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Saudi Arabia

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

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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. Sunni Islam is the official religion. The country's basic law declares the Holy Qur'an is the constitution, and the legal system is based on the government's application of the Hanbali school of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence.

The status of respect for religious freedom by the government was unchanged during the reporting period. The government claims to provide for and protect the right to private worship for all, including non-Muslims who gather in homes for religious services. This right was not always respected in practice and is not defined in law. Moreover, the public practice of non-Muslim religions is prohibited, and the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) and security forces of the Ministry of Interior (MOI) continued to raid private non-Muslim religious gatherings. Although the government also confirmed its stated policy to protect the right to possess and use personal religious materials, it did not provide for this right in law, and the CPVPV sometimes confiscated the personal religious materials of non-Muslims. Religious leaders and activists continued to face obstacles in expressing their views against the religious establishment.

Although overall government policies continued to place severe restrictions on religious freedom, there were incremental improvements in specific areas during the reporting period, including increased scrutiny of and training for the CPVPV; somewhat greater authority and capacity for official human rights entities to operate; legal reform to broaden the officially sanctioned interpretations of Shari'a (Islamic law) to include other schools of Sunni jurisprudence; selective measures to combat extremist ideology; and encouragement of leading clerics to preach tolerance in their sermons. The king's Interfaith Dialogue Initiative (IDI) launched a large-scale media campaign to promote tolerance and moderation.

The king's official title is "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques," reflecting the importance the royal family attaches to upholding Islam within the country as a central pillar of the royal family's legitimacy, both domestically and within the global Muslim community. There is no separation between state and religion, and the deep connection between the royal family and the religious establishment results in significant pressure on all citizens to adhere to the official government interpretation of Islam and conservative societal norms. Most citizens accept the idea that their lives should be governed by Islamic law; the debate is not about whether citizens should become more or less religious but about which

interpretation of Islamic laws and traditions should guide their society. Notwithstanding the pressure for orthodoxy, there are varying views among the citizenry on what should constitute Shari'a and how it should be implemented.

Despite the diversity of individual views, the government continued to enforce its official interpretation of Sunni Islam. Some Muslims who did not adhere to this interpretation faced significant political, economic, legal, social, and religious discrimination, including limited employment and educational opportunities, underrepresentation in official institutions, restrictions on the practice of their faith, and on the building of places of worship and community centers. The largest group affected was the Shi'a. Non-Muslims, nearly all of whom are citizens of other countries, faced significant restrictions on the public practice of their faith. However, there were fewer charges of harassment and abuse at the hands of the CPVPV, and non-Muslims were usually permitted to worship in private gatherings. Although some overtly intolerant statements in textbooks were removed or modified following stated government intention to reform educational materials to remove or revise such statements, textbooks continued to contain overtly intolerant statements against Jews and Christians and subtly intolerant statements against Shi'a and other religious groups. For example, during the reporting period they continued to state 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 the Jews. The government continued to screen and monitor prospective and current teachers who espoused extremist religious views. In contrast to the previous reporting period, there were no reports of teachers who, in defiance of government policy, promoted intolerant views in the classroom and did not face disciplinary measures. The government also continued to screen and monitor government-paid clerics in mosques throughout the country, although some public officials and clerics made discriminatory and intolerant statements.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. 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 of the right to religious freedom. On January 16, 2009, the Secretary of State re-designated the country as a Country of Particular Concern. In connection with this designation, the secretary 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, of whom approximately 19 million are citizens. There is no accurate figure for the number of foreign residents. The government estimated there were 6.5 million legal workers in the country, accompanied by approximately 1.5 million family members. Analysts estimated there were up to 1.5 million illegal immigrants. Figures from sending-country embassies indicated the foreign population in the country, including many undocumented migrants, was more than 10 million. Estimates provided by other countries' embassies include 1.8 million Indians, 2 million Bangladeshis, 1.3 million Filipinos, 1.5 million Pakistanis, one million Egyptians, one million Yemenis, 600,000 Indonesians, 400,000 Syrians, 400,000 Sri Lankans, 350,000 Nepalese, 250,000 Palestinians, 150,000 Lebanese, 100,000 Eritreans, and 50,000 Americans.

Accurate religious demographics were difficult to obtain. 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 Shafi'i schools).

Although estimates of the Shi'a population ranged from 5 to 20 percent, more reliable statistics put the figure at 10 to 15 percent. Approximately 80 percent of Shi'a are "Twelvers" (followers of Muhammad ibn Hasan, whom they recognize as the Twelfth Imam) and are primarily located in the Eastern Province. Most of the remaining Shi'a population are Sulaimaniya Isma'ilis, also known as "Seveners" (followers of Isma'il ibn Jafar, whom they recognize as the Seventh Imam), and they 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 150,000 Ashraf (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad) and

50,000 Nakhawala. Additionally, unconfirmed statistics put the number of Zaydis, residing primarily in the cities of Jizan and Najran, along the border with Yemen, at approximately 20,000. (Zaydis are followers of the first four of the Twelve Imams, but differ from Twelver Shi'a in recognizing Zayd ibn Ali as the fifth Imam).

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Comprehensive statistics for the religious denominations of foreigners were not available. They include Muslims from the various branches and schools of Islam, Christians (including Eastern Orthodox, Protestants, and more than one million Roman Catholics), Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and others. In addition to European and North American Christians, there are Christian East Africans, Indians, Pakistanis, Lebanese, Syrians, Egyptians, Palestinians, and large numbers of other South Asians residing in the country. The Filipino community is 90 percent Christian.

Although more recent figures from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowment, Call, and Guidance (MOIA) were not available, in 2008 MOIA estimated it was responsible for 73,000 Sunni mosques and more than 50,000 Sunni clerics throughout the country. The two mosques in Mecca and Medina do not come under 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.

In November 2009 the country hosted approximately 25 million Muslim pilgrims from throughout the world and representing all branches of Islam for the annual Hajj. Muslim pilgrims visit the country throughout the year to perform the Umra (lesser pilgrimage in Mecca) and to visit holy sites there and in Medina.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

According to the basic law, Islam is the official religion and the country's constitution is the Qur'an and the Sunna (traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). It is the government's policy to permit non-Muslims to practice their religion without interference as long as it is done privately within their own homes. Under the government's official interpretation of Islam, there is no legal recognition or protection of religious freedom, which is severely restricted in practice.

The 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 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. Ibn Abd' Al-Wahhab's stance was originally a reaction to a number of popular practices of his time that he believed represented a regression to pre-Islamic polytheism. He taught that the Muslims of his day had become apostates, and that Allah was punishing them by allowing outsiders to colonize Arabia. He urged Muslims to be stricter in their obedience to Islam and advocated a return to what he considered the practices of the first three generations of the Muslim era, arguing that every idea added to Islam after this period contradicted Muhammad's original teachings and should be eliminated. 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. Those Saudis who adhere to the teachings of Abd al Wahhab are more likely to think of themselves as followers of the earliest generations of Muslims or believers in divine unity.

No law specifically requires citizens to be Muslims, but non-Muslims and many Muslims whose beliefs do not adhere to the government's interpretation of Islam must practice their religion in private and are vulnerable to discrimination, harassment, detention, and deportation for noncitizens. Blasphemy is a crime punishable by long prison terms or, in some cases, death. Conversion by Muslims to another religion (apostasy) is punishable by death under the version of Islamic law adopted by the country, but there have been no confirmed reports of executions for either crime in recent years.

The Islamic judicial system is based on laws derived from the Qur'an and the Sunna (traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). On February 14, 2009, the king reorganized the Council of Senior Scholars to include scholars from all four Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence; however, since Abd Al-Wahab's teachings were based on the Hanbali School, it is the dominant school of Sunni jurisprudence in the country. Government universities provide training on all the Sunni schools, but focus on the Hanbali School; consequently, most Shari'a judges follow its system of interpretation.

The Majlis al-Shoura (the Consultative Council) is responsible for approving laws and regulations. The king appoints the Consultative Council's 150 male full-time members and 12 female part time advisors. There are five Shi'a 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.

Established in 1971, the Ulema (Council of Senior Religious Scholars) is an advisory body of 20 persons that reports to the king. It is headed by the grand mufti and is composed of scholars, Sunni religious jurists and the minister of justice. The council, supported by the Board of Research and Religious Rulings (fatwas), is recognized as the supreme authority on religious rulings by the basic law. As such, its opinions form the basis of the legal system. Three members of the council belong to non-Hanbali schools of Islamic jurisprudence, representing the Maliki, Hanafi, and Shafi'i schools; however, there are no Shi'a members. Scholars are chosen at the king's discretion and serve renewable four-year terms.

The government permits Shi'a judges presiding over courts in the Eastern Province to use the Ja'fari school of Islamic jurisprudence to adjudicate cases in family law, inheritance, and endowment management. There were six Shi'a judges, all located in the Eastern Province cities of Qatif and al-Ahsa, where the majority of Shi'a lived. Shi'a living in other parts of the Eastern Province, Najran Province, and the western Hejaz region had no access to local, regional, or national Shi'a courts. Two of the Shi'a judges served on the Qatif Court and one served on the al-Ahsa Court. The remaining three judges served on the Qatif-based Court of Appeals, which oversees the Qatif and al-Ahsa Courts. In January 2010 Shi'a judge Sheikh Hassan Bu Khamseen was dismissed after demonstrating opposition to some of the government's judicial decisions in 2007, reducing the number of Shi'a judges from seven to six.

In accordance with the government's official interpretation of Islam, the law discriminates against polytheistic religions and to a lesser extent against Christians and Jews, who are mentioned in the Qur'an as "People of the Book." This discrimination is manifested, for example, in calculating 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 others are only entitled to receive one-sixteenth 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. For example, testimony by Shi'a can carry less weight than testimony by Sunnis or be ignored in courts of law, despite official government statements that judges do not discriminate based on religion when they hear testimony. 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. Legally, children born to Muslim fathers are also Muslim.

The MOIA was established in 1993 as a bridge between the government and religious leadership. The MOIA supervised and financed the construction and maintenance of most Sunni mosques, including hiring of clerical workers; however,

approximately 30 percent of Sunni mosques were built and endowed by private persons, either as acts of charity or at private residences. Unlike for Sunni mosques, the process for obtaining a government-required license for a Shi'a mosque was reportedly unclear and arbitrary.

According to most recently available data from 2008, the MOIA employed approximately 78,000 clerical personnel, including 50,000 Sunni imams and khateebis (Friday sermon leaders), who were chosen by their communities and approved by the government. Based on the size of their communities, the imams received monthly MOIA stipends ranging from \$500 to \$800 (1,875 to 3,000 riyals). Khateebis who deliver Friday prayers receive an additional monthly stipend of \$425 (1,593 riyals). These stipends are low compared with other civil service salaries; however, the stipends are considered supplemental, rather than a primary source of personal income. Most clerics had private businesses or fulltime government jobs. Shi'a clerics were not funded by the MOIA and instead relied on community contributions, which varied widely, depending on the number of congregants they served. Some private mosques employed clerics of other nationalities.

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

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. Founded by King Abdul Aziz in 1926 in the Nejd region, the CPVPV gradually expanded, and in 1991 the general president of the CPVPV ordered the establishment of a branch of the commission in each of the country's 13 provinces. The CPVPV reports to the king through the Council of Ministers. The MOI coordinates with, but does not have authority over, the CPVPV. Fulltime or volunteer CPVPV field officers are known as mutawwi'in. They do not wear uniforms, but are required to wear identification badges and can only act in their official capacity when accompanied by a regular policeman. The 1980 law defined the CPVPV's mission as "guiding and advising people to observe the religious duties prescribed by Islamic Shari'a, and to preclude committing [acts] proscribed and prohibited [by Shari'a], or adopting bad habits and traditions or taboo [sic] heresies."

The 1980 law does not clearly define the CPVPV's jurisdiction, but the law's executive regulations state that the CPVPV is authorized to monitor various practices including 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.

According to the latest public statistics, the CPVPV has more than 5,000 staff members, including 3,583 CPVPV field officers throughout all 13 provinces. Additionally, there are over 1,600 administrative support personnel. In a February 2008, interview with the English language daily Saudi Gazette, the CPVPV president stated that all new staff members served a one-year probationary period before they were allowed to work in the field. A study reported in the November 3, 2007, Saudi Gazette stated that 44 percent of CPVPV members were college graduates and 79 percent were high school graduates. Reportedly, 4 percent had traveled abroad, 15 percent spoke only Arabic, and 23 percent were considering a career change.

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 CPVPV 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 government's official Human Rights Commission (HRC), the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR), a quasi-autonomous nongovernmental organization (NGO), and when appropriate, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The HRC and NSHR reported that they received and acted on complaints against the CPVPV. The government

made no information available on the number of complaints filed against the CPVPV during the reporting period or the official response to these complaints.

Officially, the government allows religious materials for private personal use in the country, and 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.

A MOIA committee defines the qualifications of Sunni clerics, and the MOIA is responsible for investigating complaints against clerics for promoting intolerance, violence, or hatred. The government's policy is to advise clerics in tolerance and moderation, particularly those 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. Based on their reports, the committees summon clerics accused of preaching intolerance. If the provincial committees are not able to dissuade these clerics from their thinking, the clerics are referred to a central committee. MOIA officials state that from 2003 to 2006 1,300 clerics were dismissed during the first phase of this program. The second three-year phase ended in 2009. On March 25, 2009, the minister for Islamic affairs told Arabic daily newspaper Okaz Online that over the five years since the program's inception, 3,200 clerics had been dismissed. While he acknowledged that some imams were brought in for counseling, no imams were dismissed between 2008 and 2010. The MOIA conducted activities that targeted extremist online forums and Web sites.

The 24-member Human Rights Commission (HRC) was established in September 2005 by the Council of Ministers to address human rights abuses and promote human rights within the country. The board does not include women or Shi'a members. The HRC reported that it received complaints of human rights violations, including infractions by the CPVPV and detentions and arrests of religious leaders and human rights activists. The HRC also has a mandate to improve human rights awareness in the country, including the promotion of tolerance, and launched a four-year human rights awareness campaign in January 2010. Additionally, the HRC worked with the Ministry of Education and provided materials and training to police, security forces, and the CPVPV on protecting human rights.

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

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The status of respect for religious freedom by the government was unchanged during the reporting period. Public religious practice was generally limited to activities that conform to the official interpretation of Islam. Contrary practices, such as celebrating Maulid Al-Nabi (birthday of the Prophet Muhammad) and visits to the tombs of renowned Muslims, are forbidden, although enforcement was more relaxed in some communities than in others, and Shi'a were permitted to observe Ashura (the "day of grief" which commemorates the martyrdom of Hussein bin Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed considered by Shi'a to be the third Imam and rightful successor of the Prophet) publicly in some communities. The government also prohibited the public propagation of Islamic teachings that differ from the official interpretation of Islam.

During the reporting period, there was significant public discussion, including in the media, questioning the official version of religious traditions and criticizing their enforcement, although 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, detention, and deportation for foreigners. 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. Several media sources reported that the editor of Al-Watan Newspaper, Jamal Khashoggi, was fired on May 15, 2010, for publishing a number of articles in the paper that criticized the country's official interpretation of Islam.

Sunni clerics, who receive government stipends, occasionally used anti-Semitic, anti-Christian, and anti-Shi'a 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.

The government restricted the establishment of places of worship and public training of non-Sunni clergy. 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 were able to hold services. These entry restrictions made it difficult for non-Muslims to maintain regular contact with clergy, particularly Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians, whose faiths require a priest on a regular basis to receive sacraments. However, many non-Muslims continued to gather for private worship and the government generally allowed the discreet performance of religious functions of all faiths.

During the reporting period, Shi'a continued to face systematic discrimination and intolerance tied to a variety of factors, including historical perceptions and ongoing suspicions of foreign influences on their actions. While they coexisted with their Sunni neighbors in relative peace, most Shi'a shared general concerns about discrimination in education, employment, political representation, the judiciary, religious practice, and media.

Judicial discrimination against Shi'a was evident during the reporting period. Shi'a 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 Shi'a court rulings and government departments can choose not to implement judgments rendered by Shi'a judges. Shi'a leaders argue that the one court of appeals on which Shi'a judges sit has no real authority and only verifies documents. Jurisdictionally, these courts are only allowed to rule on cases in the Qatif and al-Ahsa areas; Shi'a from other regions cannot use such courts. Due to the Shi'a courts' lack of authority, six of their seven judges threatened to resign in 2007, but no action was taken by the government or the judges. In April 2008 the government unexpectedly replaced Sheikh Mohammad Al-Obaidan, the senior of the two Shi'a court judges in Qatif. Although there was no official reason given for his replacement, he had been critical of the government for giving only limited resources and authority to the Ja'fari courts. The perceived arbitrary nature of this action caused an outcry in the Shi'a community and Sunni judges continued to interfere in the work of the Ja'fari court during the reporting period.

In higher education the government discriminated against Shi'a in the selection process for students, professors, and administrators at public universities. For example, Shi'a 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 Shi'a. At the primary and secondary levels of education in al-Ahsa, there continued to be severe underrepresentation of Shi'a among school principals, with approximately 1 percent of area principals Shi'a, and none in al-Ahsa female schools. In Qatif, where Shi'a comprise approximately 90 percent of the population, many male principals and even some male religious teachers in primary schools were Shi'a; however, there were no Shi'a principals or religious teachers in Qatif's public female primary schools. There were no private schools for girls in Qatif.

Regardless of their 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 were not required to study Islam. Muslim students of other nationalities must obtain a waiver from the 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 were not permitted. Despite government revisions to elementary and secondary education textbooks, they retained language intolerant of other religious traditions, especially Jewish, Christian, and Shi'a beliefs, including commands to hate infidels and kill apostates.

Shi'a faced significant employment discrimination in the public and private sector. A very small number of 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 negatively affect career advancement.

In the public sector, Shi'a were significantly underrepresented in national security-related positions, including the Ministry of Defense and Aviation, the National Guard, and the Ministry of the Interior. Shi'a were better represented in the ranks of traffic police, municipalities, and public schools in predominantly Shi'a areas. Qatif community leaders described allegedly prejudicial zoning laws that prevent construction of buildings over a certain height in various Shi'a neighborhoods. The leaders claimed the laws prevented investment and development in these areas and aimed to limit the density of Shi'a population in any given area.

There was no formal policy concerning the hiring and promotion of Shi'a 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 Shi'a were passed over for less qualified Sunni colleagues. Engineer Abdulshaheed al-Sunni, a high-ranking Shi'a official at the King Abdulaziz Sea Port in Dammam, reportedly resigned in September 2009 due to oppression and injustice which prevented him from being promoted.

Members of the Shi'a minority were also subjected to political discrimination. For example, although Shi'a compose 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 Shi'a 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 Shi'a. However, the Shi'a were well-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 Shi'a headed the Qatif municipal council. With five Shi'a on the Consultative Council they were significantly underrepresented.

Many Shi'a were also subjected to systematic religious discrimination. For example, the government does not finance construction or maintenance of Shi'a mosques. All new mosques required the permission of the MOIA, the local municipality, and the provincial government, which is functionally part of the MOI. The government approved construction of new Shi'a mosques in Qatif and some areas of al-Ahsa--sometimes after lengthy delays due to the numerous approvals required--but did not approve construction of Shi'a mosques in Dammam, home to many Shi'a. Shi'a leaders attributed the refusals to a government desire to discourage the growth of Shi'a populations in these communities. Since May 2008 al-Ahsa municipal authorities continued to halt construction of the Imam Rida mosque, the largest Shi'a mosque in al-Ahsa, reportedly due to building code violations.

During the reporting period, at least seven Shi'a mosques and two Shi'a waqfs (places of prayer in individuals' homes sanctioned by local Shi'a clerics as a suitable alternative to traditional mosques) were closed in al-Khobar and al-Ahsa. The provincial government reportedly carried out the closures by arresting and threatening to arrest mosque owners and clerics if they continued to hold prayers and by posting police near the mosques. Local authorities reportedly told mosque owners that the closures were due to improper zoning and lack of appropriate permits.

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

The government does not officially recognize several centers of Shi'a religious instruction located in Eastern Province, provide financial support to 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. These centers were also subject to forced closures. Public religious training for non-Sunni religious groups is prohibited.

The government refused to approve construction or registration of Shi'a community centers. Shi'a were forced to build areas in private homes to serve as community centers. 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.

Authorities allowed Shi'a in the Eastern Province city of Qatif greater freedom in their religious practices, including the public commemoration of Ashura (with minimal government interference). In other areas with large Shi'a populations, such as al-Ahsa and Dammam, authorities restricted Shi'a religious activities, including public observances of Ashura, public marches, loudspeaker broadcasts of clerics' lectures from Shi'a community centers, and, in some instances, gatherings within those centers.

Moreover, the government continued to exclude Shi'a perspectives from the state's extensive religious media and broadcast programming. The government sporadically imposed bans on the importation and sale of Shi'a 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 Shi'a, were commonly found in public discourse and could be found on the MOIA Web site.

The Medina Shi'a are a small, deeply rooted community of diverse believers including the Nakhawala, who are laborers by tradition. Nakhawala community leaders claim they face more issues than Shi'a Twelvers in the Eastern Province because they are not allowed to construct mosques, women's centers, or community centers, nor do they have access to Shi'a courts. They also claimed to hear anti-Shi'a sermons and statements regularly in their neighborhoods. Unlike the case with Shi'a from the Eastern Province, there were no prominent Nakhawala Shi'a in government bodies such as the Consultative Council or the HRC. In addition, the Nakhawala 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 continued to face obstacles in Najran Province. Community leaders asserted that the government discriminated against them by prohibiting their own religious books; allowing Sunni religious leaders to declare them unbelievers; denying them government employment, restricting them to lower-level government jobs; and relocating them from the southwest to other parts of the country, or encouraging them to emigrate.

Since the government's interpretation of Islam holds that veneration of humans, including the Prophet Muhammad, is idolatrous, public celebration of Maulid Al-Nabi (the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad) and certain ritual acts at places associated with the Prophet and his family in Medina and Mecca are officially forbidden. Shi'a described restrictions on their visits to Mecca and Medina as the interference of Riyadh-based authorities in private Muslim worship. In addition, government religious authorities continued the practice of destroying ancient Islamic historical sites for fear that Muslims would pray to the people the sites represented.

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

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The government continued to commit abuses of religious freedom. Non-Muslim groups in different parts of the country were detained and harassed for worshipping privately. Harassment of Shi'a during religious worship and communal gatherings continued. The number of arbitrary arrests of Shi'a in the Eastern Province reported in the local media increased from the previous reporting period. A few high-profile death penalty cases involving alleged witchcraft continued. Religious leaders and activists continued to face obstacles in expressing their views against the religious establishment. In addition, a few senior clerics continued to use their pulpits to disseminate intolerant views although the prevalence of such behavior continued to decrease. For example, a sheikh who was named to lead extra Ramadan prayers at the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 2008, a prestigious appointment, classified Shi'a clerics as "infidels" in two separate interviews with the BBC in May and June 2009. This sheikh also opined that Shi'a clerics are not entitled to join the Council of Senior Religious Scholars, the highest religious body in the country. The sheikh was subsequently dismissed from leading extra Ramadan prayers in August/September 2009.

The government continued to prohibit public, non-Muslim religious activities, and non-Sunni activities in dominantly Sunni areas although the government's stated policy is that persons are free to practice their faith in private. Many of the reported abuses were difficult to corroborate, however, because of witnesses' or victims' fears that disclosing such information might harm themselves or 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.

An unknown number of detainees were held in prison on charges of sorcery, black magic, or witchcraft; there were a few media reports each week of persons detained or arrested on charges of sorcery, black magic, or witchcraft. Anti-sorcery departments exist within the CPVPV branches across the country, with 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 March 29, 2010, security authorities reportedly detained three Shiites, including the brother of Abdullah Saleh al-Muhanna, a prominent Shi'a detained for one month in May 2009. All three men were arrested for taking part in religious activities during Ashura in January 2010, sentenced to one month in prison in Khobar, and released after serving a required 30-day sentence.

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

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

On January 14, 2010, authorities released prominent Shi'a figure, Sayed Mohammad Baqer al-Nasser, after detaining him for an hour for having performed Friday prayer in a Sunni mosque.

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. At the end of the reporting period, the case was pending with the appeals court in Mecca.

On November 9, 2009, authorities in the Eastern Province (Ras Tanura and Abqaiya) closed two Shi'a mosques that had operated for years, justifying the closures on the grounds of improper zoning and lack of mandated permits. Authorities reportedly closed at least five other Shi'a mosques and waqfs (religious foundations) in the Eastern Province during the reporting period, including two in Al Khobar in August 2009.

From November 1 to 30, 2009, at least five Shi'a 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.

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 Shi'a activist Munir Jassas. Authorities had summoned him two months earlier and ordered him to provide a written pledge to stop blogging about the government's poor treatment of Shi'a Muslims. Reportedly, he spent at least four months in solitary confinement although no formal charges were filed, and at the end of the reporting period he remained in prison.

On October 27, 2009, authorities reportedly arrested Shi'a 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 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 stopping discrimination against the Shiite minority in the country. According to Al-Amer, he appeared in court on charges of "stirring the system" on October 20, 2009, but the judge postponed the trial indefinitely after his lawyer requested the right for legal access to the details of the case. Al-Amer was a known teacher of Qur'anic interpretations and was previously been arrested three times. His most recent arrest was in September 2008 for announcing call to prayer in accordance with Shi'a practice.

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 Shi'a 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 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 3, 2009, Hadi al-Mutif, a Sulaimaniya Isma'ili Shi'a who has been on death row for 16 years for "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 Al-Hurra television in 2007. International reaction followed a February 2008 petition with 115 country signatories asking the king to free Al-Mutif. The king refused to intervene due to the claim that Al-Mutif's alleged offense was a hadd crime, referring to a crime whose explanation and punishment are explicitly described in the Qur'an and thus not subject to civil authority. The king could pardon him if the

sentence were to be rescinded and reissued under ta'azir (punishment determined by a judge). NGOs reported that Al-Mutif has been in solitary confinement for more than a year, reportedly in response to two suicide attempts. At the end of the reporting period, the HRC had taken up his case, but Al-Mutif remained in prison.

Between August and October 2009, at least eight Shi'a 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. Arrestees include Abdullah Al Muhana, detained on May 25, 2009; Zuhair Hussain Busaleh, detained on July 16, 2009; Hussain Al Rashed, detained on August 11, 2009; Abdulla Fahad Al Maki, detained on March 30, 2010; Mahdi Ahmed Khodair, detained on March 30, 2010; Hassan Saleh Al Muhana, detained on March 30, 2010; Hassan Ali Al Maki, detained on April 5, 2010; and Sayed Yusuf Sharaf Al-Hashim, detained on October 25, 2009.

On August 24, 2009, King Abdullah ordered the release of 17 Sulaimaniya Isma'ili Shi'a men jailed after riots in Najran Province in 2000. According to Rasid.com, all 17 men were asked by prison authorities to sign a pledge not to participate in any future protests or unrest as a condition of their release. The government asserted they were arrested and imprisoned for disturbing public order and threatening the safety of the Najran governor, but not for religious reasons.

In May 2009 police in Khobar arrested Hajj Abdullah Saleh Al-Muhanna, a Shi'a, for leading prayer services in his home. Over the previous year, authorities had carried out a campaign of harassment against Al-Muhanna. Without facing trial, Al-Muhanna was released from prison on June 30, 2009.

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

In March 2009 Hamoud Saleh Al-Amri was released from prison on the condition that he not leave the country or appear in the media. On January 13, 2009, Al-Amri was 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 (ANHRI) campaigned for Al-Amri's release. This was the third time Hamoud had been detained; he was held for nine months in 2004 and for one month in 2008.

In March 2009 a Shi'a cleric from Awamiya Village in Qatif gave a controversial sermon wherein he raised the possibility of a separate Shi'a state. Following this sermon, the cleric reportedly went into hiding to avoid arrest. On March 19, 2009, several hundred Shi'a conducted a sit-in protest in Awamiya in support of the cleric; reports indicated more than a dozen Shi'a were arrested. At the end of the reporting period, contacts reported that all of the previously arrested Shi'a were released.

In February 2009 a group of Shi'a trying to visit the Baqi'a cemetery in Medina clashed with police and the CPVPV. Licensed media outlets in the country did not report this incident; however, the international press and blogs in the country widely covered the sectarian tension that followed. Several religious and political leaders from the Shi'a community wrote open letters to the king calling for the release of Shi'a youth who were detained as a result of the incident. Eventually a delegation of Shi'a from Qatif, al-Ahsa, and Medina met with the king, after which the king announced the immediate release of all detainees.

In January 2009 Sabri Bogday, a Turkish barber, returned to Turkey after the king pardoned him. In March 2008 Bogday was sentenced to death after two men reported to authorities that he blasphemed God and the Prophet Muhammad in his barber shop. In May 2008 an appellate court upheld his conviction of blasphemy, necessitating the pardon.

In January 2009 Yemane Gebriel, an Eritrean pastor, fled the country to an undisclosed location after multiple threats from the CPVPV. Gebriel had led a church of more than 300 foreign-born Christians for 10 years. In 2005 Gebriel was arrested

and released a few weeks later due to diplomatic efforts on his behalf. There was no update on Gebriel's status at the end of the reporting period.

On January 12, 2009, Rasid.com reported that students and government employees who missed school or work on a Shi'a holiday, the Tenth of Muharram, without an acceptable excuse were "punished." The nature of the punishment was not specified.

In November 2008 Shams Daily reported that the CPVPV in the Eastern Province denied Internet reports that it forcibly arrested blogger and poet Rushide Al-Dowsary for promoting witchcraft and sorcery. No updates were available at the end of the reporting period.

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. Officials had also attempted to deport them in June and October 2008. Each time higher authorities intervened to rescind the orders. Eight of the original 14 remained in country through 2009, but all of them faced deportation consequent to the revocation of their employment sponsorship. At the end of the reporting period, all of them were deported.

Also in April 2008 an Indian Christian residing in the Western Province reported that his sponsor began receiving daily phone calls from local authorities demanding the Christian's immediate deportation on the basis of a previous MOI order. The Christian was one of 28 Indians arrested in a December 2003 CPVPV raid on a private religious gathering. Due to sponsor intervention, the subject and his family remained in the country, while the other 27 Indian Christians were deported. Responding to local authorities' pressure, the sponsor obtained an exit visa for the Christians with a departure date of May 31, 2008. However, intervention by senior government officials led local authorities to contact the sponsor on May 16, 2008, and inform him the exit visa was cancelled pending a review. As of the end of the reporting period, the subject and his family remained in the country and experienced no further harassment from the local authorities.

In August 2008 Rasid.com reported that authorities arrested Shiite religious figure and reformer Sheikh Nemer Baqer Al-Nemer after a series of declarations in which he demanded religious freedom reforms. He was released from prison less than 24 hours after his arrest. The Web site Al-Sahat stated a royal order secured his release.

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 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 reinstituted 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.

The appeal of the 2008 sentencing of four Sulaimaniya Isma'ili activists to 80 lashes and up to two-months' imprisonment on charges of consuming alcohol was granted.

The November 2007 case filed by a Sunni man requesting compensation from the government for imprisoning him from December 2006 to April 2007 remained under review at the end of the reporting period. He claimed he was jailed on the basis of his Internet articles advocating human rights, including religious freedom for Shi'a, and his meeting with a prominent Shi'a leader. He also claimed government officials harassed him and his family members before and after his imprisonment. At the end of the reporting period, the case was still under review by the Dammam branch of the Board of Grievances, a government ombudsman.

In September 2007 a Uighur Muslim from China was detained in a Mecca prison awaiting forcible return to China. He was allegedly involved in underground religious activities, including teaching the Qur'an, in China. There have been credible reports that the government of China denies due process to, tortures, and in some cases executes Uighur Muslims who have advocated for religious freedom and who have been forcibly returned. Senior U.S. embassy and U.S. consulate Jeddah officers met with government officials and requested government intervention to prevent his forcible return.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

During the reporting period, the government implemented policies that slightly improved the status of religious freedom. Moreover, the king and other government and religious leaders significantly expanded the interfaith and national dialogue to promote tolerance and moderation through broadly targeted seminars and media campaigns.

Improvements included limited education reform, better protection of the right to possess and use personal religious materials, legal reform to broaden the officially sanctioned interpretations of Islamic law, 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, somewhat greater authority and capacity for official human rights entities to operate, and measures to combat extremist ideology.

In May 2010 Princess Basma Bint Saud bin Abdulaziz, daughter of King Saud, published an article in Al-Madina accusing members of the CPVPV of committing "religious terrorism." She called on the organization to start fighting corruption inside government bodies instead of "wasting their time barbarically chasing women and men."

The fourth Interfaith Dialogue Conference was held in Geneva September 30 to October 1, 2009. The Deputy Minister of Education and Secretary General of the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue, Faisal al-Mu'ammar, led the 19-member delegation to the conference. Saudi and regional newspapers carried multiple articles and editorials on the event, positively portraying the conference and the King's Interfaith Dialogue Initiative.

In addition to the IDI, the King continued a national dialogue campaign to increase tolerance and encourage moderation and understanding. In May 2010 the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue launched its largest ever public awareness campaign using 10 public service announcements to promote dialogue and tolerance. The PSAs were screened during primetime television and major soccer matches. During the reporting period, the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue had 1,555 certified trainers who conducted 66 training programs and workshops on "the culture and importance of open dialogue and communication skills" for more than 500 men and women. 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 establish memorandums of understanding with government ministries and institutions, including the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, the CPVPV, universities, and charities.

On February 14, 2009, the king reorganized the Council of Senior Scholars to include scholars from all four schools of Islamic jurisprudence. Since the 1920s, the government had officially adhered to the Hanbali school by declaring two Hanbali sources as the only acceptable references for Saudi judges. The reorganization of the council is the first official recognition of the other three schools in the country since that time. Most scholars and judges, however, are still Hanbalists.

The government continued to combat extremist ideology by scrutinizing religious clerics and teachers closely, dismissing those found to be promoting intolerant and extreme views. Additionally, many leading government and religious officials made strong public statements against extremism and instead, advocated tolerance and moderation.

On March 28, 2010, Prince Naif bin Abdulaziz, second deputy prime minister and minister of interior, opened a four-day international conference at Madina's Islamic University on terrorism and extremist thought, the conference produced a declaration condemning terrorism and calling on Muslim youths to embrace moderate Islam.

March 28, 2010, King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue held a conference on moderation in Islam for religious scholars. The conference highlighted tolerance, understanding, dealing with differences, and the culture of dialogue.

On January 14, 2010, an official at the Islamic Education Foundation (IEF) in Jeddah announced the cancellation of an anti-Shi'a seminar in Jizan, reportedly in response to local protests. Officials at IEF did not identify the authority that canceled the seminar.

On October 7, 2009, multiple newspapers reported that Sheikh Saleh bin Hameed, the president of the Higher Judicial Council, cautioned prayer and Friday sermon leaders against "closed and narrow minded isolation."

On September 27, 2009, all local newspapers reported that Assistant Defense Minister Prince Khalid bin Sultan stated that "there will be no compromise with extremist groups who work under the pretext of following religious principles."

On August 21, 2009, Al-Risala reported that the Islamic affairs ministry instructed all clerics leading prayers during Ramadan that praying for the destruction of Jews, Christians and infidels was wrong and illegitimate.

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 reportedly were able to bring personal Bibles, crosses, DVDs of sermons, and other religious materials into the country without difficulty.

In response to continuing concerns about the CPVPV, the government continued to allow unprecedented media coverage of the trials of CPVPV members allegedly involved in the harassment and deaths of citizens. There was greater freedom to criticize openly the religious establishment, including in the press, and many writers denounced abuses the CPVPV committed, some calling for a nationwide examination of the CPVPV's role or even its disbandment. In the past such criticism often resulted in harassment by the CPVPV and generated death threats from religious extremists, but there were no similar reports during the reporting period.

Public discussions and challenges to the role of the CPVPV in monitoring social interactions under their religious mandate increased in number and intensity, especially among younger citizens, given that 70 percent of the population is under age 30. In particular, some younger females continued to demonstrate eagerness to expand restrictive social and legal boundaries. As a result of increased public scrutiny and discussion of the CPVPV during the reporting period, the CPVPV actively sought to improve the public performance of its organization and officers.

On June 16, 2009, Prince Naif bin Abdulaziz, minister of interior, launched a new strategic plan for the CPVPV, formalizing long-term agreements between the CPVPV, King Fahd University for Petroleum and Minerals, and King Saud University in order to enhance the professionalism of CPVPV employees and their interaction with the public. In conjunction with these universities and others, members of the CPVPV participated in training sessions throughout the year on the laws and procedures applying to their "field work" and on communication and effective dialogue.

In February 2007 the government authorized \$2.4 billion (nine billion riyals) to support a six-year implementation of a pilot program in educational modernization. One of the chief goals of the program is to supplement traditional religious

instruction with more "knowledge-based" subject matter such as science and computer literacy; officials in the government ministries reported the classroom time devoted to science and math more than doubled. The minister of education publicly and privately supported rapid implementation of the program. Additionally, the Minister of Education signed a five-year collaboration agreement with the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue to promote religious and cultural tolerance in the classroom through teacher training programs and seminars.

New textbooks for math and science showed improvement by focusing solely on academic subjects, removing previous religious references. New textbooks for religious and Arabic classes did not show substantial improvements, and continued to include intolerant and provocative language regarding religious minorities. In addition, Ministry of Education officials continued to monitor teachers for intolerant and extreme language. Over the past two years, 2000 teachers were moved to administrative positions for "promoting extremism" and Ministry of Education officials continue to monitor teachers for intolerant and extreme language.

The NSHR continued to receive and respond to complaints concerning transgressions by CPVPV members and called for modification of the CPVPV's authority.

The MOIA continued to monitor education materials used at religious summer camps to prevent teaching of extremist ideologies to children.

Local authorities continued to permit an incrementally greater degree of freedom to Shi'a in Qatif during the reporting period, allowing religious practices and gatherings that were restricted or prevented in the past. The number and size of Karbala plays reenacting the martyrdom of Imam Hussain grew. Pictures of revered imams were displayed openly in shop windows.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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 support 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. There were reports that some employers withheld pay or residency card renewal based on religious factors.

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

On September 15, 2009, Rasid.com reported that approximately 100 radical Sunni citizens attacked individuals in a Shiite district in Al-Madina, injuring seven local citizens before security forces arrived and ended the assault. There was no mention of why the attack occurred and no update on the status of the assailants was available at the end of the reporting period.

Unprecedented media criticism of government educational materials took place during the reporting period. On August 24, 2009, a popular television series, Tash ma Tash, aired a controversial episode which focused on education reform. The episode depicted the attempts of ultraconservatives to block education reform and showed the Minister of Education ordering a delegation of religious conservatives out of his office. Several newspapers reported on the controversial episode.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. policy is to press the government consistently to honor its public commitment to permit private religious worship by non-Muslims, eliminate discrimination against minorities, promote tolerance toward non-Muslims, and combat extremism.

During the reporting period, the ambassador met with senior government and religious leaders regarding religious freedom, and raised specific cases of violations with senior officials. Other senior U.S. officials discussed with the government its policies concerning religious practice and tolerance and defamation of religion. They encouraged the government to honor policies to combat intolerant literature and extremist ideology within the country and around the world, protect private worship for all religious groups, curb harassment of religious groups, and promote tolerance toward all religions. Senior U.S. officials supported calls for religious tolerance, including elimination of discrimination against religious minorities, improved respect for human rights, and improved accountability and transparency in these matters. U.S. officials also raised specific cases and instances of religious freedom violations with senior government officials.

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 government's official form of Sunni Islam. In addition, embassy officers met with ministry of foreign affairs officials to discuss other matters pertaining to religious freedom.

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