



Saudi Arabia

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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There is no legal recognition of, or protection under the law for, freedom of religion, and it is severely restricted in practice. The country is a monarchy and the King is both head of state and government. The legal system is based on the government's official interpretation of Shari'a (Islamic law). Sunni Islam is the official religion.

The Government confirmed that, as a matter of public policy, it guarantees and protects the right to private worship for all, including non-Muslims who gather in homes for religious services. However, this right was not always respected in practice and is not defined in law. Moreover, the public practice of non-Muslim religions is prohibited, and mutawwa'in (religious police) continued to conduct raids of private non-Muslim religious gatherings. Although the Government also confirmed its policy to protect the right to possess and use personal religious materials, it did not provide for this right in law, and the mutawwa'in sometimes confiscated the personal religious material of non-Muslims.

While overall government policies continued to place severe restrictions on religious freedom, there were incremental improvements in specific areas during the period covered by this report, such as better protection of the right to possess and use personal religious materials; sporadic efforts to curb and investigate harassment by the mutawwa'in; increased media reporting on, and criticism of, the mutawwa'in; somewhat greater authority and capacity for official human rights entities to operate; and limited education reform. In addition, there were larger public and private celebrations of Shi'a holidays in the Qatif oasis of the Eastern Province.

There were also several positive developments in government policy that, if fully implemented, could lead to important improvements in the future. The Government reiterated its policy to halt the dissemination of intolerance and combat extremism, both within Islam and toward non-Muslim religious groups, in the country and abroad. For example, officials advised that they were monitoring sermons at government-supported mosques and would dismiss or retrain imams whose preaching promoted religious extremism. The Government continued to state its goal of "balanced development," by promising greater infrastructure development in predominantly Shi'a and Isma'ili areas of the Eastern and Najran Provinces. Most significantly, this year saw the beginning of an interfaith dialogue process, led by King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud. The King, along with the support of the Muslim World League, sponsored an intrafaith dialogue in Mecca between June 4-6, 2008, bringing Sunnis and Shi'a together, and at the end of the reporting period, was planning to hold a similar conference in Madrid, Spain, in July, bringing together Christians, Jews, Muslims, and adherents of other faiths.

The King's official title is "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques." As such, upholding Islam within the country is regarded as one of his and his government's paramount functions. In addition, the conservative religious establishment exerts significant pressure on the state and society to adhere to the official interpretation of Islam and conservative societal norms. Moreover, there is intense pressure within the society to conform accordingly. However, while the majority of citizens support a government and society based on Shari'a, there are varying views among the citizenry on how it should be interpreted and implemented.

Despite this diversity of views, the Government continued to enforce its official interpretation of Sunni Islam. Non-Muslims and Muslims who do not adhere to this interpretation faced significant political, economic, legal, social, and religious discrimination, including limited employment and educational opportunities, underrepresentation in official institutions, and restrictions on the practice of their faith and on the building of places of worship and community centers. There were also charges of harassment, abuse, and killings at the

hands of the mutawwa'in, or religious police, who work for the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice (CPVPV). These incidents caused many non-Muslims to worship in fear of, and in such a manner as to avoid discovery by, the police and mutawwa'in. There were also concerns about Saudi textbooks that continued to contain overtly intolerant statements against Jews and Christians and subtly intolerant statements against Shi'a, Isma'ilis, and other religious groups, notwithstanding government claims that it was reviewing educational materials to remove or revise such statements. Furthermore, while government officials stated prospective and current teachers who espoused extremist religious views would be screened out or dismissed, and some screenings reportedly did take place, there were multiple incidents where teachers, in defiance of Saudi government policy, promoted intolerant views in the classroom without being disciplined. Discriminatory and intolerant statements were also made by public officials and government-paid imams.

Senior U.S. officials discussed a number of key policies concerning religious practice and tolerance with the Government, as well as specific cases involving the infringement of the right of religious freedom. In November 2006, the U.S. Secretary of State re-designated Saudi Arabia as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for violations of religious freedom, and the Government was issued a waiver of sanctions "to further the purposes of the Act."

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 1,225,000 square miles and a population of more than 28.5 million, including an estimated foreign population of more than 8 million. The foreign population reportedly includes 1.6 million Indians, 1.5 million Bangladeshis, 1.2 million Filipinos, 1 million Pakistanis, 1 million Egyptians, 600,000 Indonesians, 400,000 Sri Lankans, 350,000 Nepalese, 250,000 Palestinians, 150,000 Lebanese, 100,000 Eritreans, and 30,000 Americans.

While accurate religious demographics are difficult to obtain, approximately 90 percent of citizens are Sunni Muslims, who predominantly subscribe to the Government-sanctioned interpretation of Islam. In the western Hejaz region, there are sizeable communities following other Sunni interpretations.

Ten percent of citizens are Shi'a Muslims. The reportedly 1.5 to 2 million Shi'a are primarily located in the Eastern Province, southern Najran Province, and western Medina area. An estimated 150,000 Shi'a also reside in the Medina area of the western Hejaz region, including the Ashraf (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad) and approximately 50,000 Nakhawala. In addition, there are reportedly 250,000 – 450,000 Sulaimaniya Isma'ili Shi'a in the southern Najran Province and the Eastern Province. The majority of the country's Shi'a are "Twelvers" (i.e., they are followers of Muhammad ibn Hasan, whom they recognize as the Twelfth Imam) and are primarily located in the Eastern Province and the Medina area of the western Hejaz region. The Sulaimaniya Isma'ili, are known as "Seveners" (i.e., they are followers of Isma'il ibn Jafar, whom they recognize as the Seventh Imam).

Comprehensive statistics for the religious denominations of foreigners are not available; however, they include Muslims from the various branches and schools of Islam, Christians (including Eastern Orthodox, Protestants, and over 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, Palestinians, and large numbers of other South Asians residing in the country. Ninety percent of the Filipino community is Christian. Private Christian religious gatherings reportedly take place throughout the country.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowment, Call, and Guidance (MOIA) is responsible for 72,000 Sunni mosques and over 50,000 Sunni imams. The Grand Muftis of the two holiest mosques in Mecca and Medina report directly to the King.

In December 2007 the country hosted almost three million Muslim pilgrims from around the world and all branches of Islam for the annual Hajj to Mecca.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

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

The Government considers its legitimacy to rest in part on its interpretation and enforcement of Islam, which are derived from the writings and teachings of 18th-century Sunni religious scholar Muhammad ibn Abd Al-Wahhab. 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 religion and state in terms of governance.

Although no law specifically requires citizens to be Muslim, Article 12.4 of the Naturalization Law requires that applicants attest to their religious affiliation, and Article 14.1 requires applicants to get a certificate endorsed by their local imam. Most non-Muslims and Muslims whose beliefs do not adhere to the Government-approved interpretation of Islam must practice their religion in private and are vulnerable to discrimination, harassment, detention, and if a noncitizen, deportation. Blasphemy carries the death penalty. Conversion by Muslims to another religion (apostasy) and proselytizing by non-Muslims are both punishable by death, but there have been no confirmed reports of executions for either crime in recent years.

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

The Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council) is responsible for approving laws and regulations that are compatible with Shari'a. The 150 male members are supported by 6 female advisors. There are three Shi'a members.

The Council of Senior Ulema (religious scholars) is an advisory body of reportedly 20 Sunni religious jurists, including the Minister of Justice, who reports to the King. Established in 1971, the Council is headed by the Grand Mufti of Mecca. It meets periodically to interpret Shari'a and establish the legal principles that guide lower court judges. Three Ulema members belong to non-Hanbali schools of Shari'a, but none of them are Shi'a.

The Government permits Shi'a judges presiding over courts in the Eastern Province to use the Ja'afari school of jurisprudence to adjudicate cases limited to family law, inheritance, and endowment management. There are only seven Shi'a judges, all of whom were located in the Eastern Province cities of Qatif and al-Ahsa, where the majority of the country's Shi'a live. Shi'a living in other parts of the Eastern Province, Najran Province, and the western Hejaz region, among other places, have no access to local, regional, or national Shi'a courts. Two of the Shi'a judges serve on the Qatif Court and two of the Shi'a judges serve on the al-Ahsa Court. The remaining three judges serve on the Qatif-based Court of Appeals, which oversees the Qatif and al-Ahsa Courts.

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

in which case the law deems such children to be Muslims.

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

The Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice (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, the CPVPV reports to the King through the Council of Ministers. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) coordinates with, but does not have authority over the CPVPV, and its full-time or volunteer field officers are known as mutawwa'in. The mutawwa'in do not wear uniforms, but they are now required to wear identification badges and can only act in their official capacity when accompanied by a regular policeman. The 1980 law that formally established the CPVPV defines the body'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."

While the 1980 law does not clearly define the CPVPV's jurisdiction, that law's Executive Regulations state that the mutawwa'in are authorized to monitor various practices including: mixing of the two sexes; men's advances toward 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 Islamic practices; practicing magic for profit; and committing or facilitating of lewdness, including adultery, homosexuality, and gambling.

In 2006 the Government declared that religious police could no longer detain or interrogate suspects or violate the sanctity of private homes. However, on July 1, 2007, Interior Minister Prince Nayif bin Abulaziz Al Saud rolled back the previous year's prohibition on entering private homes but reaffirmed the need for mutawwa'in to hand over any suspects to the regular police for detention. Additionally, the mutawwa'in can only act in their official capacity when accompanied by a police officer, and they are not allowed to administer any kind of punishment. Nevertheless, the Government conducted investigations into several incidents that occurred during the reporting period where the mutawwa'in were accused of violating these restrictions. In addition, the government-controlled press frequently criticized mutawwa'in activity.

The Government's stated policy is to permit private worship for all, including non-Muslims who gather in homes for religious practice, and to address violations of this policy by government officials. However, the mutawwa'in sometimes did not respect this policy. Individuals whose ability to worship privately had been infringed could address their grievances through the MOI, the official government 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 mutawwa'in. No information was made available on the number of complaints filed during the reporting period or the Government's response to these complaints.

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

In a February 16, 2008, interview with the English language daily *Saudi Gazette*, the CPVPV President stated that the CPVPV had 5,000 staff members, including 3,227 mutawwa'in spread throughout all 13 provinces. He added that all new staff members had 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 were unable to speak any language but Arabic, and 23 percent were considering a career change. The pan-Arab newspaper *Al-Hayat* reported on April 9, 2008, on a CPVPV-commissioned independent study that showed that the CPVPV conducted 406,000 arrests in 2007. According to the study,

during this period, CPVPV members committed 37 violations and 25 members were victims of assault. There were reports that the mutawwa'in claimed they referred very few arrests to the "relevant authorities," supposedly to protect the privacy of those involved and reduce the caseload of the overstretched police force.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Call, Guidance, and Endowments (MOIA) was established in 1993 as a bridge between the Government and religious leadership. The MOIA supervises and finances the construction and maintenance of most Sunni mosques; however, approximately 30 percent of Sunni mosques were built and endowed by private persons, either as acts of charity or at private residences. Shi'a mosques do not receive MOIA support and instead rely on private contributions, which can vary widely, depending on the number and generosity of the congregants they serve. The process for obtaining a Government-required license for a Shi'a mosque is reportedly unclear and arbitrary.

The MOIA employs approximately 78,000 persons, including 50,000 Sunni imams, who are chosen by their communities and approved by the Government. Based on the size of their communities, the imams receive monthly MOIA stipends ranging between \$500 and \$800 (1875 and 3000 riyals), which is considered low, compared to other full-time civil servant salaries. Preachers who deliver the Friday prayers receive an additional monthly stipend of \$425. The majority of Sunni imams are full-time MOIA employees, with some private mosques employing non-Saudi imams. However, the government salaries paid to imams is supplemental, rather than their primary source of personal income, as most imams have separate businesses. As with Shi'a mosques, Shi'a imams are not funded by the MOIA and instead rely on community contributions, which can vary widely, depending on the number of congregants they serve.

An MOIA committee defines the qualifications of Sunni imams, and the MOI is responsible for investigating complaints against imams for promoting intolerance, violence, or hatred. While not always followed, the Government's policy is to counsel imams who issue intolerant fatwas or who make religious statements that promote intolerance, violence, or hatred, especially of non-Sunnis, though this policy is not always followed. In 2003 the MOIA created a program to monitor imams. Provincial committees of senior religious scholars supervise mutawwa'in who monitor all mosques and imams within their respective provinces. Based on the mutawwa'in reports, the committees summon the imams accused of preaching intolerance to meet with them. If they are not able to dissuade the imams of their thinking, then the committees refer the imams to a central committee in Riyadh. The first phase of this program ran from 2003 to 2006. MOIA officials claim that 1,300 imams were dismissed during this first phase. The second 3-year phase will end in 2009.

The official government HRC was created to address human rights abuses and promote human rights within the country. The 24-member HRC board, which does not include women, was established in December 2006. Two HRC board members appointed in 2007 are Shi'a and Sulaimaniya Isma'ili Shi'a, respectively. The HRC reported that it received a variety of human rights complaints, including infractions by mutawwa'in. The HRC was also given the mandate to improve human rights awareness in the country, including the promotion of tolerance. In this endeavor, the HRC worked with the Ministry of Education and provided materials and training to the police, security forces, and mutawwa'in on protecting human rights. The King also issued a decree that ministries had 3 weeks to respond to complaints filed by the HRC.

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

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Public religious practice is generally limited to that which conforms to the officially approved version of Islam. Practices contrary to this interpretation, such as the celebration of Maulid al-Nabi (birthday of the Prophet Muhammad) and visits to the tombs of renowned Muslims are forbidden, although in some places enforcement was more relaxed than in others. Similarly, the Government also prohibits the public propagation

of Islamic teachings that differ from the officially accepted interpretation of Islam.

Although there was an increasing degree of public discussion questioning the official interpretation of religious traditions and criticism of their enforcement during the reporting period, including in the media, discussion of many sensitive religious issues, including sectarian differences, remained limited, and criticism of Islam was forbidden. Individuals who publicly criticized the official interpretation of Islam risked harassment, intimidation, detention, and if a foreigner, 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.

The Government restricted the establishment of places of worship and public training of non-Sunni clergy. The Government officially did not permit non-Sunni clergy to enter the country to conduct religious services, although some did so under other auspices, and the Government generally allowed them to perform discreet religious functions. Such restrictions made it difficult for most non-Muslims to maintain 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.

The Government required noncitizens to carry a legal resident identity card, which contained a religious designation for "Muslim" or "non-Muslim." There were unconfirmed reports that some mutawwa'in pressured sponsors and employers not to renew the residency card 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 mutawwa'in pressured employers and sponsors to reach verbal agreements with non-Muslim employees that they would not participate in private non-Muslim worship services.

During the reporting period Shi'a continued to face systemic discrimination and intolerance tied to a variety of factors, including historical perceptions and ongoing suspicions of foreign influences on their actions. Nevertheless, most Shi'a are loyal to the Government and actively try to contribute to Saudi society. While they coexist with their Sunni neighbors in relative peace, most Shi'a share general concerns of discrimination in education, employment, political representation, the judiciary, religious practice, and media.

In higher education, the Government discriminated against Shi'a in the selection process for students, professors, and administrators at public universities. For example, it was estimated that Shi'a constituted 2 percent of professors at a leading university in al-Ahsa, an area 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 principals, with approximately 1 percent of area principals being Shi'a. There were no Shi'a principals in female schools. Shi'a were also underrepresented among principals in Qatif, where they comprise approximately 90 percent of the population. In addition, Shi'a teachers were not permitted to teach certain courses, including religious studies at the intermediate and secondary levels, even in predominantly Shi'a areas.

There were reports that some Shi'a students experienced discrimination within the primary and secondary school systems. Some religious education teachers told their students that Shi'a practices were un-Islamic and that Shi'a students must follow Sunni traditions to be true Muslims. Some teachers told their students that Shi'a were not Muslims, but rather kufaar (unbelievers), rafidah (rejectionists), infidels, or polytheists. In January 2008 a Qatif student was reportedly accused of witchcraft, when a turbah (small piece of soil or clay used for Shi'a prayer) was found among her personal belongings. That same month, the story of a former Qatif-area school teacher who was recorded making harsh anti-Shi'a comments to a private gathering and claiming to have converted nine students to Sunni Islam during a trip to Mecca was widely reported. Despite stated government policy to the contrary, these teachers went without reprimand, although in some cases they were transferred to other schools. In addition, there were reports that many public schools routinely punished Shi'a students academically for their absence during holidays unrecognized by the Government and there continued to be reports of prejudicial questions on exams.

Regardless of their personal religious traditions, public school students at all levels receive mandatory religious instruction based on the Government's interpretation of Sunni Islam. Non-Muslim students in private international schools, which citizens can attend only with special permission, were not required to study Islam. Private religious schools not based on the official interpretation of Islam were not permitted. Despite

governmental claims that elementary and secondary education textbooks had been revised, they still retained language that was intolerant of other religious traditions, especially Jewish, Christian, and Shi'a beliefs.

Shi'a faced considerable employment discrimination in the public and private sector. While 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 have a negative impact on career advancement. While there was no formal policy concerning the hiring and promotion of Shi'a, anecdotal evidence suggested that in some companies, including in the oil and petrochemical industries, a "glass ceiling" existed and well-qualified Shi'a were passed over for less-qualified Sunni colleagues. In the public sector, Shi'a were significantly underrepresented in national security related positions, including a clear dearth of Shi'a officers in the Ministry of Defense and Aviation, Saudi Arabian National Guard, and the MOI. Qatif community leaders describe allegedly prejudiced zoning laws, which prevent the construction of buildings of a certain height in various Shi'a neighborhoods. The leaders claim that these laws prevent investment and development in these predominantly Shi'a areas.

Members of the Shi'a minority were also subjected to political discrimination tacitly approved by the Government. For example, although Shi'a comprise approximately 10 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 3 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 11 of 12 seats on the Qatif and al-Ahsa councils. In addition, the Qatif municipal council was headed by an elected Shi'a. At the national level, there were three Shi'a members in the Majlis Al-Shura, due to the natural death of a fourth Shi'a member during the reporting year.

Judicial discrimination against Shi'a was evident during the reporting period. The Ja'afari courts' powers are limited by the fact that any litigant who disagrees with a ruling can seek a decision from a non-Ja'afari (Sunni) court. Sunni court rulings can void Ja'afari 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, such as Dammam, Khobar, Najran, or Medina, cannot use such courts. Due to the Shi'a courts' lack of authority, six of the seven judges threatened to resign in September 2007, but no action was taken by the Government or Shi'a judges. The Government unexpectedly replaced Sheikh Mohammad al-Obaidan, the more senior of the two Qatif Court judges, on April 13, 2008. The perceived arbitrary nature of this action caused an outcry in the Shi'a community.

Many Shi'a were also subjected to systemic religious discrimination. For example, in addition to the fact that the Government does not finance construction or maintenance of Shi'a mosques, Shi'a who wished to build a new mosque were required to obtain the permission of the MOIA, the local Municipality, and the Governorate, which is functionally part of the MOI. No approval from the Governorate was necessary for the construction of Sunni mosques. While the Government approved construction of new Shi'a mosques in Qatif and some areas of al-Ahsa, sometimes after lengthy delays, it did not approve construction of Shi'a mosques in Dammam, home to a significant number of Shi'a. In addition, on May 22, 2008, *Al-Rasid*, a privately-owned Shi'a Web site reported that the al-Ahsa Municipal authorities halted construction of the Imam Rida mosque, the largest Shi'a mosque in al-Ahsa, on the orders of the local government.

Shi'a mosques in mixed neighborhoods were reportedly required to recite the Sunni call to prayer, which is distinct from their own, during 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 Sunni practices.

Furthermore, the Government does not officially recognize several *hawzat* (centers of Shi'a religious instruction) located in the Eastern Province, provide financial support to them, recognize certificates of educational attainment for their graduates, or provide their graduates employment, all of which it does for Sunni religious training institutions. *Hawzat* were also subject to forced closures without explanation. This was the case of a women's *hawza* on Tarut Island in the Qatif-area, which Saudi authorities closed in early June 2008. Religious training for all other religious groups is prohibited.

The Government refused to approve construction or registration of husseiniyat, which serve as Shi'a community centers. Shi'a were forced to build areas in private homes to serve as husseiniyat, which did not enjoy legal recognition. These husseiniyats sometimes did not meet safety codes, and the lack of legal recognition made their long-term financing and continuity considerably more difficult. Despite the absence of a licensing process, there were reports of a husseiniyat being closed on the grounds of operating without a license.

While the authorities allowed Shi'a in the Eastern Province city of Qatif greater freedom in their religious practices, in other areas with large Shi'a populations, such as al-Ahsa and Dammam, the authorities continued to restrict Shi'a religious practices. The Government imposed restrictions on public observances of Ashura (commemoration of the martyrdom of Hussayn ibn Ali, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad) in al-Ahsa, Dammam, and other mixed areas where Shi'a and Sunni live, banning public marches, loudspeaker broadcasts of clerics' lectures from husseiniyat, and, in some instances, gatherings within husseiniyat. There were reports that these measures were strong in al-Ahsa, where the local governor allegedly gathered an estimated 30 Shi'a community leaders 2 weeks before the annual Ashura celebration, which took place on January 19, 2008, to warn them against any public celebrations. In addition, security forces actively patrolled the streets of al-Ahsa to ensure that there were no banners or flags, which are commonly associated with the religious holiday. It was reported that the Government prohibited the public celebration of the Arbaeen religious holiday, which took place on February 28, 2008, in all areas except the majority Shi'a area in Qatif.

Moreover, the Government continued to exclude Shi'a perspectives from the state's extensive religious media and broadcast programming. Government-imposed bans on the importation and sale of Shi'a books and audiovisual products remained sporadic. The Government also blocked access to some Web sites with religious material that the Government considered offensive or sensitive, including the Shi'a Web site *Al-Rasid*, in line with a broader official policy of censoring objectionable content including political discourse and illicit materials. In addition, terms like rafidah or rejectionists, which are insulting to Shi'a, are common and can be found on the MOIA Web site.

The Medina Shi'a are a small, deeply-rooted community of diverse believers, including the Ashraf descendants of the Prophet Muhammad and Nakhawala, who are laborers by tradition. Nakhawala community leaders claim that they face more issues than Twelvers in the Eastern Province, because they are not allowed to construct mosques, husseiniyat, or hawzat, nor do they have access to Shi'a courts. They also claim to hear anti-Shi'a sermons and statements regularly in their neighborhoods. Unlike in Eastern Province, there are no prominent Nakhawala Shi'a in Government bodies like the Majlis al-Shura or the Human Rights Commission. In addition, the Nakhawala aver that their surname ("alNakhly," which roughly translates as "farmers" and identifies their minority status and sect) facilitates their systemic discrimination 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 them from having their own religious books, allowing Sunni religious leaders to declare them unbelievers; denying them Government employment, restricting them to lower-level jobs; and relocating them from the southwest to other parts of the country, or encouraging them to emigrate. On December 28, 2007, the privately run *al-Ukhud* Web site reported that a letter stamped "Secret" was posted on several internet fora, carried the signature of Najran's Deputy-Governor, and called for allowing the Sunni members of the Yemeni Yami tribe to receive Saudi social benefits pending their acquisition of Saudi citizenship. Isma'ilis contend that this tribal resettlement is part of a Government plan to change the sectarian demographics of Najran Province and further marginalize the religious minority, despite King Abdullah's 2006 moratorium on resettlements.

Since the government-approved 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 venerating places associated with the Prophet and his family in Medina and Mecca is forbidden. Non-Hanbali Sunnis and Shi'a described the restrictions on their visits to Mecca and Medina, including raising their hands in prayer, as the interference of Riyadh-based authorities in private Muslim worship. In addition, ancient Islamic historical sites continue to be razed for fear that Muslims will pray to the persons represented by such sites, which is viewed as "un-Islamic," as it is not "praying only to God." According to the September 11, 2007, edition of the English language daily *Al-Watan*, an inter-ministerial committee ordered the elimination of Qaseer al-Nabi (believed to be where the Prophet camped before the historical battle of Khaiber) on the instruction of the Grand Mufti.

On March 18, 2008, *Al-Watan* reported that the Shura Council voted against endorsing an international convention that would have made it illegal to insult religions and religious figures because the convention would also have required the country to recognize Buddhism and Baha'ism as religions.

In January 2008 the Grand Mufti reportedly called for qunoot prayers for the people of the Gaza Strip during the Gaza siege. (Qunoot prayers are special prayers added during regular prayers to ask for God's salvation from a specific disaster, and they normally require governmental consent.) However, there were reports of imams in the Eastern Province who included calls for divine punishment of the Jews as part of their qunoot prayers.

On October 7, 2007, *Arab News*, reported that the Presidency for Scientific Research and Religious Edicts, headed by the Grand Mufti, launched an official Web site for fatwas.

In August 2007 the Government prohibited the public celebration of the birthday of the Imam al-Mahdi (the Twelfth Imam who is currently in occultation or "hidden" according to Shi'a beliefs). On August 28, 2007, video footage of an al-Ahsa crackdown showed a group of approximately 20 young men lined up facing a wall, as officials attempted to control the festivities. Security officials confiscated candy and decorations used for celebrations. On August 29, 2007, authorities reportedly forced the al-Maazi, al-Zahra, and Um al Banin husseiniyat in the Sanabis area of Qatif to cancel celebrations scheduled to take place later that evening.

Abuses of Freedom of Religion

The Government continued to commit abuses of religious freedom. There were a few high-profile death penalty cases involving alleged witchcraft and blasphemy. Non-Muslim groups in different parts of the country were detained and harassed for private worship. Harassment of Shi'a during religious worship and communal gatherings continued. Religious leaders and activists continued to face obstacles for expressing their views against the religious establishment. In addition, senior clerics continued to use their pulpits to disseminate extremist ideology.

Although the Government's stated policy is that people are free to practice their faith in private, the Government continued to prohibit public, non-Muslim religious activities. Many reported abuses were difficult to corroborate, however, because of fear that disclosing such information might harm persons under government investigation. Moreover, information regarding government practices was generally incomplete because judicial proceedings usually were closed to the public, despite provisions in the 2002 Criminal Procedure Law that require court proceedings to be open. Many non-Sunnis worshiped in secret because of continuing fear of harassment, intimidation, detention, or deportation by the police or mutawwa'in. There were reports that the increased number of raids during the reporting period were due to expatriate informers working hand-in-hand with the mutawwa'in.

While mutawwa'in have the authority to confront individuals violating social standards, the Government also requires them to follow established procedures and to offer instruction in a polite manner. However, the mutawwa'in often failed to comply with these requirements. Women, and especially foreign women, were harassed by the mutawwa'in for failure to observe strict dress codes, particularly failure to wear headscarves. Moreover, some provincial authorities in the provinces of Mecca and Jof took a more active role in encouraging the mutawwa'in to enforce traditional standards of appearance on younger generations of citizens.

During the reporting period, public discussion of the nature of khulwa, or seclusion with unrelated members of the opposite gender, versus ikhtilat, or public mixing of men and women, increased, due to many high-profile CPVPV cases. While khulwa is prohibited by Shari'a, ikhtilat is not illegal but is nevertheless frowned upon by Saudi social standards. It appeared that some mutawwa'in conflated the two concepts and incorrectly accused couples interacting in public of khulwa, often leading to harassment and more serious problems. On December 6, 2007, the privately owned newspaper *Al-Hayat* reported that the CPVPV would conduct a study on the impact of men and women intermingling on Saudi society.

The CPVPV continued to monitor Valentine's Day, New Year's, and even the Janadriya Heritage Festival. The media reported that, as in years past, the mutawwa'in warned shopkeepers not to sell Valentine's Day or New

Year's items. The *Al-Madina* newspaper reported on New Year's Eve and Valentine's Day about teams of CPVPV members that raided shops and confiscated holiday-related gift items and statements, including red-colored items on Valentine's Day. In February 2007 newspapers reported that the CPVPV stated its members had instructions to confiscate gifts associated with the "pagan feast" of Valentine's Day and punish those who market them in the Kingdom. The mutawwa'in noted they would not "assault non-Muslims" celebrating this "feast" if celebrated in their homes and warned Muslims against participating in any such celebrations. On February 24, 2008, Dammam-based newspaper *Al-Yaum* reported that the annual Janadriya Heritage Festival would remain gender-segregated due to intense pressure from the CPVPV.

An unknown number of detainees were held in prison on charges of "sorcery," "black magic," or "witchcraft." Anti-sorcery departments exist within the CPVPV branches across the country and report incidents of "sorcery" to the local police.

On February 13, 2008, Human Rights Watch (HRW) issued a public letter to King Abdullah, requesting that he halt the execution of Fawza Falih Muhammad Ali for witchcraft. Arrested by mutawwa'in in May 2005, she was sentenced to death in April 2006 for allegedly bewitching a man in Quraiyat to make him impotent. There was reportedly weak evidence and the procedures followed by the court were highly irregular. In September 2006 an appeals court reversed the trial court's ruling due to insufficient evidence and remanded the case back 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 and in weak mental health.

On November 2, 2007, Mustafa Ibrahim, an Egyptian pharmacist, was executed in the northern town of Ar'ar on charges of "sorcery," desecrating the Qur'an, and adultery. Another expatriate apparently accused Ibrahim of practicing magic to separate this other expatriate from his wife, and cited as evidence books on black magic, a candle with an incantation "to summon devils," and "foul-smelling herbs" that he claimed he saw and smelled in Ibrahim's home.

On July 27, 2007, *Arab News* reported the CPVPV arrested an African national for practicing "black magic" near Medina.

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

There continued to be instances in which Sunni imams, who are paid Government stipends, used anti-Jewish, anti-Christian, and anti-Shi'a language in their sermons. Although this language declined in frequency after the Government began encouraging moderation following the 2003 terror attacks, there continued to be instances in which mosque speakers prayed for the death of Jews and Christians, including from the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. There were reports the MOIA dismissed some imams for espousing intolerant ideas, but other imams who said such things were allowed to continue.

On June 22, 2008, a prominent Shi'a Sheikh in al-Ahsa was arrested by authorities after calling a previous anti-Shi'a statement by 22 Salafi clerics an incitement that invited violence, and demanding greater rights and political representation for the Shi'a of al-Ahsa. The Sheikh was held for 1 week before being released.

On June 5, 2008, government authorities in the city of Khobar closed three "unofficial" Shi'a mosques operating out of private residences, detaining each mosque's imam and other attendees until the accused parties signed agreements pledging not to engage in holding such unlicensed prayer service in the future. Despite being unlicensed, these mosques are reported to have been in operation for approximately 30 years.

On May 23, 2008, Government officials arrested 15 Indian Christians in Qassim Province for private religious worship. During the raid, a CPVPV member reportedly slapped the community's pastor twice on his face.

Christian songbooks and Bibles were allegedly confiscated. After questioning, the police transported the Indians to the local jail. They were all released that same night to their sponsors.

On May 13, 2008, Ahmad Turki al-Saab was detained in Riyadh, after he was summoned to the capital from Najran Province. Al-Saab is a leading Sulaimaniya Isma'ili activist who organized a petition campaign demanding the removal from office of Najran's Governor for his alleged discrimination against the minority community and presented the petition personally to the King on May 2, 2008. His family met with Government officials and with him. He was still detained at the end of the reporting period.

On May 5, 2008, the Government charged Ra'if Bedawi al-Shammary, a lawyer and businessman, with "setting up an electronic site that insults Islam." The prosecution referred his case to a Jeddah court, and asked for a 5-year prison sentence and a \$800,000 (3 million riyals) fine. His Web site and online writings detailed the abuses of the CPVPV and questioned the Government's interpretation of Islam. Due to the charges and several physical threats, al-Shammary and his family fled the country in May 2008. From September 2007 to May 2008, al-Shammary represented the family of Salman al-Huraisi in a suit it brought against the CPVPV for the death of Salman al-Huraisi, who died during a CPVPV raid in May 2007.

On May 2, 2008, prominent Isma'ili activists presented a petition to King Abdullah, calling for local authorities to stop the ongoing resettlement of Yemeni tribesmen on land owned by Isma'ilis. In September 2006, 300 Sulaimaniya Isma'ili Shi'a in Najran reportedly made similar complaints as part of a protest in which they also decried their "repression" and demanded the release of Isma'ilis held in jail since 2000 and an apology from a cleric and judge who labeled them "infidels."

On May 1, 2008, *Arab News* reported that the CPVPV arrested a Filipino nurse for sitting with a Western male colleague at a Riyadh restaurant. The Philippines Embassy was denied access to the nurse. The male was released thereafter.

In April 2008, Government officials arrested 16 Asian Christians, including 3 women, a 3-year old child, and a 1-year old child, for conducting a worship service in the Western Province. Police raided the worship location, questioned the group, and then transported them to jail. The men were detained for 3 days in the police substation jail. The women and children were detained for 3 days in the central prison, which has a women's section. Due to intervention by senior government officials, the Christians were released.

At least 17 Sulaimaniya Isma'ili Shi'a who were jailed after riots in the Najran Province in 2000 remained imprisoned at the end of the reporting period. The Government asserted the men were arrested and imprisoned ostensibly for disturbing public order and threatening the safety of the Najran governor, and not for religious reasons. Prominent Isma'ili activists presented a petition to King Abdullah on April 26, 2008, calling for the release of the 17 prisoners. There was no official response.

On April 19, 2008, there was a well-publicized *YouTube* clip of a Saudi woman's apparent beating and kidnapping by alleged CPVPV members, after she was found in a Riyadh restaurant with a male non-relative. According to the April 21, 2008, edition of *Arab News*, police are investigating the apparent kidnapping.

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 had been 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 the local authorities' pressure, the sponsor obtained an exit visa with a departure date of May 31, 2008, for the Christian. Intervention by senior government officials led local authorities to contact the sponsor on May 16, 2008, and inform him that the exit visa was cancelled pending a review. At the end of the reporting period, the Christian and his sponsor were still attempting to extend the Christian's legal residency status.

On March 31, 2008, Sabri Bogday, a Turkish barber, was sentenced to death after two men reported to the authorities that he blasphemed God and the Prophet Muhammad in his barbershop. On May 1, 2008, an appellate court upheld his conviction of blasphemy. At the end of the reporting period, however, the sentence had not been carried out.

On February 25, 2008, *Al-Madina* reported that a Mecca public court sentenced a Saudi academic to 8 months imprisonment and 180 lashes for privately meeting with a female colleague not related to him. The academic claimed that the CPVPV framed him because he awarded low grades to some CPVPV members. The NSHR Makkah branch supervisor said that the CPVPV had no authority to refer the case directly to court. On March 5, 2008, the *Saudi Gazette* reported that the NSHR met with the academic to discuss the incident.

On February 21, 2008, CPVPV members arrested, and later released, a Saudi-American woman and a Syrian-American man at a Jeddah mall for being in a state of seclusion with an unrelated member of the opposite gender and for his not having a residency card.

On February 9, 2008, Human Rights First, Saudi Arabia's only independent NGO, published a petition with 115 signatures asking King Abdullah to free a Sulaimaniya Isma'ili Shi'a named Hadi Al-Mutif, who has been in prison for more than 12 years for "insulting the Prophet Muhammad." In his first trial, Al-Mutif was sentenced to death under haad (punishment directed under Shari'a) and not under ta'azir (punishment determined by a judge). If the sentence is rescinded and reimposed under ta'azir, then the King may pardon him. Reportedly, the sentence has already been commuted to life imprisonment. However, NGOs reported that he has been in solitary confinement for more than a year, reportedly in response to two suicide attempts, and the Government recently moved him to a second prison. Moreover, when his father passed away last April, he was not allowed to attend the funeral, as is normally the practice in cases like this. At the end of the reporting period, the official HRC had taken up his case, and the Supreme Judicial Council was reviewing it.

On February 4, 2008, several dailies reported that a 40-year old Saudi-American businesswoman and her male Syrian colleague were arrested by a mutawwa'in in a Riyadh coffee shop on charges of seclusion with an unrelated member of the opposite gender. She was forced to enter a taxi with the mutawwa, made to sign two confessions, strip-searched in prison, and then released on the same day. Her male colleague was released two days later. On February 19, 2008, several papers published the CPVPV official response, which maintained that its members were following regulations, and that the CPVPV intended to file a defamation lawsuit against two Saudi columnists that accused the CPVPV of kidnapping the woman and depriving her of her rights. On February 23, 2008, *Arab News* reported that the NSHR and HRC were waiting for an official reply from the CPVPV regarding the alleged violations of CPVPV rules, including the lack of a police escort, the lack of official badges, and the forced transfer of the woman to the prison.

On January 27, 2008, CPVPV members arrested four Sulaimaniya Isma'ili activists in a Najran hotel on charges of consuming alcohol. The Isma'ilis claimed that the arrest was politically motivated and aimed at stopping their activism on behalf of Isma'ilis. A court in Najran sentenced the four men to 80 lashes and up to 2 months' imprisonment. They were sentenced under haad, a Qur'an-mandated sentence that requires the strictest punishment. They have appealed their sentence to the Mecca Appeals Court with the hope of the ruling being changed to ta'azir, which is a type of punishment not mandated by the Qur'an and that allows for greater judicial discretion in sentencing.

On November 22, 2007, *Al-Watan* published an article by Senior Council of Ulema member Sheikh Saleh Al-Fawzan, who rejected interacting with "infidels" and quoted Qur'anic verses such as, "Take not the Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors. They are but friends and protectors to each other."

In November 2007 a Sunni man filed a case requesting compensation from the Government for imprisoning him from December 2006 to April 2007. He claimed he was jailed on the basis of his internet articles advocating for 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 Board of Grievances branch in Dammam.

On October 27, 2007, a young al-Ahsa man was detained on charges of having attended gatherings at a husseiniya and later released.

On October 21, 2007, two al-Ahsa men were detained. One was accused of holding a private religious gathering on his farm, and the other, a Shi'a teacher, was detained without a specific reason. The teacher was released after 1 day in custody and the farmer was released several days later.

In September 2007 a Uighur Muslim from China was detained in a Mecca Prison awaiting deportation to China. He was allegedly involved in underground religious activities, including teaching the Qur'an, in his native China. Therefore, there were concerns that his forcible return could result in immediate arrest and imprisonment upon his arrival home. Senior U.S. Embassy and U.S. Consulate Jeddah officers met with government officials and requested government intervention to prevent his deportation.

In July 2007 officials detained another Chinese Uighur Muslim named Habibula Ali and sent him back to China. An NGO reported that the Chinese Government requested that the Saudi Government forcibly return Mr. Ali because the Chinese Government was displeased by the assistance he provided to Uighur religious pilgrims and his participation in discussions about an agreement the Chinese Government reached with the Saudi Government to restrict Chinese citizens from applying for Hajj visas in a third country.

Early in this reporting period, Saudi Arabian Airlines had posted on its English-language Web site a notice that the country bans "Bibles, crucifixes, statues, carvings, [and] items with religious symbols such as the Star of David." These items appeared under the list of forbidden articles within the "Customs Regulations" portion of the site, although the Government's stated policy was that such items were allowed for private religious purposes. As of August 31, 2007, after foreign media outlets called attention to it, the posting was removed.

On August 29, 2007, the newspaper *Okaz* reported that security authorities in the southern Jizan Province began an investigation into a case filed by a citizen against two CPVPV staff and two young men for unlawful arrest of his wife. The couple was pulled over because they were suspected of driving in a state of seclusion with an unrelated member of the opposite gender. The man contended his wife suffered from "mental torture" as a result of the arrest.

On August 18, 2007, *Okaz* reported that four Government departments were investigating the death of a Bangladeshi laborer after CPVPV members arrested him for washing cars at prayer time in Medina. The Governor of Medina Prince Abdulaziz bin Majid reportedly ordered the investigation.

On August 15, 2007, an Egyptian Coptic Christian returned to his home in Cairo using a fake exit visa. He claimed Egyptian Muslim co-workers in Saudi Arabia harassed him from 2004 to 2006, tried unsuccessfully to convert him to Islam, and then accused him of immoral behavior. He was detained by the CPVPV and police in 2005 and 2006. His sponsor was helpful at first and then ignored his requests for his passport and exit visa.

On August 5, 2007, seven British and one American Shi'a performing *umra* rituals at the Grand Mosque in Mecca were harassed and detained by CPVPV members for 14 hours before being released. The Shi'a alleged mutawwa'in working with local police officers insulted the pilgrims' faith and physically attacked them in the mosque and then later in a detention center. Col. Ghazi al-Ossaimi, Deputy Director-General of the Grand Mosque Police, denied that any attack took place in the Grand Mosque. U.S. Consulate General and British Consulate officials in Jeddah helped facilitate the pilgrims' return home.

On July 3, 2007, for the first time in the history of the CPVPV, a CPVPV representative appeared before the court to defend the CPVPV's actions in the 2003 case of a woman known as Umm Faisal who requested compensation for damages after mutawwa'in allegedly drove her car into an electrical post and left her and her daughter, both in the backseat, at the scene of the accident. However, the September 2007 hearing was postponed when the CPVPV representatives failed to appear. On February 3, 2008, *Arab News* reported that the CPVPV told the Board of Grievances that the CPVPV will not be held responsible for the personal mistakes of its members. *Al-Watan* reported on April 6, 2008, that the Board of Grievances postponed Umm Faisal's case until the end of April 2008.

On June 27, 2007, an employee of a Shi'a mosque and husseiniya in al-Ahsa was reportedly detained for holding prohibited religious gatherings. Shortly afterwards, local government officials asked the husseiniya and mosque leaders to build internal walls in the structures and convert them into residential buildings.

On June 23, 2007, Senior Council of Ulema member Sheikh Saleh Al-Fawzan issued a fatwa that appeared to define "liberals" as non-Muslims, which many viewed as grounds for violence against non-Muslims. He later clarified his statement saying that it was not intended to advocate violence.

On June 1, 2007, Ahmad Al-Bulawi, a 50-year-old retired border patrol guard, died at a CPVPV center in the northern town of Tabuk, allegedly of a heart attack. Al-Bulawi's family demanded an autopsy to determine the cause of his death. The mutawwa'in arrested Al-Bulawi and brought him to their center because he had a Saudi woman who was not his relative in his car. Both Al-Bulawi's family and the family of the woman in the car stated that he was working as a driver for the woman and her family. On August 1, 2007, *Arab News* reported that the three judges presiding over the case dropped the charges against the three mutawwa'in and security guard accused of al-Bulawi's death. However, the family appealed the verdict. Subsequently, one mutawwa was tried for his role. On February 26, 2008, *Al-Watan* reported that the Mecca appellate court found the mutawwa not guilty.

On May 23, 2007, 28-year-old Salman Al-Huraisi, a security guard, died in a CPVPV office in Riyadh. According to his father and brother, at least 18 mutawwa'in raided their home in Riyadh on suspicion of alcohol production, and then arrested 10 family members. Al-Huraisi died as a result of an alleged beating by mutawwa'in. Two mutawwa'in were charged and acquitted at trial. On March 18, 2008, *Arab News* reported that the Court of Cassation in Riyadh overturned the acquittals and returned the case to the Riyadh General Court for a retrial. On May 14, 2008, *Al-Hayat* reported that the Riyadh General Court upheld its November 27, 2007 verdict. On June 12, 2008, *Arab News* reported the family appealed the case yet again.

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

On December 29, 2006, the mutawwa'in raided a private gathering of the Ahmadiyya religious group. Reportedly, the mutawwa'in detained 49 people of all ages (including a 6-month-old infant) from India, Pakistan, and Syria. In early January 2007, nine other Ahmadiyya foreign workers were also arrested. All of these individuals were deported to their countries of origin. In February 2007 two more Ahmadiyya guest workers were arrested in Riyadh and deported.

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

On October 15, 2006, the mutawwa'in raided a Christian worship service in the western region of the country. They arrested a Filipino national, turned him over to government officials to complete the investigation, and confiscated his Bibles. He was released a week later and then deported.

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

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

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

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

Forced Religious Conversion

On May 11, 2008, the *Al-Rasid* Web site reported that a Qatif court forced a Shi'a woman to convert to Sunni Islam, before she could marry an Egyptian Sunni man. The case elicited a response from the Assistant Interior Minister for Social Affairs, who said the case should proceed only after "lifting Shari'a barriers," referring to laws against intermarriage between Sunnis and Shi'a. The judge decided the woman had to become a Sunni and made her study Sunni materials over the course of several months. An exam was given on Sunni practices before she was allowed to marry.

There were no other reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, nor were there any reports of such minors not being allowed to return to the United States.

While the law ascribing Islam to the children of Muslim males discriminates against non-Muslim, non-Saudi citizen mothers and denies their children the freedom to choose their religion, in practice some children of mixed marriages were raised in other religions.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

During the reporting period, the Government implemented certain policies that made some improvements in the status of religious freedom. In addition, it announced additional policies that, if carried out, would continue progress in this area. Moreover, the King and other government and religious leaders called for interfaith dialogue, tolerance, and moderation.

Improvements included limited education reform, better protection of the right to possess and use personal religious materials, augmented efforts to curb and investigate harassment by the mutawwa'in, increased media coverage and criticism of the mutawwa'in, somewhat greater authority and capacity for official Saudi Arabian human rights entities to operate, and select measures to combat extremist ideology.

On June 4-6, 2008, the Government, along with the Muslim World League, organized an intrafaith conference, in Mecca. The goal of the conference was to promote unity amongst various Islamic sects. Former Iranian President Rafsanjani as well as Saudi Grand Mufti Abdulaziz Al al-Sheik attended. As a follow up, at the end of the reporting period, King Abdullah, along with King Juan Carlos I of Spain, were planning to host an interfaith conference in Madrid that would include prominent religious figures from Islam, Christianity, Judaism and other world religions.

There were fewer reports of Government officials confiscating religious materials and no reports that customs officials confiscated religious materials from travelers, whether Muslims or non-Muslims. Individuals were able to bring personal Bibles, crosses, DVDs of sermons, and other religious materials into the country without difficulty. In addition, Saudi Arabian Airlines updated its Web site in August 2007 to remove outdated references to Government customs prohibitions against the importation of non-Islamic religious items for personal use.

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

While some negative references to non-Muslims remained in government educational materials, a more moderate curriculum was test-piloted in grades 1, 4, and 7 at 40 schools throughout the Kingdom during the 2007-08 academic year. The new curriculum is expected to be implemented in the remaining elementary and middle school grades in future reporting periods.

Three new university initiatives were also announced. On November 13, 2007, the newspaper *Al-Riyadh* reported that King Abdullah approved the establishment of the Center for Contemporary Islamic Studies and Dialogue of Cultures at Imam Mohammed bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh. The Center will reportedly include six divisions: Islamic Regulations, Human Rights, Youth Issues, Combating Terrorism, Dialogue Among Civilizations, and Family Issues. Papers also reported on the April 2, 2008 inauguration of the Prince Sultan Chair for Contemporary Islamic Studies at Riyadh-based King Saud University, whose aim is to promote tolerance and moderate Islamic teachings. On May 14, 2008, *Al-Riyadh* interviewed Dr. Khalid al-Durais, the new Chair of the Prince Nayif Program for Intellectual Security Research at King Saud University, who said that this new program was established in fall 2007. He stated that the purpose of this program is to "protect the minds of the Muslim society's members against the deviant ideas that threaten their security and prosperity." The program is also supposed to train teachers to confront extremist ideology.

According to the May 10, 2008, editions of *Al-Madina* and *Arab News*, the MOIA stated that imams and khateeb (preachers who lead Friday prayers) should not wait for orders to speak out against extremism and terrorism, because it is their responsibility to speak out against such acts.

On May 4, 2008, the Saudi Gazette reported that the CPVPV Deputy-President said the CPVPV would implement a new strategy to "restructure its departments, mechanism of work, and train its staff." The \$267,000 (one million riyal) plan will precisely define all administrative and field staff positions and help the 3,500 field officers (mutawwa'in) implement the new legal procedures. He added that they will also "attend intensive training courses on the art of speaking to non-Muslims in the English language."

According to the May 4, 2008, edition of *Al-Hayat*, the Grand Mufti delivered a lecture on the evils of terrorism and cautioned people against those who use religion to promote terrorism.

On April 28, 2008, *Al-Watan* reported that the Jeddah branch of the MOIA had summoned a number of imams and khateeb for questioning related to their deviation from MOIA directions that are intended to prevent the preaching of extremist ideologies.

On April 10, 2008, the *Saudi Press Agency* reported that the Minister of Islamic Affairs said, "As Allah Almighty wanted this nation to become a moderate one, those who opt for the path of extremism will either disappear or shrink."

In addition to the supervisor of the Eastern Province HRC branch being a Shi'a from Qatif, there were reports that the HRC made greater efforts to connect with the Shi'a communities through public outreach in the Eastern Province, including a series of visits in the spring of 2008.

In February and again in March 2008 the HRC hosted HRW for in-depth discussions on a variety of human rights issues including equal rights for religious minorities.

The NSHR continued to receive complaints concerning transgressions by CPVPV members. During the reporting period, the NSHR took a more vocal, public stance calling for CPVPV accountability in the July 2007 case of an Australian woman harassed by "volunteer" mutawwa'in, and a similar February 2008 case that occurred in a Riyadh coffee shop. On April 7, 2008, the pan-Arab English language daily *Asharq al-Awsat* reported that the NSHR launched a campaign to inform the accused of their rights during arrest, investigation, inspection, and trial in a leaflet entitled "Know Your Rights." At the end of the reporting period NSHR was developing a new human rights curriculum, exploring other Arab countries' experiences, and advising the Government on how to introduce human rights and a culture of respect for others in the school curricula.

The April 2, 2008, edition of the *Al-Riyadh* newspaper reported that the CPVPV President said CPVPV members do not have immunity; they are subject to the same laws as everyone else.

An April 2, 2008, *Saudi Gazette* op-ed praised the Grand Mufti's issuance of a fatwa cautioning Muslims against excessive use of takfir (describing another person as a non-believer) against fellow Muslims. He called on all Muslims to bridge the gap among themselves via dialogue.

On April 2, 2008, the Grand Mufti said the principles of Islam are moderation and tolerance and that there is no room for extremism in Islam.

On March 28, 2008, the MOIA Undersecretary wrote a letter to *Al-Madina* noting that the MOIA has taken "the written pledge of every single imam and prayer-caller to refrain from deputizing non-Saudi nationals under any circumstances [to serve as imams], be it in return for money or free."

On March 25, 2008, *Al-Watan* reported that the MOIA will provide imams with weekly sermon themes, including women's rights and children's rights. Imams would be required to send monthly summaries to the MOIA to ensure their compliance and any imam who missed three prayers in a month would be warned.

On March 17, 2008, *Al-Hayat* stated that the MOIA removed 22 imams and muezzins (those who call to

prayer) due to "absence and carelessness."

To prevent extremist ideologies from being taught to school children, the MOIA continued monitoring education materials used at religious summer camps known for spreading intolerant ideas to school children. On July 5, 2007, the Deputy Minister for Islamic Affairs told the newspaper *Al-Jazirah* that no lecture would be delivered in the school summer camps without advance approval from the MOIA. On March 11, 2008, *Okaz* reported that the Deputy Education Minister for girls instructed departments to prepare 146 summer camps for middle, high school, and university girls.

On March 10, 2008, *Al-Hayat* reported that the MOIA had instructed preachers to carry an identification card and present it to mosque imams, if they wanted to deliver sermons. The MOIA noted that any imam permitting access to unauthorized preachers would be investigated and held accountable.

On March 8, 2008, *Okaz* reported that the Grand Mufti warned against making charitable donations to suspect or "untrusted" persons who might use donations against Islam and Muslims.

On February 22, 2008, *Okaz* reported that the MOIA appointed 1,500 people to monitor sermons in mosques and the activities of imams across the country. According to the article, a leading MOIA official fired some imams for violating MOIA regulations.

In contrast to the situation in al-Ahsa, local authorities continued to permit an incrementally greater degree of freedom to the Shi'a in Qatif during the reporting period, allowing religious practices and gatherings that were restricted or prevented in the past. The January 2008 Ashura holiday in Qatif was marked by a greater number of commemorations and participants. The only overt security presence assisted with crowd control. In addition, there was also wider practice of ritual self-flagellation, a practice that the Government sought to discourage previously. The number and size of Karbala plays, reenacting the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, grew. Pictures of revered imams were displayed openly in shop windows. Large groups of Shi'a gathered throughout the Qatif area to hear Shi'a clerics speak at husseiniyat, purchase books and other religious paraphernalia, and participate in marches in commemoration of Imam Hussain's death.

On January 24, 2008, *Al-Riyadh* reported that at the request of the CPVPV, the Government's Institute for Diplomatic Studies would organize short training programs for CPVPV members on how to deal with diplomats and non-Muslims living in the Kingdom.

There were reports that Sunnis, Shi'a, and Sufis in the western Hejaz region were able to celebrate the Prophet's birthday with less Government interference than in previous years. On January 23, 2008, the *Al-Rasid* Web site reported that thousands of Shi'a from the Western Province celebrated Ashura in various parts of Medina, especially in Shi'a-populated districts. The programs included lectures and chanting by religious scholars. Shi'a from Rabigh, Ta'if, Jeddah, and Yanbu reportedly attended the Medina celebrations. This is the third year the unofficial celebration took place without official interference.

On January 19, 2008, the *Saudi Gazette* reported that the CPVPV President said the CPVPV had shut down all its detention facilities across the country. He denied allegations that CPVPV members used electrical stun batons during raids, claiming that any staff member found using the weapons would be subject to investigation.

On December 21, 2007, *Arab News* reported that King Abdullah addressed the Hajj pilgrims by saying, "The leading divine religions . . . contain great principles and common values. . . . I call upon all those who hear my speech to think about the common values of religions, faiths, and culture [to] help us overcome our differences and narrow the divide between us." The Grand Mufti Abdul Aziz Al al-Sheikh played an increasingly public role in this effort.

On December 10, 2007, *Al-Hayat* reported that the Government sentenced an imam in the northern province of Ha'il to 7 months imprisonment and 140 lashes for sending a death threat to the local head of the MOIA branch, in response to the official's lawsuit against him. The MOIA official had filed a case against the imam in a religious court, because the imam reportedly argued that "it was legitimate in Islam to pray against the governments of certain Western countries."

On November 29, 2007, *Al-Watan* reported that the MOIA branch in Mecca issued an order prohibiting unauthorized preachers from delivering religious sermons during the Hajj.

The November 28, 2007, *Arab News* quoted the HRC President as saying, "Religious freedom is guaranteed to visitors and residents in their private residences. No one will get in their way when they practice their rituals at home."

On November 6, 2007, local and international papers reported on the meeting between King Abdullah and Pope Benedict XVI in Rome, in which their discussions centered on interfaith dialogue, tolerance, and denouncing terrorism. This was the first meeting of a Saudi King with the Pope and it was reportedly at the request of the Saudis. On March 22, 2008, BBC News reported that Archbishop Paul Mounge al-Hachem, a senior Middle East representative of the Pope, said the Vatican was holding talks with the Saudi government on the subject of building churches in the Kingdom. Al-Hachem said discussions began a few weeks earlier, but the outcome was unclear.

On October 29, 2007, *Al-Watan* reported that several Saudi preachers and MOIA officials warned of the negative impact of cursing peaceful non-Muslims during Friday prayers. They labeled this behavior as unacceptable and asked all clerics to comply with MOIA instructions.

On October 22, 2007, *Al-Madina* reported that the MOIA launched a "reinforcement campaign" by publishing a book on the meeting between the Interior Minister and a group of imams, preachers, and muezzins. MOIA stated it would publish a series of books to help religious scholars guide young people away from extremist thinking.

On October 2, 2007, *Asharq al-Awsat* reported that the MOIA Undersecretary said the qunoot prayer, recited during the additional tarawih prayer during Ramadan, should not be politicized. He said that the qunoot prayer has legal regulations to which all imams must adhere, including that the prayer must not be aggressive or of an abusive nature.

On October 1, 2007, the Grand Mufti issued a fatwa warning Saudi youth against traveling to Iraq and noted that only Islamic rulers can call for jihad.

On September 29, 2007, *Al-Riyadh* reported that the MOIA will launch a public awareness campaign to protect Saudi youth from extremism by developing loyalty to Islam and the Saudi leadership. The September 29, 2007, edition of *Al-Jazirah* noted that the MOIA had formed a number of committees and a working group to develop the campaign's strategies.

On September 17, 2007, several papers reported about an Internet statement from prominent Sunni religious scholar and Saudi Sheikh Salman al-Oudah, who criticized Osama Bin Laden for the first time and bemoaned the loss of innocent lives to al-Qa'ida.

On September 11, 2007, the *Aafaq* Web site posted a report that seven CPVPV officials reportedly received lashings and jail sentences for harassing a Shi'ite praying in a Sunni mosque in the Eastern Province. According to the posting, three of the officials criticized the way that the Shi'a man was praying and then physically attacked him. The other four officials allegedly coerced witnesses to fabricate testimony. The mosque's imam apparently uncovered the false testimony and reported the officials to local authorities.

On September 9, 2007, *Al-Jazirah* reported that the MOE announced a plan to activate permanent committees charged with fighting extremism among students and teachers beginning that academic year. On the same day, several papers reported that the MOE and the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue, which was established in 2003 to "secure a channel for the responsible expression of opinion," signed a memorandum of understanding to develop a culture of dialogue and disseminate related concepts through the education system. On March 4, 2008, *Al-Madina* reported that the Jeddah education department would launch an initiative to include teaching modules aimed at protecting school children from deviant ideas, extremism, and fundamentalism.

On September 8, 2007, the CPVPV Vice-President said that rooms previously used for holding detainees were in the process of being converted into offices.

On August 14, 2007, *Al-Hayat* reported that the CPVPV spokesman said all CPVPV field staff must prominently display their identification badges.

On July 23, 2007, *Asharq al-Awsat* reported that the MOIA disclosed its campaign to combat extremist ideologies includes new initiatives, such as sending text messages, distributing cassettes and compact disks, hanging posters in the streets, and posting messages on the Internet. The MOIA reportedly sent over 1 million text messages and distributed millions of cassettes and flyers.

On July 14, 2007, *Okaz* reported that the CPVPV branch office in Jeddah dismissed two "volunteer" members for harassing an Australian woman in the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. Their dismissal was reportedly in response to an NSHR complaint.

On July 1, 2007, the Ministry of Interior stated publicly that CPVPV members could no longer detain any citizen at CPVPV branch offices and instead must immediately hand over anyone they wanted arrested to the police.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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 Kingdom, the culture also exerts intense pressure on the population to conform to socio-religious norms. The result is that 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 is a factor in mistreatment of foreign workers by citizen employers and coworkers. There were reports that some sponsors withheld pay and residency card renewal based on religious factors. In addition, there was a report that a non-Muslim foreign worker was targeted by Muslim coworkers and accused falsely of proselytizing, knowing that the non-Muslim would be censured and possibly deported.

There were reports that religious vigilantes, unaffiliated with the mutawwa'in and acting on their own, harassed and assaulted citizens and foreigners. There were also many reports of former government-paid imams disseminating extremist, intolerant ideas against Jews, Christians, and Shi'a from their pulpits. The Government has stated that it does not tolerate this behavior, and in some instances it took action against such persons. However, there were other cases where the Government took no action.

On June 25, 2008, *Al-Rasid* reported that an intruder brandishing a sword broke into Sheikh Mekhleef Al-Shammary's house. Al-Shammary is a Shi'a leader who has called for Sunni-Shi'a dialogues.

On June 1, 2008, several prominent Sunni Sheikhs, including Abdullah bin Jibreen, Abdul Rahman al-Barrak, and Nasser al-Omar, issued a statement on the *Al-Muslim* Web site attacking Shi'a, including, among other accusations, that Shi'a "sow strife, corruption and destruction among Muslims and destabilize security in Muslim countries."

On May 13, 2008, Sheikh Nasser al-Omar reportedly warned readers of his *Al-Muslim* Web site of "Shi'a threats." Furthermore, he ascribed the conflicts in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen to a Jewish and American plot against Saudi Arabia.

On May 3, 2008, the *Al-Toomar* Web site reported that Amin al-Bedawy, a Saudi Shi'a lawyer, filed a lawsuit in a Dubai court against the *Al-Sahat* Web site for publishing lies and distorting Shi'a beliefs. He reportedly filed an earlier lawsuit in a Dubai court on April 21, 2008, against the Saudi television channel *Al-Majd* for defaming Shi'ism.

Between April 16-19, 2008, *Al-Jazirah* and *Al-Riyadh* reported that approximately 29 Saudi youth were

arrested allegedly for violently protesting the annual Riyadh Governorate's spring festival. In response, the Governorate cancelled several festival-related activities. An April 19, 2008, posting on the *Al-Weam* Web site claimed that the CPVPV reportedly appealed to the Grand Mufti to release the men because they were performing the duty of any Muslim who sees violations of Islamic rules.

On March 15, 2008, several Web sites published an apostasy fatwa by Sheikh Abdul Rahman al-Barrak against Abdullah bin Bejad al-Otaibi and Youssef Aba al-Khail, writers considered "liberal" by the Web sites, in response to articles they wrote in which they defined "others" in the eyes of Islam. Over 20 senior clerics, including Senior Council of Ulema member Sheikh Salih Bin Fawzan al-Fawzan agreed with the fatwa, while over one hundred reformers subsequently defended the writers' right to express themselves.

On March 13, 2008, *Al-Watan* reported that three young extremists, posing as CPVPV members, were caught harassing and ordering women to cover their faces at the Riyadh International Book Fair. Security authorities expelled the men.

On March 4, 2008, the *Al-Sahat* Web site published a statement by religious scholar Sheikh Mohamed al-Farraj regarding the Riyadh Book Fair, urging conservative scholars and students to visit the fair to buy appropriate books and identify publishers exhibiting books that propagate blasphemous ideas. Examples of blasphemous books included Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and non-Sunni books on Shi'a and Ibadhi (Islamist sect found mainly in Oman) practices.

On January 25, 2008, the *Al-Rasid* Web site reported that extremists distributed leaflets in the Eastern Province before Ashura accusing the Shi'a of plotting to demolish the Grand Mosque in Mecca, remove the Kaaba and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, and annihilate all Muslims except the rafidah.

On December 28, 2007, the *Al-Rasid* Web site reported that the *Islam Today* Web site, run by Sheikh Salman al-Oudah, published an article on an alleged Shi'a plot to create disturbances in Mecca, including killing Sunni Muslims.

On October 29, 2007, *Sabq*, an electronic newspaper, reported that a housemaid in Khobar staged a sit-in at a local mosque to protest a 48-month delay in her wages and mistreatment by her employer. In response, the employer accused her of "sorcery." CPVPV members attempted to reconcile the parties.

On October 15, 2007, an influential Sunni sheikh, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah al-Hababan wrote on his *Nur al-Islam* (Light of Islam) web site that Muslims should prepare for a battle against the Jews, who he said, "control the world, draw up its policies, and scheme against Islam and Muslims in close cooperation with the crusaders, especially in the region around Israel." He said, "There will be a decisive battle between the Muslims and the Jews."

In an October 14, 2007, article in *Al-Jazirah*, Sheikh Salman al-Oudah, objected to the festival of *rafidah* (rejectionists) and said Muslims have only two festivals-- Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.

On August 9, 2007, Asharq al-Awsat reported that Sheikh Nasser al-Omar's book *Al-Rafidah Reality and the Land of Tawhid* (Monotheism) warned Saudi scholars against being lenient with Saudi Shi'a, who he alleged posed a threat to the state.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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

During the reporting period, the U.S. Ambassador met with senior government and religious leaders regarding religious freedom, and raised specific cases of violations with senior officials. Senior U.S. officials discussed with the Government its policies concerning religious practice and tolerance. They encouraged the

Government to honor policies to halt the dissemination of intolerant literature and extremist ideology within the country and around the world, protect private worship for all religious groups, curb harassment of religious groups, and promote tolerance towards all religious groups. Senior U.S. officials supported provisions calling for religious tolerance, including elimination of discrimination against religious minorities, improved respect for human rights, and improved accountability and transparency.

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.

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

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