God's Cheater People," a pun in Arabic on the expression "God's Chosen People."

In addition, Al-Arabiya, an Arab news satellite TV channel founded by late King Fahd's brother-in-law, was referred to disparagingly by religious conservatives as "Al-Ebreyia" (The Hebrew Channel) for perceived biases against Islamic interests.

At times there was also media speculation on whether Christians and Jews should be considered "people of the book" and thus due the respect required by Islam.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

During the reporting period, the Government made clear in the context of various discussions its policy, efforts, and new proposals to allow people to practice their faith in the privacy of their homes and to improve the climate of tolerance towards other religious groups and within Islam. Some of these positive developments started to yield improvements in the status of religious freedom.

During the reporting period, the Government issued a decree that all members of the mutawwa'in must wear official photo identification badges so members of the public can tell them apart from religious vigilantes.

In June 2007 the Majlis Al-Shura voted to provide radio equipment to the mutawwa'in so they can call the police during an emergency and possibly prevent the mutawwa'in from overstepping their authority. In addition, the Majlis Al-Shura voted against expanding the jurisdiction of the mutawwa'in and voted for additional training for them.

The NSHR reported that at the end of 2006, the CPVPV established a training institute at Umm Al-Qura University in Mecca, where it will send a limited number of mutawwa'in for graduate studies. Part of the curriculum will focus on improving the behavior of the mutawwa'in. In addition, on their own initiative and funds, individual mutawwa'in members can pursue continuing education, including training on how to work more effectively with the public. Government officials also stated that the mutawwa'in are being counseled, trained, more closely monitored, and evaluated, and the CPVPV president reportedly told mutawwa'in members they are no longer allowed to confiscate personal belongings.

There were notably fewer reports of mutawwa'in raids of religious gatherings in the Western Hijaz region and in the Eastern Province. Moreover, unlike in previous years, there were no known cases during the reporting period of Muslims or non-Muslims wearing religious symbols in public confronted by the mutawwa'in for engaging in idolatry.

In response to growing concerns about the mutawwa'in, the Government allowed unprecedented media coverage of the trials of the mutawwa'in allegedly involved in the harassment and deaths of citizens and much greater freedom to criticize openly the religious establishment, including in the press, such that many writers denounced abuses committed by the mutawwa'in, and some called for a nation-wide examination of the CPVPV's role or even its disbandment. Whereas in the past such criticism often resulted in harassment by the mutawwa'in and generated death threats from religious extremists, there were no similar reports during the reporting period.

According to HRW and media reports, on October 31, 2006, the King pardoned 10 more of the at least 57 Sulaimani Ismaili Shi'a who were imprisoned after riots in the Najran Province in the year 2000, bringing the number of Sulaimani Ismaili Shi'a involved in the incident who have been pardoned to 40.

The Government announced additional infrastructure projects to support its policy of "balanced development" within different regions that were historically marginalized and undeveloped like the Shi'a and Ismaili areas of the Eastern Province and Najran Province, respectively. Projects included the construction of a community center, roads, dams, a university, and technical colleges for men and women.

The Government also appointed five more Shi'a judges to the Ja'afari courts in the Eastern Province, bringing the total number of Shi'a judges to seven, and one Shi'a and one Sulaimani Ismaili Shi'a to the board of the HRC.

During the reporting period, authorities continued to permit a greater degree of freedom to Shi'a in the Eastern Province city of Qatif, allowing religious practices and gatherings that were restricted or prevented in the past. For example, in January 2007 observances of Ashura took place in Qatif that were the largest and most public in years. In addition, there was also wider practice of ritual self-flagellation, a practice that the Government has sought to discourage; many pictures of revered imams were displayed openly in the shop windows; and large groups of Shi'a gathered to hear Shi'a clerics speak at husseiniyat, purchase books and other religious paraphernalia, and participate in marches in commemoration of Imam Hussayn's death.

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 Bibles, crosses, and religious materials, such as DVDs, through the airport in Jeddah and more Shi'a texts and paraphernalia through the airport in Dhahran and via the Bahrain causeway. In addition, anecdotal evidence suggested there was a decrease in both long-term detentions and deportations of non-Muslims for religious reasons.

There were reports that the HRC made greater efforts to connect with the Shi'a communities through public outreach to the Eastern Province. In addition, the HRC announced in April 2007 a joint program with the CPVPV to create a curriculum and training program for all CPVPV branches on working with the public.

The Government also encouraged dialogue about religious issues through the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue. Established in 2003 to "secure a channel for the responsible expression of opinion," the Dialogue offered ordinary Saudis the rare opportunity to share their opinions with public officials during televised discussions. There were reports of very frank discussions at the Dialogue sessions that took place during the reporting period, including unprecedented accusations of corruption against a Sunni public official by a minority Shi'a at a 2007 gathering in the Eastern Province.

On November 4, 2006, the Final Communiqué of the preparatory meeting for the Sixth National Dialogue was issued, which called for "establishing the concept of dialogue in schools and promoting tolerance and moderation." The Sixth National Dialogue Forum, held later that month, was entitled "Education: Reality and Promises." This Dialogue produced a "road map" for educational reform, including the revision of textbooks, curricula, and teaching methods to promote tolerance. The Dialogue was conducted in all 13 provinces with 800 to 1,000 participants in each region representing a range of perspectives. This Dialogue showed that gaps existed in natural sciences education, vocational training, and teaching methodology.

As a result of this Dialogue, the Government launched the King Abdullah Project for the Development of Public Education in February 2007 and a vocational infrastructure and training program in April 2007. On February 13, 2007, the King Abdullah Project for the Development of Public Education, approved a \$2.4 billion (SAR 9 billion), 6-year project to transform the Kingdom's public education system. The project focuses on improving the educational environment, extra-curricular activities, teacher training, and curricula development. This new project complements other Government initiatives to reform the education system. Although the project was announced in February 2007, academic experts were still developing the project's executive plan at the end of the reporting period, and final plans were not expected until late 2007.

During the reporting year, senior Saudi officials reiterated that the Government plans to reform the education system. These plans include revisions to the curricula, new teacher training to update teachers on teaching methods and to ensure that tolerance is promoted within the education system, and revising the textbooks within 1 to 2 years to remove intolerant references that disparage Muslims and non-Muslims or that promote hatred toward other religious groups. Anecdotal evidence suggested that changes made in 2006 and 2007 to the education system focused on updating teaching methods, including the use of increased class participation, active problem solving methods, and small group workshops, but did not include revising substantive material.

In the October 10, 2006, Saudi Gazette, the Ministry of Education announced that it was creating new religious curricula to "achieve moderation among the students and teachers and encourage thinking, creativity, and interpretation." The Government also took limited measures to remove what it deemed to be disparaging references to other religious traditions from some educational curricula. Some 2006-07 primary school textbooks, for instance, were found to be more tolerant than previous textbooks and had fewer negative references to non-Muslims. The Government also stated a new policy to prohibit the use of government funds or distribution channels to publish or promote textbooks that contain intolerant references toward other religious groups.

On March 5, 2007, the civil service announced it would dismiss teachers who espouse extremist views.

In April 2007 King Abdullah announced that the Government would allocate more freedom to private school curricula development.

The Government proceeded with programs to reduce the spread of extremist ideology. The MOIA monitored mosque sermons countrywide and there are reports that Government officials banned loudspeaker broadcasts of Sunni clerics' lectures in Sunni regions known for religious extremism. MOIA officials stated in June 2007 that some mosque imams were retrained and others were fired for promoting extremist ideas and intolerance. Moreover, NSHR stated that it received complaints in December 2006 from Riyadh-area imams who were dismissed by the MOIA, although there are conflicting reports about the reasons for the dismissals. In addition, the MOIA announced plans to monitor materials used within religious summer camps, previously known for spreading intolerant ideas to school children. Furthermore, the government-run television network continued broadcasting programs to combat extremist and terrorist ideology.

Moreover, during the reporting period, senior government and religious leaders, including the Grand Mufti, articulated their commitment to religious tolerance and cooperation, to prevent the rise of religious extremism. On April 14, 2007, the Arab News reported that King Abdullah told the Shura Council that internal strife, including sectarian disputes, was a "threat to national unity and the security of the state." In the same speech, he identified the sectarian conflicts in Iraq and Lebanon as the greatest threats in the Arab world, underscoring his commitment to supporting religious tolerance within and outside of the country's borders. On April 10, 2007, local newspapers reported that Interior Minister Prince Nayif called on religious scholars to start a campaign against extremists in the country. On November 24, 2006, Al-Watan newspaper reported that Islamic Affairs Minister Saleh Al-Sheikh called for moderation and tolerance, and criticized the preaching of certain Islamic preachers, which leads the youth to extremism. During his November 1, 2006, visit to Najran Province, King Abdullah said, "The state does not discriminate between one province and another or between one citizen and another, and those who tried to drive a wedge between the state and its citizens have failed."

The NSHR is the only human rights NGO officially licensed by the Government. Formed in March 2004, NSHR addresses a range of human rights violations, including limits on religious freedom and mutawwa'in abuses. Reportedly two of NSHR's founders and two board members are Shi'a, including one Sulaimani Ismaili Shi'a.

According to the 2007 NSHR annual report, the NSHR received more than 8,568 complaints over the previous 3 years. Furthermore, the NSHR stated it processed 3,516 of these cases from November 20, 2004, to June 25, 2006. More current statistics are not available, but the most common cases typically involved labor complaints (19 percent), prisoners (15 percent), and family status and family violence matters (15 percent).

NSHR said it did not officially address religious minority cases, but informally its members were trying to help affected individuals. For example, after two Shi'a teachers in the Eastern Province claimed that they were transferred to lower-ranking positions based on their religious beliefs, the local NSHR branch contacted the Government and helped the two teachers return to their previous positions. The NSHR claimed that it had not received direct requests for assistance from Ahmadiyya, a minority Muslim group, and that Ismaili concerns in Najran stemmed from political, not religious issues.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

As a deeply conservative and devout Muslim society, there is intense pressure within the country to conform to societal norms. The majority of citizens support a state based on Islamic law, although there were differing views as to how this should be realized in practice. The official title of the head of state is "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques," and the role of the King and the Government in upholding Islam within the country is regarded as one of its paramount functions. Moreover, the conservative religious leadership also exerted pressure on the state to adhere to a conservative interpretation of Islam.

On January 21, 2007, former Senior Council of Ulema member Abdullah bin Abdulrahman bin Jibrin called Shi'a "rafidah" (rejectionists) and claimed that Shi'a work with Christians to kill Sunni Muslims, especially in Iraq. He also claimed that Shi'a are liars, apostates, and heretics. He called for the expulsion of Shi'a from Muslim countries. On December 7, 2006, prominent Sunni religious commentator and former professor at Imam Mohammad bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh, Abdul Rahman Nasser Al-Barak, issued a fatwa attacking Shi'a, calling them "rejectionists" and "bearing all the characteristics of infidels." He accused them of apostasy and heresy. In each case the Government failed to criticize the speakers or their statements publicly.

On November 27, 2006, Al-Riyadh, Al-Hayat, and Al-Watan reported that a "group of extremists" raided the theater, disturbed an audience, and forcibly ended a play at Al-Yamamah College. The play was "A Moderate Who Lacks Moderation," by Ahmad Al-Eissa, president of Al-Yamamah College. Security forces intervened to end clashes between the audience and the extremists. The extremists refused to leave the theater after the show was cancelled, despite shots fired by the police to disperse them. The extremists continued their physical attacks on the organizers, reporters, and photographers; subsequently a number of them were arrested.

The January 16, 2007, edition of Al-Sharq Al-Awsat reported that a group of religious conservatives interrupted a film screening of "At Five in the Afternoon," hosted by the Eastern Province Literary Society, an organization approved by the

Ministry of Culture and Information. The film discusses the Taliban and women's rights, and this group of conservative men thought it was an inappropriate film to screen publicly. By the end of the reporting period, the Society had not shown the film. According to Al-Watan, the Ministry of Culture and Information's Deputy Minister for Cultural Affairs stated that literary clubs can show films, if suitable for the public.

Discrimination based on religion is a factor in mistreatment of foreign workers by citizen employers and co-workers. In its 2007 report, NSHR claimed it had received complaints from foreign workers about their treatment by sponsors. There were also reports that some sponsors withheld pay and iqama renewal based on religious factors. In addition, there were reports that some non-Muslim foreign workers were targeted by Muslim co-workers and accused falsely of proselytizing, knowing that the non-Muslims would be censured and possibly deported.

Anyone has the right to inform the mutawwa'in of behavior that they believe promotes vice or is otherwise contrary to public order and morality. Then the mutawwa'in investigate these complaints. There were reports that religious vigilantes unaffiliated with the mutawwa'in, and acting on their own, harassed, assaulted, battered, arrested, and detained citizens and foreigners. The Government has stated that it does not tolerate this behavior, and in some instances it took action against these people. For example, Eastern Province officials took immediate action in July 2006 to disband a group of unofficial mutawwa'in who committed numerous acts of harassment against foreigners in Al-Khobar's commercial district. However, there were other cases where the Government took no action.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. Government policy is to press the Government consistently to honor its public commitment to permit private religious worship by non-Muslims, eliminate discrimination against minorities, and promote tolerance toward non-Muslims.

During the reporting period, the U.S. Ambassador met with senior government and religious leaders regarding religious freedom, and raised specific cases of violations with senior officials. Senior U.S. officials discussed with the Government their policies concerning religious practice and tolerance. They encouraged the Government to honor policies to halt the dissemination of intolerant literature and extremist ideology within the country and around the world, protect private worship for all religious groups, curb harassment of religious practice groups, and promote tolerance towards all religious groups. Senior U.S. officials supported provisions calling for religious tolerance, including elimination of discrimination against religious minorities, improved human rights standards, and state accountability.

Senior U.S. officials called on the Government to enforce its public commitment to allow private religious practice and to respect the rights of Muslims who do not follow the country's conservative form of Sunni Islam. U.S. Government officials also raised their concerns over the dissemination of intolerant literature and an extremist ideology with the Government. In addition, embassy officers met with Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials at various other times to discuss matters pertaining to religious freedom.

In November 2006 the Secretary of State redesignated Saudi Arabia as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act. In connection with this designation, Secretary Rice issued a waiver of sanctions "to further the purposes of the Act."

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