



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Saudi Arabia

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The country is a monarchy with a legal system based on Islamic law (Shari'a). Islam is the official religion, and the law requires that all citizens be Muslims. The Government does not provide legal protection for freedom of religion, and such protection does not exist in practice. The public practice of non-Muslim religions is prohibited. The Government recognizes the right of non-Muslims to worship in private; however, it does not always respect this right in practice and does not define this right in law.

There generally was no change in the status of religious freedom during the reporting year. While the Government continued a campaign to foster greater moderation and tolerance of religious diversity, reports of harassment by Mutawwa'in (religious police) increased. The Government enforces a strictly conservative version of Sunni Islam. Muslims who do not adhere to the officially sanctioned interpretation of Islam can face severe repercussions at the hands of Mutawwa'in. Members of the Shi'a minority continued to face political and economic discrimination, including limited employment opportunities, little representation in official institutions, and restrictions on the practice of their faith and on the building of mosques and community centers. The Government has stated publicly that its policy is to allow non-Muslims to worship privately; however, this policy has no clear guidelines and is not consistently enforced, resulting in the violation of some non-Muslims' freedom of worship and causing other non-Muslims to worship in fear of harassment and in such a manner as to avoid discovery by police or Mutawwa'in. In contrast to previous years, there was a decrease in both long-term detentions and deportations of non-Muslims for religious reasons; however, there was a marked increase in harassment by Mutawwa'in and in overall arrests and short-term detentions of non-Muslims, which were usually initiated by Mutawwa'in.

During the reporting year, senior government officials made some efforts to improve the climate of tolerance toward other religions and within Islam. The Government convened the fourth session of the "National Dialogue" meeting that included members of different Muslim traditions and men and women. The National Dialogue produced recommendations that included condemning incitements to violence, an end to societal discrimination, educational reform and development of tolerance, and moderation in education. The Government also removed some disparaging references to other religious traditions from educational materials. In addition, journalists continued to publicly criticize abuses by the religious police. Religious discrimination and sectarian tension in society continued, however, during the reporting year, including denunciations of non-Muslim religions from government-sanctioned pulpits.

The majority of citizens support a state based on Islamic law, although there are varying views regarding how this should be implemented.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Senior administration officials continued to raise concerns with the Government, including on specific cases. In 2004, the Secretary of State designated Saudi Arabia as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 1,225,000 square miles, and its population is approximately 26.7 million, including an estimated foreign population of more than 7 million. The foreign population reportedly includes approximately 1.4 million Indians, 1 million Bangladeshis, nearly 900,000 Pakistanis, 800,000 Filipinos, 750,000 Egyptians, 250,000 Palestinians, 150,000 Lebanese, 130,000 Sri Lankans, 40,000 Eritreans, and 25,000 Americans. Comprehensive statistics for the religious denominations of foreigners are not available; however, they include Muslims from the various branches and schools of Islam, Christians, and Hindus. Approximately 90 percent of the Filipino community is Christian. There are between 500,000 and 1 million Catholics in the country.

The majority of citizens are Sunni Muslims who predominantly adhere to the very strict Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence. The Hanbali school is the strictest of Sunni Islam's four legal schools. In addition, most Sunnis in the Kingdom subscribe to the tradition of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, an 18th century Muslim scholar belonging to the Hanbali school. For this reason,

these individuals are often referred to by others as "Wahhabis." Most citizens, however, do not so describe themselves, preferring instead to say simply that they are "Muslims." Many conservative Sunnis in Saudi Arabia, as in other Islamic countries, attempt to follow the practice and example of the first generation of Muslims, known as the "sacred ancestors" or "Salaf" in Arabic. Such Muslims are often referred to as "Salafis." It is important to note that the terms "Wahhabi" and "Salafi" have quite different meanings.

In January and February, the country hosted approximately 2 million Muslim pilgrims from around the world, and from all branches of Islam, for the annual Hajj.

The Shi'a Muslim minority (approximately 2 million persons) lived mostly in the Eastern Province, although a significant number also resided in Medina in the Western Province.

Proselytization by non-Sunni Muslims is illegal and the promotion of non-Salafi Sunni Islam is restricted.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Freedom of religion does not exist. Islam is the official religion, and all citizens must be Muslims. Religious freedom is not recognized or protected under the laws, and basic religious freedoms are denied to all but those who adhere to the state-sanctioned version of Sunni Islam. Citizens are denied the freedom to choose or change their religion, and many noncitizens, including Muslims, practice their beliefs under severe restrictions. The Government limits the practice of all but the officially sanctioned version of Islam and prohibits the public practice of other religions.

During the reporting period, the Government publicly restated its policy that non-Muslims are free to practice their religions at home and in private; however, the Government does not always respect this right in practice. As custodian of Islam's two holiest sites in Mecca and Medina, the Government considers its legitimacy to rest largely on its interpretation and enforcement of Shari'a. The Basic Law provides that the Qur'an and the Sunna (tradition) of the Prophet Muhammed constitute the country's Constitution. The Government follows the rigorously conservative and strict interpretation of the Wahhabi branch of the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence and discriminates against other branches of Islam. During the reporting year, however, the Government for the first time began instructing Saudi judges to base their rulings on all four schools of Islamic jurisprudence, not just the Hanbali school and its Wahhabi branch. Neither the Government nor society in general accepts the concept of separation of religion and state.

The Basic Law sets out the system of government, rights of residents and citizens, and powers and duties of the Government. The judiciary bases its judgments largely on Shari'a, the traditional system of laws derived from the Qur'an and the Sunna. The Government claims that it permits Shi'a Muslims to use their own version of Shari'a to adjudicate cases limited to family law, inheritance, and endowment management. However, there is only one such Shi'a judge serving the country's entire Shi'a population, and he is limited in his ability to apply Shi'a legal tradition in court.

The Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha religious feasts are recognized as the only national holidays. During the reporting year, the Government again permitted the observance of the Shi'a holiday of Ashura in the eastern city of Qatif. Small-scale, public observances of Ashura also occurred in Al-Hasa and Saihat.

Islamic law considers Hindus to be polytheists; identification with polytheism is used to justify discrimination against Hindus in calculating accidental death or injury compensation, unlike Muslims, Christians, or Jews, who are classified as "People of the Book." According to the country's "Hanbali" interpretation of Shari'a, once fault is determined by a court, a Muslim male receives 100 percent of the amount of compensation determined, a male Jew or Christian receives 50 percent, and all others (including Hindus and Sikhs) receive 1/16 of the amount a male Muslim may receive.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Tolerated Islamic practice generally is limited to a branch of the Hanbali school of the Sunni branch of Islam founded by Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab, an 18th century Sunni religious leader. This branch of Islam is often referred to as "Wahhabism" outside the country; however, most Saudis do not use this term to describe themselves. Practices contrary to this interpretation, such as celebration of the Prophet Muhammed's birthday and visits to the tombs of renowned Muslims, are forbidden. The Government prohibits the propagation of Islamic teachings that do not conform to the officially accepted interpretation of Islam. During the reporting year, there was an increasing degree of public discussion of the conservative religious traditions. Particularly after the 2003 terror attacks in Riyadh, some writers began to criticize abuses committed by Mutawwa'in (also known as the Committee to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice). However, discussion of religious issues is limited, and the Government has placed temporary or permanent bans on some editors and writers of major local daily newspapers for publication of articles and cartoons critical of the religious establishment.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs supervises and finances the construction and maintenance of almost all mosques, although approximately 30 percent of all mosques are built and endowed by private persons for charity or at private residences. Lawful

Shi'a mosques are regulated by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, whose permission Shi'a need to begin construction of new mosques. Imams (prayer leaders) appointed to administer Shi'a mosques operate under the regulation of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and the Ministry of Interior. Some mosques are built and supported by the Shi'a community without the Government's support or regulation. Shi'a continued to build mosques and Hussainiyas (gathering places) in private homes, which are sometimes converted to mosques and prayer halls.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs pays the salaries of imams and others who work in the mosques. The Committee to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice is a governmental entity, whose chairman has ministerial status. A separate government committee defines the qualifications of imams.

Since the 2003 terrorist attacks in Riyadh, the Government has taken public measures to counter religious extremism. In February, the Government hosted the first ever Counter-Terrorism International Conference for participants representing 61 countries and international organizations. The Government also sponsored an aggressive public relations anti-terrorism, anti-extremism campaign during the same time. The government-run television network broadcasted a series of programs to combat extremist and terrorist ideology, and senior government and religious leaders, including the Grand Mufti, have spoken out against extremism. The Ministry of Education conducted a "security day" to educate schoolchildren against extremism, and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs is using the Internet to promote moderation and counter terrorist ideology.

The Government bars foreign imams from leading worship during the most heavily attended prayer times, and it prohibits them from delivering sermons during Friday congregational prayers. The Government states that its actions are part of its "Saudization" plan to replace foreign workers with citizens. Writers and other individuals who publicly criticized the official interpretation of Islam, including those who favored a more moderate interpretation than the Government's, risked Mutawwa'in sanctions. Several journalists who wrote critically about the religious leadership or who questioned theological dogma were banned temporarily from writing or traveling abroad.

Most interpretations of Shari'a consider conversion by a Muslim to another religion to be apostasy, a crime punishable by death if the accused does not recant. In 2004, a schoolteacher was tried for apostasy and eventually convicted of blasphemy in March of the same year; the individual was given a prison sentence of 3 years and 300 lashes. The trial received substantial press coverage. There were no executions for apostasy during the reporting year.

The Government prohibits public non-Muslim religious activities. Non-Muslim worshippers risk arrest, imprisonment, lashing, deportation, and sometimes torture for engaging in religious activity that attracts official attention. The Government continues to state publicly that its policy is to allow non-Muslim foreigners to worship privately. However, the Government does not provide explicit guidelines--such as the number of persons permitted to attend private services and acceptable locations--for determining what constitutes private worship, thereby leaving the distinction between public and private worship unclear. This lack of clarity and instances of inconsistent enforcement led many non-Muslims to worship in fear of harassment and in such a way as to avoid discovery by police or Mutawwa'in. The Government often deported those detained for visible non-Muslim worship, sometimes after lengthy periods of arrest during investigation. In some cases, those convicted were also sentenced to receive lashes prior to deportation. In contrast to previous years, there was a decrease in both long-term detentions and deportations of non-Muslims for religious reasons; however, there was a marked increase in harassment by Mutawwa'in and in overall arrests and short-term detentions of non-Muslims. Some former detainees reported occasional government harassment and surveillance following their release.

The Government officially does not permit non-Muslim clergy to enter the country to conduct religious services, although some do so under other auspices, and the Government generally has allowed their performance of discreet religious functions. Such restrictions make it very difficult for most non-Muslims to maintain contact with clergymen and attend services. Catholics and Orthodox Christians, who require a priest on a regular basis to receive the sacraments required by their faith, particularly are affected.

Proselytizing by non-Muslims, including the distribution of non-Muslim religious materials such as Bibles, is illegal, and the promotion of non-Salafi Islam is restricted. Muslims or non-Muslims wearing religious symbols of any kind in public risk confrontation with Mutawwa'in. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs sponsors approximately 50 "Call and Guidance" centers employing approximately 500 persons to convert foreigners to Islam. Some non-Muslim foreigners convert to Islam during their stay in the country. The press often carries articles about such conversions, including testimonials.

The Government requires noncitizens to carry iqamas, or legal resident identity cards, which contain a religious designation for "Muslim" or "non-Muslim." There have been reports that individual Mutawwa'in have pressured sponsors not to renew iqamas, which had been issued for employment, of individuals for religious reasons.

Members of the Shi'a minority are subject to officially sanctioned political and economic discrimination. During the reporting year, authorities continued to permit a greater degree of freedom to Shi'ites in the Eastern Province city of Qatif, overlooking religious practices and gatherings that have been restricted or prevented in the past. However, in other areas with large Shi'a populations, such as al-Hasa and Dammam, there continued to be restrictions on Shi'a religious practices. In February and March, observances of Ashura took place in Qatif, although the police presence outside of Qatif was much larger than in the past. However, there were no reports of police interference with Ashura celebrations. In Qatif's city center, large groups of Shi'a gathered to hear Shi'a clerics speak and to purchase books and other religious paraphernalia. Many Shi'a travel to Qatif or Bahrain to participate in Ashura celebrations because of restrictions on public observances in other parts of the country. The

Government continued sporadically to enforce other restrictions on the Shi'a community, such as banning Shi'a books and excluding Shi'a perspectives from the extensive religious media and broadcast programming.

Shi'a have declined government offers to build state-supported Shi'a mosques because they fear the Government would prohibit the incorporation and display of Shi'a motifs in them. In the past, Shi'a have been permitted to build new Hussainiyas in Qatif and Ahsa.

Members of the Shi'a minority are discriminated against in government employment, especially in national security-related positions, such as in the military or Ministry of Interior. While there are some Shi'a who occupy high-level positions in government-owned companies and government agencies, many Shi'a believe that openly identifying themselves as Shi'a would have a negative impact on career advancement. Shi'a are underrepresented in both local and national government; however, Shi'a won a majority of contested seats in certain districts in the Eastern Province during the municipal elections held in March. Shi'a served on the Provincial Councils, the Shura council, in the traffic police, the "mabahith," or internal security force, the Army, and other branches of the military. While there is no formal policy concerning the hiring and promotion of Shi'a, anecdotal evidence suggests that in some companies--including companies in the oil and petrochemical industries--well-qualified Shi'a are passed over for less-qualified Sunni compatriots.

The Government also discriminates against Shi'a in higher education through unofficial restrictions on the number of Shi'a admitted to universities. Shi'a women are now officially permitted to be school principals, although there are reports that there is currently only one Shi'a woman assistant principle in the Kingdom and no Shi'a principals among the approximately 300 female schools in the Eastern Province. Shi'a teachers are not permitted to teach certain courses in schools, such as history or religion, even in predominately Shi'a areas. While government officials state that textbook language with prejudicial, anti-Shi'a statements has been removed, some teachers have continued to use anti-Shi'a rhetoric. Some cases have resulted in punitive measures being taken against Shi'a parents who have complained. There are no Shi'a cabinet ministers, and there are only 2 Shi'a in the 150-member Majlis al-Shura (consultative council). There are no Shi'a members of the country's highest religious authority, the Council of Senior Islamic Scholars (Ulema).

Under the provisions of Shari'a law as practiced in the country, judges may discount the testimony of nonpracticing Muslims or of individuals who do not adhere to the official interpretation of Islam. Legal sources report that testimony by Shi'a is often ignored in courts of law or is deemed to have less weight than testimony by Sunnis.

Customs officials routinely open mail and shipments to search for contraband, including Sunni printed material deemed incompatible with the Salafi tradition of Islam, Shi'a religious materials, and non-Muslim materials, such as Bibles and religious videotapes. Such materials are subject to confiscation, although rules appear to be applied arbitrarily.

Sunni Islamic religious education is mandatory in public schools at all levels. Regardless of which Islamic tradition their families adhere to, all public school children receive religious instruction that conforms to the Salafi tradition of Islam. Non-Muslim students in private schools are not required to study Islam. Private religious schools are not permitted for non-Muslims or for Muslims adhering to non-Salafi traditions of Islam.

Public debate over reform in the country continued during the reporting year. In December 2004, the Fourth National Dialogue, which focused on youth issues, recommended developing the curricula to cultivate moderation and respect. During the reporting year, the newly formed National Society for Human Rights (NSHR), the first human rights group which the Government has formally permitted to operate in the country, began to address some human rights violations, though not specifically religious freedom issues.

Abuses of Freedom of Religion

During the reporting year, the Government continued to commit abuses of religious freedom; however, reports of abuses often are difficult or impossible to corroborate. Fear and consequent secrecy surrounding any non-Muslim religious activity contributes to reluctance to disclose any information that might harm persons under government investigation. Moreover, information regarding government practices is incomplete because judicial proceedings generally are closed to the public, despite provisions in the 2002 Criminal Procedural Law that allow some court proceedings to be open.

While there was an improvement in press freedom during the reporting year, open discussions of religious issues were limited. The press reported on debates in the Majlis al-Shura that focused on whether individuals must be Muslim to attain citizenship and included opinions on both sides of the issue. For several years, the Government banned from writing and traveling a dissident Sunni religious scholar whose writings questioned the Islamic establishment's interpretation of the Sunna (the sayings and acts of the Prophet Muhammed). There was also a report that a university professor was banned from teaching for criticizing the Government's discriminatory policies against Shi'a. The professor also was banned from traveling abroad. During the reporting year, the university professor was allowed to resume teaching; however, he was still banned from traveling abroad.

In 2003, the press reported a raid in the Al Jouf region, where 16 Sufis were arrested for possession and distribution of books, videos, and brochures promoting Sufism. In June 2005, the Government also shut down a weekly "majlis," or gathering, held by a Sufi shaykh who adheres to the Shafi'i school of Islamic jurisprudence. According to various reports, a number of Shi'a remained in detention during the reporting year.

The Government continued to detain and deport non-Muslims for religious reasons.

In November 2004, Indian Christian Brian O'Connor was deported after being detained for 7 months for religious reasons.

In September 2004, seven Filipino Christian leaders were arrested and detained when Mutawwa'in raided a religious service. All were released within one month, but Mutawwa'in reportedly put pressure on their employers to deport them. Six had been deported by the end of the reporting year.

In February, Mutawwa'in raided a Christian worship service in Riyadh; those detained and arrested were released within hours of the raid.

In March, Mutawwa'in arrested Indian Christian Samkutty Varghese and confiscated religious materials he was carrying. Varghese was still in custody at the end of the reporting period. There were additional reports of arrests in May of at least eight Indian Protestant leaders following Varghese's arrest, purportedly because he carried information listing other Christians in the Kingdom.

In April, the press reported a raid on Filipino Christian services in Riyadh. Mutawwa'in raided the service and confiscated religious materials such as Bibles and Christian symbols.

On April 21, according to newspaper reports and independent sources, at least 20 Pakistani Christians were arrested during a Mutawwa'in raid on a Christian service. Most or all were released the same day.

On April 29, three Ethiopian and two Eritrean Christians were arrested in Riyadh during a raid on a private service. All five were released after a month in detention.

There also were reports of surveillance of Christian religious services by security personnel.

Magic is widely believed in and sometimes practiced; however, under Shari'a the practice of magic is regarded as the worst form of polytheism. There were an unknown number of detainees held in prison on the charge of "sorcery," including the practice of "black magic" or "witchcraft." During the reporting year, the local press reported several cases of arrests of foreigners and citizens for practicing sorcery. The press also reported raids in June to apprehend individuals alleged to be practicing sorcery. The raids were reported to be part of a campaign to locate illegal residents.

Mutawwa'in practices and incidents of abuse varied widely in different regions of the country. Reports of incidents were most numerous in the central Nejd region, which includes the capital Riyadh. In certain areas, both Mutawwa'in and religious vigilantes acting on their own harassed, assaulted, battered, arrested, and detained citizens and foreigners. The Government requires Mutawwa'in to follow established procedures and to offer instruction in a polite manner; however, Mutawwa'in did not always comply with the requirements.

Mutawwa'in enforcement of strict standards of social behavior included closing commercial establishments during five daily prayer observances, insisting upon compliance with conservative dress standards, and dispersing gatherings in public places. Mutawwa'in enforcement of strict standards of social behavior is more pronounced during the month of Ramadan. Mutawwa'in reproached foreign women for failure to observe strict dress codes, particularly for failure to wear headscarves, and detained men and women found together who were not married or closely related. In the past, the press reported that Mutawwa'in warned shopkeepers not to sell New Year's or Christmas gifts or decorations. The warning also reminded employees not to allow their staff to celebrate either holiday openly. In February 2004, the Grand Mufti restated a previously issued fatwa that declared Valentine's Day a "pagan Christian holiday" that could not be celebrated publicly. Mutawwa'in banned shopkeepers from selling Valentine's Day gifts and decorations and forbade vendors from selling roses 5 days prior to and following February 14. Markets in Qatif, however, carried Valentine's items throughout the year.

Mutawwa'in have the authority to detain persons for no more than 24 hours for violation of strict standards of proper dress and behavior; however, they sometimes exceeded this limit before delivering detainees to the police. Procedures require a police officer to accompany Mutawwa'in at the time of arrest. Mutawwa'in generally complied with this requirement; however, there were cases during the year in which Mutawwa'in violated this requirement. Mutawwa'in may not conduct investigations or allow unpaid volunteers to accompany official patrols; however, there were cases during the year in which unofficial mutawwa'in harassed individuals.

The Government regards members of the large Hindu community as polytheists, and non-Muslim, non-Western religious communities must exercise extreme caution when practicing their religions. The press reported in March that Mutawwa'in raided a makeshift Hindu temple in Riyadh, destroying its temple and forcing worshippers to cease their activities. The Government reportedly deported three worshippers.

During the reporting year, there continued to be instances in which mosque preachers, whose salaries are paid by the Government, used violently anti-Jewish and anti-Christian language in their sermons. Although this language has declined in frequency since 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.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

During the reporting year, al-Qa'ida terrorists conducted a campaign of terrorist attacks in various locations in the country, killing both Muslims and non-Muslims, citizens and expatriates, and members of the security forces. During the year, terrorists killed more than 30 foreigners and citizen civilians, including 5 employees of a foreign consulate in Jeddah. More than 40 members of security forces were also killed while combating terrorists. Their attacks consisted of kidnappings, targeted shootings, bombings, and beheadings.

Forced Religious Conversion

Under the law, children of male citizens are considered Muslim, regardless of the country or the religious tradition in which they have been raised. The Government's application of this law discriminates against non-Muslim, noncitizen mothers and denies their children the freedom to choose their religion. There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States during the reporting year.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

During the reporting year, senior government officials made some efforts to improve the climate of tolerance toward other religions and within Islam. In December 2004, the Fourth National Dialogue focused on youth issues and recommended developing the curricula to cultivate moderation and respect.

The Government also took limited measures to remove what it deemed to be disparaging references to other religious traditions from the educational curriculum. In addition, increased press freedom permitted journalists to publicly criticize abuses by the religious police.

Senior leaders, including the Crown Prince and the Grand Mufti, continued to call for moderation. **In May, the Deputy Minister of Islamic Affairs was reported as saying that the country protects non-Muslims but does not plan to expand freedom of worship.**

Section III. Societal Attitudes

As a deeply conservative and devout Muslim society, there is intense pressure within Saudi Arabia to conform to societal norms. In 2004, a citizen teacher was tried for apostasy. The case received substantial press coverage, but after testimony the court declined to convict him of apostasy and instead convicted him of blasphemy, sentencing him to 3 years and several hundred lashes.

The conservative religious leadership also exerts pressure on the state to adhere strictly to its interpretation of Islam. The Government stated that in 2003 it stepped up efforts to combat religious extremism by firing several hundred prayer leaders and beginning retraining programs for both imams and other mosque employees. Activists who are openly critical of the religious establishment report harassment by religious police and other religious extremists.

The majority of citizens support a state based on Islamic law, although there are differing views as to how this should be realized in practice. The official title of the head of state is "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques," and the role of the King and the Government in upholding Islam within the country is regarded as a paramount function throughout the Muslim world.

Following the June 2003 session of the "National Intellectual Dialogue," participants representing different Muslim traditions in the country, including Sunni and Shi'ite leaders, issued a statement acknowledging that theological differences are "natural" and committing themselves to resolve differences through dialogue.

There is societal discrimination against members of the Shi'a minority. The Shi'a experienced discrimination in private sector employment at all levels of society, although this varies somewhat across communities in the Eastern Province. Concerning the hiring and promotion of Shi'a, anecdotal evidence suggests that in some companies--including companies in the oil and petrochemical industries--well-qualified Shi'a are passed over for less-qualified Sunni compatriots.

There continued to be reports of anti-Shi'a discrimination in the Saudi school system. Frequently, teachers in Qatif who teach Islam tell their Shi'a students that Shi'a practices are un-Islamic and that the students must follow Sunni traditions to be true Muslims, though the incidence of this is decreasing. There were reports that teachers instruct their students that the Shi'a are not Muslims, but are kaffirs (unbelievers).

Many non-Muslims who undertook religious observances privately and discreetly during the reporting year were not harassed. However, some non-Muslims claimed that informants paid by Mutawwa'in infiltrated their private worship groups.

Relations between Muslim citizens and foreign Muslims are generally good. Each year the country welcomes approximately 2 million Muslim pilgrims from all over the world and of all branches of Islam, who visit the country to perform the Hajj and Umra.

In certain areas, religious vigilantes unaffiliated with the Government and acting on their own harassed, assaulted, battered, arrested, and detained citizens and foreigners.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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

During the reporting year, the U.S. Ambassador discussed U.S. concerns over the lack of religious freedom with a wide range of senior government and religious leaders. The Ambassador also raised specific cases of violations with senior officials, and U.S. Embassy officers met with Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) officials to deliver and discuss the U.S. Government's 2004 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom. Senior Embassy officers 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 Salafi tradition of Islam. In addition, Embassy officers met with MFA officials at various other times to discuss matters pertaining to religious freedom. In 2004, the Secretary of State designated Saudi Arabia as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

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