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## Saudi Arabia

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report**

Report

**September 13, 2011**

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The laws and policies restrict religious freedom, and in practice, the government generally enforced these restrictions. Freedom of religion is neither recognized nor protected under the law and is severely restricted in practice. The country is an Islamic state governed by a monarchy; the king is head of both state and government. According to the basic law, Sunni Islam is the official religion and the country's constitution is the Qur'an and the Sunna (traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). The legal system is based on the government's application of the Hanbali School of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence. The public practice of any religion other than Islam is prohibited, and there is no separation between state and religion. The government did not respect religious freedom in law, but generally permitted Shia religious gatherings and non-Muslim private religious practices. Some Muslims who did not adhere to the government's interpretation of Islam faced significant political, economic, legal, social, and religious discrimination, including limited employment and educational opportunities, underrepresentation in official institutions, restrictions on religious practice, and restrictions on places of worship and community centers.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) and security forces of the Ministry of Interior (MOI) conducted some raids on private non-Muslim religious gatherings, and sometimes confiscated the personal religious materials of non-Muslims. However, there were fewer reported charges of harassment and abuse at the hands of the CPVPV compared with the previous reporting period. Although many intolerant statements had been removed, some school textbooks continued to contain overtly intolerant statements against Jews and Christians and intolerant references by allusion against Shia and Sufi Muslims and other religious groups. For example they stated that apostates from Islam should be killed if they do not repent within three days of being warned and that treachery is a permanent characteristic of non-Muslims, especially Jews.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Conservative vigilantes sometimes harassed and assaulted citizens and foreigners.

Senior U.S. officials discussed a number of key policies concerning religious practice and tolerance with the government, as well as specific cases involving infringement on the right to religious freedom. On January 16, 2009, the Secretary of State redesignated the country as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC). In connection with this redesignation, the Secretary issued a waiver of sanctions on the same date "to further the purposes of the act."

### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 830,000 square miles and a population of 27.1 million persons, of whom approximately 18.6 million are citizens, according to the government. There is no accurate figure for the number of foreign residents. The government estimated there were 8.5 million foreign workers in the country in 2010. Figures from foreign embassies indicated the foreign population in the country, including many undocumented migrants, may be even higher, exceeding 12 million. Estimates provided by foreign embassies include two million Indians, two million Bangladeshis, 1.5 million Filipinos, 1.5 million Pakistanis, 1.5 million Indonesians, one million Egyptians, one million Yemenis, 400,000 Syrians, 500,000 Sri Lankans, 350,000 Nepalese, 250,000 Palestinians, 150,000 Lebanese, and 100,000 Eritreans.

Approximately 85 to 90 percent of citizens are Sunni Muslims, who predominantly adhere to the Hanbali School of Islamic jurisprudence. A number of Sunni citizens also adhere to the other Sunni schools of jurisprudence (the Hanafi, Maliki, and Shaf'i schools).

Shiites constitute 10 to 15 percent of the population. Approximately 80 percent of Shia are "Twelvers" (followers of Muhammad ibn Hasan al-Mahdi, whom they recognize as the Twelfth Imam) and are primarily located in the Eastern Province. Twelver Shia adhere to the Jafari school of jurisprudence. Most of the remaining Shiite population are Sulaimaniya Isma'ilis, also known as "Seveners" (those who branched off from the Twelvers to follow Isma'il ibn Jafar as the Seventh Imam). Seveners reside primarily in Najran Province, around the residence of their sect's spiritual leader in Al Mansourah. In the western Hejaz region, there are approximately 100,000 Ashraf (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad) and 150,000 Nakhawala, or "Medina Shia." Additionally, statistics put the number of Zaydis (followers of Zayd ibn Ali, whom they recognize as the fifth Imam) at approximately 500,000. The Zaydis reside primarily in the cities of Jizan and Najran along the border with Yemen.

Comprehensive statistics for the religious denominations of foreigners are not available, but they include Muslims from the various branches and schools of Islam, Christians (including Eastern Orthodox, Protestants, and more than one million Roman Catholics), Jews, over 250,000 Hindus, over 70,000 Buddhists, approximately 45,000 Sikhs, and others. In addition to European and North American Christians, there are Christians from East African, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, the Palestinian territories, India, Pakistan, and other South Asian countries. The Filipino community is 90 percent Christian.

In 2010 the country hosted approximately three million Muslim pilgrims during the annual three-day Hajj pilgrimage and four million Umra pilgrims throughout the year from throughout the world.

### Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

#### Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

Current laws and policies restrict freedom of religion. According to the basic law, Islam is the official religion, and the country's constitution is the Qur'an and the Sunna. There is no legal recognition or protection of religious freedom, and the government allowed only private practice of non-Muslim religions.

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The basic law establishes the country as a sovereign Arab Islamic state and establishes the Qur'an and the Sunna as the constitution. Neither the government nor society in general accepts the concept of separation of state and religion.

The government considers its legitimacy to rest in part on its custodianship of the two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina and its promotion of Islam. The official interpretation of Islam is derived from the writings and teachings of 18th-century Sunni religious scholar Muhammad ibn 'Abd Al-Wahhab, who advocated a return to what he considered the practices of the first three generations of the Muslim era and urged Muslims to be stricter in their obedience to Islam. The country's religious teaching opposes attempts by the Muslim reform movements of the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries to reinterpret aspects of Islamic law in light of economic and social developments, particularly in areas such as gender relations, personal autonomy, family law, and participatory democracy. Outside the country this branch of Islam is often referred to as "Wahhabi," a term the Saudis do not use.

The Islamic judicial system is based on laws derived from the Qur'an and the Sunna and on legal opinions and fatwas (rulings) of the Council of Senior [Religious] Scholars. Established in 1971, the council is an advisory body of 20 persons that reports to the king. The council, supported by the Board of Research and Religious Rulings, is recognized as the supreme authority on religious rulings by the basic law. It is headed by the grand mufti and is composed of Sunni religious scholars and jurists, as well as the minister of justice. Government universities provide training on all the Sunni schools of jurisprudence but focus on the Hanbali school; consequently, most Sharia judges follow its system of interpretation. Three members of the council belong to non-Hanbali schools, representing the Maliki, Hanafi, and Shaf'i schools; however, there are no Shiite members. Scholars are chosen at the king's discretion and serve renewable four-year terms, with most members serving for life. Sharia is not based on precedent and rulings can diverge widely. In theory rulings can be appealed to the appellate and supreme courts, but these higher courts must agree to hear the case. In 2009 for the first time ever, a member of the council was dismissed after he criticized the king's establishment of a mixed-gender university.

The government permits Shiite judges presiding over courts in the Eastern Province to use the Jafari school of Islamic jurisprudence to adjudicate cases in family law, inheritance, and endowment management. There were six Shiite judges, all located in the Eastern Province cities of Qatif and al-Ahsa, where the majority of Shia lived. Shia living in other parts of the Eastern Province, Najran Province, and the western Hejaz region had no access to local, regional, or national Shiite courts.

The Majlis al-Shoura (the Consultative Council) is responsible for drafting resolutions for approval by the Council of Ministers and the king. The king appoints the Consultative Council's 150 full-time male members and 13 part-time, female, non-voting advisors. Advisors can attend sessions and may offer their opinion, but have no voting power. There are five Shiite members. According to the council charter, the members should be "scholars and men of learning." There are no term limits for the Consultative Council's members; however, every four years the king must replace 50 percent of the council.

The two mosques in Mecca and Medina do not come under Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowment, Call, and Guidance (MOIA) jurisdiction. They are the responsibility of the General Presidency for the Affairs of the Two Holy Shrines, which reports directly to the king; its head holds a rank equivalent to a government minister. Thousands of other mosques existed in private homes, at rest stops along highways, and elsewhere throughout the country. There were no public non-Muslim houses of worship, but private Christian religious gatherings took place throughout the country.

The CPVPV is a semiautonomous agency authorized to monitor social behavior and enforce morality consistent with the government's interpretation of Islam. The law defines the CPVPV's mission as "guiding and advising people to observe the religious duties prescribed by Islamic Sharia, and to prevent committing [acts] proscribed and prohibited [by Sharia], or adopting bad habits and traditions or taboo [sic] heresies." The purview of the CPVPV includes public gender mixing and illegal private contact between men and women; practicing or displaying non-Muslim faiths or disrespecting Islam; displaying or selling media contrary to Islam, including pornography; producing, distributing, or consuming alcohol; venerating places or celebrating events inconsistent with approved Islamic practices; practicing sorcery or magic for profit; and committing or facilitating lewdness, including adultery, homosexuality, and gambling. Full-time CPVPV field officers are known as mutawwa'een; they do not wear uniforms, but are required to wear identification badges and can only legally act in their official capacity when accompanied by a regular policeman. In practice CPVPV officers often act as public morality enforcers. According to the latest public statistics, the CPVPV has more than 5,000 staff members, including 3,583 CPVPV field offices throughout all 13 provinces. Additionally there are over 1,600 administrative support personnel. The CPVPV reports to the king through the Council of Ministers, and the minister of interior oversees its operations on the king's behalf. Religious vigilantes and/or volunteers unaffiliated with the CPVPV also exist but often act alone, sometimes even harassing and assaulting citizens and foreigners.

The 24-member Human Rights Commission (HRC) was established in 2005 by the Council of Ministers to address human rights abuses and promote human rights within the country. The board does not include women, but each regional branch includes a women's branch operated and staffed by women. The board previously did not have Shia members, but now includes at least one. The HRC regularly follows up on citizen complaints, including complaints of favoritism or unfair court decisions, but has not specifically addressed issues of religious freedom and tolerance and does not issue a report on its actions.

No law specifically requires all citizens to be Muslims, but non-Muslim foreigners and many foreign and Saudi national Muslims whose beliefs are deemed not to conform with the government's interpretation of Islam must practice their religion in private and are vulnerable to discrimination, harassment, detention, and deportation for noncitizens. Legally children born to Muslim fathers are deemed Muslim, and conversion from Islam to another religion is considered apostasy and punishable by death. Blasphemy against Sunni Islam is also punishable by death, but the more common penalty is a long prison sentence. There have been no confirmed reports of executions for either apostasy or blasphemy in recent years.

The law discriminates against adherents of religions deemed polytheistic and to a lesser extent against Christians and Jews, who are mentioned in the Qur'an as "People of the Book." The government officially does not permit non-Muslim clergy to enter the country to conduct religious services, although some do so under other auspices and are able to hold services. These entry restrictions make it difficult for non-Muslims to maintain regular contact with clergy. This is particularly problematic for Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians, whose faiths require that they receive sacraments from a priest on a regular basis. However, many non-Muslims continue to gather for private worship, and the government generally allows the discreet performance of religious functions of all faiths.

Shia face systematic and pervasive official and legal discrimination, including in education, employment, the military, housing, political representation, the judiciary, religious practice, and media. Primary reasons include the widely-held view that Shia are polytheists and that they commit apostasy by practicing some of their worship activities, historical Sunni-Shia animosity, and suspicion of Iranian influence on their actions.

The MOIA determines the qualifications of Sunni clerics and is responsible for investigating complaints against them, particularly clerics who issue intolerant fatwas or promote intolerance, violence, or hatred. In 2003 the MOIA created a program to monitor all government-paid clerics. Provincial committees of senior religious scholars supervise full-time MOIA employees who monitor all mosques and clerics, through scheduled and unscheduled visits and receipt of public

complaints. Based on their reports, the committees summon clerics accused of preaching extremist ideologies. If the provincial committees are not able to dissuade these clerics from their thinking, the clerics are referred to a central committee or dismissed. Under this program, the MOIA has removed 3,500 imams from duty since 2003, but none were removed during the reporting period. On August 12, in a move to curb extremist and absurd fatwas, King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz decreed that only members of the Council of Senior [Religious] Scholars, and those whom the king permits, may issue public fatwas. The MOIA also monitors and posts counter-arguments on extremist online forums and Web sites.

The government requires noncitizen legal residents to carry an identity card containing a religious designation for "Muslim" or "non-Muslim." Older residency cards bear religious denominations such as "Christian."

The Naturalization Law requires that applicants attest to their religious affiliation and requires applicants to get a certificate endorsed by their local cleric.

Freedom of religious assembly is severely limited, because the government does not allow individuals to publicly assemble based on religious affiliation. This freedom is also limited in other ways, including the government's hindering of the establishment and maintenance of non-Sunni places of worship. All new mosques require the permission of the MOIA, the local municipality, and the provincial government, which is functionally part of the MOI. The MOIA supervises and finances the construction and maintenance of most Sunni mosques, including the hiring of clerical workers, while the other approximately 30 percent of Sunni mosques are at private residences or were built and endowed by private persons. Individuals responsible for the supervision of a mosque are selected from the local community. The imams received monthly MOIA salaries ranging from 2,500 to 5,000 riyals (\$667 to \$1,333), depending on the seniority and educational level of the individual. The MOIA estimated that in 2010 it was financially and administratively responsible for 75,000 Sunni mosques, 15,000 of which are Friday mosques (larger mosques that host Friday prayers and include a sermon). According to data provided by the MOIA in October, it employs approximately 75,000 Sunni imams and 15,000 Sunni Friday khateebis (sermon leaders) to staff these mosques.

Unlike for Sunni mosques, the government does not finance construction or maintenance of Shiite mosques, and the process for obtaining a government-required license for a Shiite mosque is reportedly unclear and arbitrary. However, Shia have the right to manage their own mosques and to be supervised by Shiite scholars.

Discussion of sensitive religious issues such as sectarian differences was rare, and criticism of Islam is forbidden. Officially the government allows religious materials for personal use in the country; customs officials and the CPVPV do not have the authority to confiscate personal religious materials. Furthermore, the government's stated policy for its diplomatic and consular missions abroad is to inform foreign workers applying for visas that they have the right to worship privately and possess personal religious materials and to provide the name of the appropriate offices where grievances can be filed.

The government prohibits the public propagation of Islamic teachings that differ from the official interpretation of Islam and restricts the public religious training of non-Sunni groups and clergy.

Regardless of a student's personal religious traditions, public school students at all levels receive mandatory religious instruction based on the government's interpretation of Islam. Students in private international schools are not required to study Islam. Muslim students of other nationalities must obtain a waiver from the Ministry of Education (MOE) to attend private international schools, but obtaining the waiver was rarely a problem. Private religious schools not based on the official interpretation of Islam are not permitted.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.

Shiite courts' powers are limited by the fact that any litigant who disagrees with a ruling can seek a new decision from a Sunni court. Sunni court rulings can void Shiite court rulings, and government departments can choose not to implement judgments rendered by Shiite judges. Jurisdictionally these courts are only allowed to rule on cases in the Qatif and al-Ahsa areas; Shia from other regions cannot use such courts.

Discrimination is manifested in the calculation of accidental death or injury compensation. 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; all other non-Muslims are only entitled to receive one-sixteenth of the amount a male Muslim would receive. Furthermore, judges may discount the testimony of non-practicing Muslims or individuals who do not adhere to the official interpretation of Islam and disregard the testimony of a non-Muslim in favor of the testimony of a Muslim. Moreover, courts adhere to the Qur'anic stipulation that in cases of capital punishment the value of a woman's testimony is only one-half that of a man's.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally enforced legal and policy restrictions on religious freedom vigorously. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

Sunni clerics, who received government stipends, occasionally used anti-Semitic, anti-Christian, and anti-Shiite language in their sermons. It was common for preachers in mosques, including the mosques of Mecca and Medina, to end Friday sermons with a prayer for the well-being of Muslims and for the humiliation of polytheism and polytheists.

Most Shia expressed general concerns about discrimination in religious practice, education, employment, political representation, the judiciary, and the media.

The government generally limited public religious practice to activities that conform to the official interpretation of Islam. Practices that diverged from the official interpretation, such as celebrating Maulid Al-Nabi (the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad) and visits to the tombs of renowned Muslims, were forbidden. Enforcement was more relaxed in some communities than in others. For example, authorities allowed Shia in the Eastern Province city of Qatif greater freedom in their religious practices, including the public commemoration of Ashura (the "day of grief"). This event was held with minimal government interference. In other areas with large Shiite populations, such as al-Ahsa and Dammam, authorities restricted Shiite religious activities, including public observances of Ashura, public marches, loudspeaker broadcasts of clerics' lectures from Shiite community centers, and, in some instances, gatherings within those centers.

Shia described restrictions on their visits to Mecca and Medina as interference by Riyadh-based authorities in private Muslim worship. In addition government religious authorities continued the practice of destroying ancient Islamic historical sites.

Shiite mosques in mixed religious neighborhoods reportedly were required to recite the Sunni call to prayer, which is distinct from the Shiite call, at prayer times. Moreover, although Shia combine two of the five daily Sunni prayers, Shiite businessmen were often forced to close their shops during all five prayer times, in accordance with the country's official Sunni practices.

The government's stated policy is to permit private worship for all, including non-Muslims, and address violations of this policy by government officials; however, the CPVPV sometimes did not respect this policy. Individuals whose ability to worship privately had been infringed could address their grievances through the MOI, the government's official Human Rights Commission (HRC), the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR, a quasi-autonomous NGO), and when appropriate, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The HRC and the NSHR reported that they did not receive any complaints

against the CPVPV in the past year and that they have never received complaints regarding violations of religious freedom.

The government restricted the ability of religious leaders and activists to express views critical of the religious establishment. Consequently some Shia faced obstacles in constructing their mosques. For example, provincial officials in Al-Ahsa have blocked construction of some new Shiite mosques and community lecture halls, as well as withdrawn some permits for existing mosques and lecture halls. Shia in other parts of Saudi Arabia were not allowed to build Shia-specific mosques. However, the government did approve construction of some new Shiite mosques in Qatif and Al-Ahsa -- sometimes after lengthy delays due to the numerous approvals required -- but did not approve construction of Shiite mosques in Dammam, home to many Shia.

The government did not officially recognize several centers of Shiite religious instruction located in the Eastern Province, provide financial support for them, recognize certificates of educational attainment for their graduates, or provide employment for their graduates, all of which it does for Sunni religious training institutions. In contrast to previous reporting periods, none of these centers were subject to forced closures.

The government refused to approve construction or registration of Shiite community centers, so Shia were forced to build such facilities in private homes. These community centers sometimes did not meet safety codes, and the lack of legal recognition made their long-term financing and continuity considerably more difficult.

During the reporting period, there was significant public discussion, including in the media, questioning the official version of religious traditions and criticizing their enforcement. However, discussion of sensitive religious issues such as sectarian differences remained limited, and criticism of Islam was forbidden. Individuals who publicly criticized the official interpretation of Islam risked harassment, intimidation, and detention, and foreigners who did so risked deportation. Journalists and activists who wrote critically about the religious leadership or who questioned theological dogma risked detention, travel bans, and government shutdowns of their publications.

Moreover, the government continued to exclude Shiite perspectives from the state's extensive religious media and broadcast programming. The government sporadically imposed bans on the importation and sale of Shiite books and audiovisual products. The government also blocked access to some Web sites with religious content it considered offensive or sensitive, including the Al-Rasid Web site, in line with a broader official policy of censoring objectionable content, including political discourse and illicit materials. In addition, terms like "rejectionists," which are insulting to Shia, were commonly found in public discourse and could be found on the MOIA official Web site.

In higher education the government discriminated against Shia in the selection process for students, professors, and administrators at public universities. For example, Shia constituted an estimated 2 percent of professors at a leading university in al-Ahsa, an area with a population that is at least 50 percent Shiite.

At the primary and secondary levels of education in al-Ahsa, there continued to be severe underrepresentation of Shia among school principals, with approximately 1 percent of area principals Shiite, and none in al-Ahsa schools for females.

In Qatif, where Shia constitute approximately 90 percent of the population, many male principals and even some male religious teachers in primary schools were Shiite; however, there were no Shiite principals or religious teachers in Qatif's public female primary schools. There are a small number of private schools for girls in Qatif.

A new curriculum was implemented throughout the country in 2010 for first, fourth, and seventh grades. Math, science, and English textbooks for these grades were improved by the removal of all religious references. The new religious sciences and Arabic textbooks for those grades, however, continue to contain intolerant language. Approximately 100 schools piloted a new curriculum for second, fifth, and eighth grades in 2010 that reportedly contains a reduction in

intolerant language, which is scheduled to be implemented in all schools next year. Reform programs for the other grades are being developed, but most schoolchildren used textbooks that retained language intolerant of other religious traditions, especially Jewish, Christian, and Shiite beliefs, and included commands to hate infidels for their kufr (unbelief) and kill apostates. Unrevised school textbooks continued to contain intolerant statements alluding to Shia and Sufi Muslims, and other religious groups, some inciting to violence. For example, the monotheism textbook for twelfth grade boys states that those who worship tombs -- a likely allusion to include Shia and Sufi Muslims' practice of visiting tombs of venerated Imams -- thereby commit apostasy by action. The text goes on to state that once a finding of apostasy has been confirmed, legal consequences apply, including that if the apostate refuses to repent, he must be killed.

Shia faced significant employment discrimination in the public and private sectors. A very small number of Shia occupied high-level positions in government-owned companies and government agencies. Many Shia believed that openly identifying themselves as Shia would negatively affect career advancement. Shia were significantly underrepresented in national security-related positions, including the Ministry of Defense and Aviation, the National Guard, and the MOI. Shia were better represented in the ranks of traffic police, municipalities, and public schools in predominantly Shiite areas. There was no formal policy concerning the hiring and promotion of Shia in the private sector, but anecdotal evidence suggested that in some companies, including the oil and petrochemical industries, a "glass ceiling" existed and well-qualified Shia were passed over for less qualified Sunni colleagues.

Qatif community leaders described allegedly prejudicial zoning laws that prevent construction of buildings over a certain height in various Shiite neighborhoods. The leaders claimed the laws prevented investment and development in these areas and aimed to limit the density of the Shiite population in any given area.

In contrast to previous reporting periods, there were no reports that MOI officials and/or CPVPV members pressured sponsors and employers not to renew the residency cards of non-Muslims they had sponsored for employment if it was discovered or suspected that those individuals had led, sponsored, or participated in private non-Muslim worship services. Similarly there were no reports that CPVPV members pressured employers and sponsors to reach verbal agreements with non-Muslim employees that they would not participate in private non-Muslim worship services.

Members of the Shiite minority were also subjected to political discrimination. For example, although Shia constitute approximately 10 to 15 percent of the citizen population and approximately one-third to one-half of the Eastern Province population, they were underrepresented in senior government positions. There were no Shiite ministers, deputy ministers, governors, deputy governors, or ministry branch directors in the Eastern Province, and only three of the 59 government-appointed municipal council members were Shiite. However, the Shia were proportionally represented among the elected members of the municipal councils, as they held 10 of 11 seats on the Qatif and al-Ahsa councils. An elected Shia headed the Qatif municipal council. However, the Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council) -- the 150 strong, all-male, all-appointed body that advises the king and in some cases can initiate legislation -- only has five Shiite members.

Judicial discrimination against Shia was evident during the reporting period. Shiite leaders argue that the one court of appeals on which Shiite judges sit has no real authority and only verifies documents.

In addition to these discriminatory practices, Nakhawala leaders claimed the Shia in their community faced even more problems, particularly in comparison to the Twelvers in the Eastern Province. They claimed to hear anti-Shiite sermons and statements regularly in their neighborhoods. Unlike the case with Shia from the Eastern Province, there were no prominent Nakhawala Shia in government bodies such as the Consultative Council or the HRC. The Nakhawala also averred that their surname ("al-Nakhly," which roughly translates as "farmers" and identifies their minority status and sect) facilitated systematic discrimination against them in employment and education.

The Sulaimaniya Isma'ili community also continued to face additional obstacles in Najran Province. Community leaders asserted that the government discriminated against them by prohibiting their religious books; allowing Sunni religious leaders to declare them unbelievers; denying them government employment; and relocating them from the southwest to other parts of the country, or encouraging them to emigrate.

#### Abuses of Religious Freedom

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom in the country, including that of religious prisoners and detainees. Non-Muslim groups in different parts of the country were detained and harassed for worshipping privately. Harassment of Shia during religious worship and communal gatherings continued. The frequency of arbitrary arrests of Shia in the Eastern Province reported in the local media remained about the same as in the previous reporting period. A few high-profile death penalty cases involving alleged witchcraft continued.

The government continued to prohibit public, non-Muslim religious activities and non-Sunni activities in predominantly Sunni areas. Many of the reported related abuses were difficult to corroborate, because of witnesses' or victims' fears that disclosing such information might cause harm to themselves or to others. Moreover, information regarding government practices was generally incomplete because judicial proceedings usually were closed to the public, despite provisions in the criminal procedure law that require court proceedings to be open. Many non-Muslims worshiped in secret because of continuing fear of harassment and intimidation by police or the CPVPV, as well as police detention or deportation.

Police detained and imprisoned an unknown number of persons on charges of sorcery, black magic, or witchcraft; there were a few media reports each week on such arrests. Anti-sorcery departments exist within the CPVPV branches across the country, with the responsibility to investigate and report incidents of "sorcery" to local police. From media reports it appeared that some accused sorcerers were charlatans or quacks but others, mainly Africans, appeared to be engaged in traditional spiritual or healing practices.

On February 10, 2010, *Rasid.com*, a Shiite blog, reported that the authorities summoned a number of prominent Shia in al-Khobar and informed them that Shia were no longer allowed to pray in Sunni mosques.

On March 10, 2010, *Rasid.com* reported the arrest of Mohammad Jasim Al-Hofoufi, a Saudi Shiite teacher accused of reading polytheistic Shiite supplements at Al-Baqi'a cemetery. Sources indicate that Al-Hofoufi was sentenced to three months' detention and 60 lashes.

On March 19, 2010, four CPVPV officers and one uniformed police officer raided an Indian Christian prayer service being held in a private residence. The CPVPV took photographs and video in addition to confiscating Bibles and religious instruments. Police arrested the pastor and two worshippers and detained them in the local police station until their release on March 23.

On March 29, 2010, security authorities reportedly detained three Shia, including the brother of Abdullah Saleh al-Muhanna, a prominent Shia and former city mayor of Khobar, who was himself detained in May 2009. All three men were arrested for taking part in religious activities during Ashura in January 2010 and were sentenced to one month in prison in Khobar. They were released after serving the sentence. In August 2010 an arrest warrant was again issued for Al-Muhanna and another Shiite cleric, Sayed Mohammad Bager Al-Nasser, who on January 14, 2010 had been detained for having performed Friday prayer in a Sunni mosque. On November 29, 2010, the arrest warrant for Al-Nasser was enforced. The reason for his arrest was his continued insistence on establishing Shiite places of worship in Al Khobar, according to *Rasid.com*. No further details were reported at the end of the reporting period.

On August 2, 2010, the investigation service authority in Medina raided the ranch of Shiite preacher Mohamed Ali Al-Emary. Al-Emary's son Kazim was arrested 10 days earlier. Kazim Al-Emary remains in custody, and no additional information was available at the end of the reporting period.

On October 1, 2010, members of the CPVPV disrupted a private Catholic religious service and detained 13 foreign nationals overnight before releasing them the next day.

On October 26, 2010, police in Qatif detained Sheikh Saeed al Bahhar, the imam of Imam Reza Mosque in Tarot Island, and Mohammad Hassan al Hubail, the administrator of the mosque, for allegedly establishing a ceremony marking the anniversary of the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The administrator of Imam Al-Hadi Mosque in the village of Sanabis, Hussein al Dubaisy, was also arrested. As of the end of the reporting period, all three remained in detention centers.

On November 20, 2010, Shiite religious scholar Sheikh Hassan al-Baqshi from Hofouf in al-Ahsa was released after having been detained for three days for organizing congregational prayer.

In January 2009 Yemane Gebriel, an Eritrean pastor, fled the country to an undisclosed location after multiple threats from the CPVPV, following his 2005 arrest. There was no update on Gebriel's status at the end of the reporting period.

In February 2009 a group of Shia trying to visit the Baqi'a cemetery in Medina clashed with police and the CPVPV. Several religious and political leaders from the Shiite community wrote open letters to the king calling for the release of Shiite youth who were detained as a result of the incident. Eventually a delegation of Shia from Qatif, al-Ahsa, and Medina met with the king, after which the king announced the immediate release of all detainees.

In March 2009 Hamoud Saleh Al-Amri, a Saudi convert to Christianity, was released from prison on the condition that he not leave the country or appear in the media. On January 13, 2009, Al-Amri had been arrested for discussing his Christian faith on his blog. The case received international attention and advocacy groups such as the Arab Network for Human Rights Information campaigned for Al-Amri's release. This was the third time Al-Amri had been detained; he was held for nine months in 2004 and for one month in 2008.

In May 2009 *Rasid.com* reported the arrest of prominent religious figure Sheikh Ali Hussein Al-Amar for collecting and spending money on hussainyat (Shiite places of worship).

In May 2009 police in Khobar arrested Hajj Abdullah Saleh Al-Muhanna, a Shia, for leading prayer services in his home. Without facing trial, Al-Muhanna was released from prison on June 30, 2009.

On August 24, 2009, King Abdullah ordered the release of 17 Sulaimaniya Isma'ili Shiite men jailed after riots in Najran Province in 2000.

Between August and October 2009, at least eight Shiite men from al-Ahsa were reportedly arrested for taking part in religious activities during Ashura in January 2009. Most of the men were sentenced to one week in jail and transferred to al-Ahsa General Prison.

On September 3, 2009, Hadi al-Mutif, a Sulaimaniya Isma'ili Shia who has been on death row for 16 years for an offhand remark "insulting the Prophet Mohammad," received an additional five-year sentence for criticizing the government's justice system and human rights record on a tape smuggled out of prison and broadcast on Alhurra television in 2007. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported that Al-Mutif has been in solitary confinement for more than a year, reportedly in response to two suicide attempts. Al-Mutif remains in prison, but authorities are reviewing his case.

On September 20, 2009, the government released Naif al-Baqshi, the brother of a prominent Shiite cleric in al-Ahsa, after he spent 18 months in prison. Al-Baqshi was imprisoned in June 2008 without any official charges.

On September 20, 2009, the government released Sulaimaniya Isma'ili activist Ahmad Turki al-Saab after 18 months in Al-Hayer prison for organizing a petition campaign demanding the removal from office of Najran's former governor for alleged discrimination against the Shiite community. On April 26, 2008, al-Saab presented the petition personally to the king; al-Saab subsequently was summoned from Najran Province to the capital and detained on May 13, 2008.

On October 17, 2009, *Rasid.com* reported that Shiite religious scholar Tawfiq al-Amer would be tried before a court on charges of stirring sectarian conflicts in his Friday sermons when he called for an end to discrimination against the Shiite minority in the country. According to Al-Amer, he appeared in court on October 20, 2009 on charges of "stirring the system," but the judge postponed the trial indefinitely after his lawyer requested the right of legal access to the details of the case. Al-Amer was a known teacher of Qur'anic interpretations and was previously arrested three times. His most recent arrest was in September 2008 for announcing the call to prayer in accordance with Shiite practice.

On October 27, 2009, authorities reportedly arrested Shia Sayed Yusuf al-Hashim for hosting Friday prayers in his house in Khobar. Al-Hashim was sentenced to one-week's imprisonment without trial, completed his sentence, and was released.

On November 2, 2009, Al-Heyad e-newspaper reported that authorities arrested 118 men and women in the Makkah Province and charged them with practicing sorcery. No additional information was available at the end of the reporting period.

On November 7, 2009, intelligence officers arrested Shiite activist Munir Jassas. Authorities had summoned him two months earlier and ordered him to provide a written pledge to stop blogging criticism about the government's poor treatment of Shiite Muslims. Reportedly he spent at least four months in solitary confinement. On August 28, 2010, he was asked to sign a "confession," which was a collection of statements he had made while being interrogated and, according to press reports, while under duress. Additionally, on September 1, 2010, he was taken to the lower court in Dammam where he was asked to read the same "confession" and sign it before a judge. Jassas remained in detention without charge at the end of the reporting period.

On November 9, 2009, Ali Hussain Sibat, a Lebanese presenter on a Beirut-based satellite television channel, was sentenced to death on charges related to sorcery. Sibat was arrested and charged with sorcery while visiting the country in May 2008 to perform Umra. On March 10, 2010, judges in Medina refused the sentence of the appeals court and upheld the original death sentence verdict. On November 12, 2010, the Supreme Court overturned the death sentence, declaring that it was too severe since no one was harmed by Sibat's actions and he had no prior criminal record.

Between November 2009 and June 2010, authorities closed seven Shiite mosques or waqfs (religious foundations). However, there were no further developments during the reporting period.

From November 1 to 30, 2009, at least five Shiite men from al-Ahsa were reportedly arrested for taking part in the preparations for the remembrance day of Imam Al-Mahdi in August. Most of the men were sentenced to one week in jail and transferred to al-Ahsa General Prison. No further details were available at the end of the reporting period.

In February 2008 Human Rights Watch (HRW) issued a public letter to the king requesting that he halt the execution of Fawza Falih Muhammad Ali for witchcraft. Arrested by the CPVPV in May 2005, she was sentenced to death in April 2006 for allegedly bewitching a man in Quraiyat. Court procedures were highly irregular. In September 2006 an appeals court reversed the trial court's ruling due to insufficient evidence and remanded the case to the trial court. According to HRW the trial court reinstated the death sentence against her on a "discretionary" basis in the "public interest" to "protect the

creed, souls, and property of this country." Her case was transferred to the royal court in January 2008. At the end of the reporting period, she remained imprisoned.

In April 2008 police imprisoned a group of 14 Indian Christians in Makkah Province for between 24 and 56 hours and issued deportation orders through their employment sponsors. By July 2010 all of them were deported.

#### Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

During the reporting period, the government implemented policies that sought to address issues of religious freedom in the country. Moreover, the king and other government and religious leaders showed efforts that aimed to expand interfaith and national dialogues to promote tolerance and moderation through broadly targeted seminars and media campaigns.

Improvements included the implementation of a completely new curriculum in three grades and continued teacher training, better protection of the right to possess and use personal religious materials, augmented efforts to curb and investigate harassment by the CPVPV (particularly through specialized training to improve the performance of the CPVPV), increased media coverage and criticism of the CPVPV, greater authority and capacity for official human rights entities to operate, and measures to combat extremist ideology.

The king continued a national dialogue campaign to increase tolerance and encourage moderation and understanding. During the reporting period, the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue (KACND) had 2,000 certified trainers. Over the past five years, the KACND has trained over 500,000 men and women in over 17,000 training programs in 42 cities on "the culture and importance of open dialogue and communication skills." Beginning in June 2010, the KACND launched an eight-month awareness campaign using television advertisements and print media. The government-owned Saudi Channel One donated free airtime to the KACND for this campaign. All of the advertisements focused on spreading tolerance and dialogue, with some specifically focused on interaction with different cultures. During the reporting period, a mix of high-level government and religious officials openly supported this campaign. They advocated against religious extremism and intolerant language, especially in mosques and schools. The center continued to conclude memoranda of understanding with government ministries and institutions, including the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, the CPVPV, universities, and charities. Training sessions with CPVPV members were ongoing. In October 2010 the KACND trained over 100 CPVPV members in communication skills to promote dialogue and help prevent conflicts.

The government continued to combat extremist ideology by scrutinizing religious clerics and teachers closely and dismissing those found to be promoting intolerant and extreme views. The MOIA supervised clerics through regular inspections, surprise inspections, receiving complaints from worshipers, and investigating accusations in the press. In July 2010 for example, 2,000 teachers reportedly were either fired or transferred to administrative positions due to fear that they were indoctrinating their young students with dangerous content. According to Mansour al-Turki, spokesman for the MOI, his ministry assesses teachers' beliefs and viewpoints prior to hiring them to identify extremist ideologies.

Additionally some leading government and religious officials, including the king and crown prince, made strong public statements against extremism and instead advocated tolerance and moderation. For example, on September 26, during the symposium on "The Saudi Moderate Approach," Minister of Interior Prince Nayef said, "[T]errorism has harmed our country and because of it we lost many of our sons, we have approached it in a moderate way such as giving advice to those who have extremist thoughts to bring them back to their senses." Additionally according to press reports, on November 11, three days before the Hajj, the king called on citizens "to look at the common points of different religions, creeds, and cultures and to stress the shared principles in order that we sidestep our differences, narrow the distance between us, and build a world dominated by peace and understanding, enjoying progress and prosperity."

On August 12 King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz decreed that only members of the Council of Senior [Religious] Scholars, and those whom he permits, may issue public fatwas. The decree was in direct response to a spate of controversial and sometimes contradictory fatwas issued by scholars and imams outside the council. The decree exempted religious opinions given in private at the request of an individual. Individuals may continue to seek religious opinions on the day-to-day aspects of life or specific situations that may arise and are not otherwise addressed in the official public fatwas. Following the decree, the Saudi Communications and Information Technology Center blocked three Web sites and the sites' text messaging services. Several similar sites voluntarily stopped issuing fatwas.

There were fewer reports that government officials confiscated religious materials, and no reports that customs officials confiscated religious materials from travelers, whether Muslims or non-Muslims. Individuals reportedly were able to bring personal Bibles, crosses, DVDs of sermons, and other religious materials into the country without difficulty.

The MOIA confirmed that it continues to monitor educational materials used at religious summer camps to prevent the teaching of extremist ideologies to children.

### Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. In addition to the religious basis on which the government claims its authority, and the significant role the country's religious leadership plays in the country, the culture also exerts intense pressure on the population to conform to socio-religious norms. As a result a majority of citizens supported a state based on Islamic law, although there were differing views as to how this should be realized in practice.

Discrimination based on religion was a factor in mistreatment of foreign workers by citizen employers and coworkers.

Religious vigilantes and/or volunteers, unaffiliated with the CPVPV and acting on their own, sometimes harassed and assaulted citizens and foreigners.

Media criticism of government educational materials continued during the reporting period.

Editorial cartoons occasionally exhibited anti-Semitism characterized by stereotypical images of Jews along with Jewish symbols and comparisons of Israeli government actions to those of Nazis, particularly at times of heightened political tensions with Israel. For example, on September 15 the daily newspaper Al-Madina showed a caricatured Jew whipping an Arab toward "concessions" in a new round of peace talks. Anti-Semitic editorial comments appeared in government and private print and electronic media in response to regional political events.

### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. policy is to press the government to respect religious freedom and honor its public commitment to permit private religious worship by non-Muslims, eliminate discrimination against minorities, promote respect for non-Muslim religious belief, and combat violent extremism. Senior U.S. government officials raised these issues at the highest levels within the MOIA, MOI, HRC, MOE, and Ministry of Culture and Information during the reporting period. U.S. government officials also continued to meet with minority religious groups to discuss religious freedom concerns, including Shia groups and non-Muslim expatriates.

Additionally, Saudi government officials regularly participate in U.S. government visitor programs to promote tolerance and interfaith dialogue. Previous participants in these programs continued to commend the openness and tolerance they witnessed on their trips to the United States in lectures and television and radio programs that reached a broad audience.

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