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U.S. Department of State

Saudi Arabia Report on Human Rights Practices for 1996

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SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia is a monarchy without elected representative institutions or political parties. It is ruled by King Fahd Bin Abd Al-Aziz Al Saud, a son of King Abd Al-Aziz Al Saud, who unified the country in the early 20th century. The King and the Crown Prince are chosen from among the male descendants of King Abd Al-Aziz. There is no written constitution. The concept of the separation of religion and state is not accepted by either society or the Government. The Government maintains adherence to the precepts of a rigorously conservative form of Islam.

The Government does not permit the establishment of political parties and suppresses opposition views. In 1992 King Fahd appointed a Consultative Council, the Majlis Ash-Shura, and similar provincial assemblies. The Council began holding sessions in 1994. The judiciary is generally independent but is subject to influence by the executive branch and members of the royal family.

Police and border forces under the Ministry of Interior are responsible for internal security. The Mutawwa'in, or religious police, compose the Committee to Prevent Vice and Promote Virtue, a semiautonomous agency that encourages adherence to Islamic values by monitoring public behavior. Members of the security forces committed human rights abuses.

The oil industry has fueled the transformation of Saudi Arabia from a pastoral, agricultural, and commercial society to a rapidly urbanizing one characterized by large-scale infrastructure projects, an extensive social welfare system, and a labor market comprised largely of foreign workers. Oil revenues

account for 37 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) and 72 percent of government income. Agriculture accounts for only about 8 percent of GDP. Government spending, including spending on the national airline, power, water, telephone, education, and health services, accounts for 36 percent of GDP. About 37 percent of the economy is in private hands, and the Government is promoting further privatization of the economy. The Government has also undertaken an aggressive campaign to increase the number of Saudi nationals represented in the private and public work forces. This has included restrictions on some categories of foreign workers, for example, limiting certain occupations to Saudis only, increasing fees for some work visas, and setting minimum wages for some job categories designed to increase the cost to employers of non-Saudi labor.

The Government commits and tolerates serious human rights abuses. There is no mechanism for citizens to change their government, and citizens do not have this right. Since the death of King Abd Al-Aziz, the King and Crown Prince have been chosen from among his sons, who themselves have had preponderant influence in the choice. A 1992 royal decree reserves for the King exclusive power to name the Crown Prince. The Government bases its legitimacy on governance according to Islamic law. Security forces continued to abuse detainees and to arbitrarily arrest and detain persons. Ministry of Interior officers abused prisoners and facilitated incommunicado detention in contradiction of the law, but with the acquiescence of the Government. Prolonged detention is a problem. The legal system is subject to executive and royal family influence. The Government prohibits or restricts freedom of speech, the press, assembly, association, and religion. Reports of harassment by the Mutawwa'in decreased in 1995 and 1996, though Mutawwa'in intimidation, abuse, and detention of citizens and foreigners of both sexes continued. Other problems include discrimination and violence against women, suppression of ethnic and religious minorities, and strict limitations on the rights of workers. The Government with internationally accepted definitions of human rights and views its interpretation of Islamic law as its sole source of guidance for human rights.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Political and Other Extrajudicial Killing

There was one allegation of political or other extrajudicial killings by government officials. In early December, Haytham Al-Bahir, a Shi'a student, reportedly died of complications arising from detention and torture, which aggravated a preexisting medical condition.

On June 25, unknown persons exploded a truck bomb outside a U.S. military housing complex at Al-Khobar. The bomb killed 19 U.S. personnel and wounded hundreds of persons. Authorities arrested dozens of people, and the investigation was continuing at year's end.

On April 22, the authorities announced the arrest of four persons for the November 1995 car bombing of a U.S.-run military training center for Saudi military that killed 7 persons and wounded 60. All four were tried and found guilty in accordance with Saudi judicial procedures, which include several levels of appellate review, and mandatory review by the King prior to their execution on May 31.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

There were credible reports that the authorities continued to abuse detainees, including citizens and foreigners. Ministry of Interior officers are responsible for most incidents of abuse, which can include beatings and the deprivation of sleep during weeks of interrogation resulting in severe weight loss for the detainee. There were unverified reports of worse abuses. Efforts to confirm or discount reports of worse abuses, including torture, are hindered by the Government's refusal to grant members of diplomatic missions access to the Ministry of Interior detention facilities or allow members of international human rights groups into the country. The Government's past failure to denounce human rights abusers has contributed to the public perception that abuses can be committed with impunity.

Although reports of harassment by the Mutawwa'in decreased, Mutawwa'in intimidation, abuse, and detention of citizens and foreigners of both sexes continued (see Sections 1.d. and 1.e.).

The Government rigorously observes criminal punishments according to its interpretation of Islamic law, including amputation, flogging, and execution by beheading or stoning. No executions were performed during the 5-month period from October 17, 1995, to March 14. Executions resumed March 15, and by year's end the authorities had beheaded 40 men and 1 woman for murder, 14 men for rape, 6 men and 2 women for drug offenses, 5 men for armed robbery, and 1 man for witchcraft. In a reversal of previous years, those executed in 1996 were predominantly Saudi (39 men and 1 woman). There were no executions by stoning in 1996.

In accordance with Shari'a, the authorities punish repeated thievery by amputation of the right hand. However, amputation has not been imposed since June 1995. For less serious crimes, such as drunkenness or publicly flouting Islamic precepts, flogging with a cane is frequently the punishment.

Conditions in standard jails and prisons vary throughout the Kingdom. Prisons, particularly in the eastern province, are of generally high quality, with air-conditioned cells, good nutrition, regular exercise, and careful patrolling by prison guards. Some detainees in police station jails, however, have complained of overcrowding and unsanitary conditions. Family members are allowed access.

Boards of Investigation and Public Prosecution, organized on a regional basis, were established by King Fahd in 1993. The members of these boards have the right to inspect prisons, review prisoners' files, and hear their complaints. The Government, however, does not permit visits to jails or prisons by human rights monitors. Some diplomats have been granted regular access to incarcerated foreign citizens.

No impartial observers are allowed access to specialized Ministry of Interior prisons, such as Al-Hair Prison south of Riyadh, where the Government detains persons accused of political subversion.

Representatives of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are present at the Rafha refugee camp housing former Iraqi prisoners of war (POW's) and civilians who fled Iraq following the Gulf War. According to UNHCR officials, there is no systematic abuse of refugees by camp guards. When occasional instances of abuse surface, the authorities are generally responsive and willing to reprimand offending guards. The camp itself is comparatively comfortable and well run.

d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile.

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest. Despite the law, however, officers make arrests and detain persons without following explicit legal guidelines. There are few procedures to safeguard against abuse. However, there was a case in 1995 in which a Saudi citizen successfully sued the Government for wrongful imprisonment and was awarded compensation.

Authorities usually detain suspects for no longer than 3 days before charging them, in accordance with a regulation issued by the Ministry of Interior in 1983, although serious exceptions have been reported. The regulation also has provisions for bail for less serious crimes. Also, detainees are sometimes released on the recognizance of a patron or sponsoring employer without the payment of bail. If not released, the accused are detained an average of 1 to 2 months before going to trial.

There is no established procedure providing detainees the right to inform their family of their arrest. If asked, the authorities usually confirm the arrest of foreigners to their country's diplomats. In general, however, foreign diplomats learn about such arrests through informal channels. The authorities may take as long as several months to provide official notification of the arrest of foreigners, if at all. In capital cases, foreigners have in the past been tried and executed without notification of their arrest ever having been given to their government's representatives.

The Mutawwa'in enforce a strict public code of proper dress and behavior. However, reports of harassment, intimidation, and detention of those deemed to be violating the code declined in 1995 and 1996. The Mutawwa'in have the authority to detain people for no more than 24 hours for violation of behavior standards. However, they sometimes exceeded this limit before delivering detainees to the regular police (see Section 1.f.). Current procedures require a police officer to accompany the Mutawwa'in before the latter make an arrest, although this requirement is sometimes ignored.

Detainees arrested by the General Directorate of Investigation (GDI), which is the Ministry of Interior's security service, are commonly held incommunicado in special prisons during the initial phase of an investigation, which may last weeks or months. The GDI allows the detainees only limited contact with their families or lawyers.

The authorities detain without charge people who publicly criticize the Government, or they charge them with attempting to destabilize the Government (see Sections 2.a. and 3). The authorities continued to detain Salman Al-Awdah and Safar Al-Hawali, Muslim clerics who were arrested in September 1994 for publicly criticizing the Government. Their detention that year sparked protest demonstrations resulting in the arrest of 157 persons for antigovernment activities. At the end of 1994, 27 of these persons remained in detention pending investigation; the Government has not announced the release of any of those detainees in the succeeding 2 years. The thousands of prisoners and detainees released under the annual Ramadan amnesty included no political dissidents. The total number of political detainees is impossible to determine.

The Government does not use forced exile. However, Mohammed al-Masari and Osama Bin Ladin, two critics of the Government who live outside of the country, have had their citizenship revoked.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial.

The independence of the judiciary is prescribed by law and is usually respected in practice. However, judges occasionally accede to the influence of the executive branch, particularly members of the royal family and their associates. Moreover, judicial, financial, and administrative control of the courts rests with the Ministry of Justice.

The legal system is based on Shari'a, or Islamic law. Regular Shari'a courts exercise jurisdiction over common criminal cases and civil suits regarding marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. These courts base judgments largely on the Koran and on the Sunna, another Islamic text. Cases involving relatively small penalties are tried in summary courts; more serious crimes are adjudicated in general courts. Appeals from both courts are heard by the appeals courts in Mecca and Riyadh.

Other civil proceedings, including those involving claims against the Government and enforcement of foreign judgments, are held before specialized administrative tribunals, such as the Commission for the Settlement of Labor Disputes and the Board of Grievances.

The military justice system has jurisdiction over uniformed personnel and civil servants charged with violations of military regulations. Court-martial decisions are reviewed by the Minister of Defense and Aviation and by the King.

The Government permits Shi'a Muslims to use their own legal tradition to adjudicate noncriminal cases within their community.

There is a Supreme Judicial Council, which is not a court and may not reverse decisions made by an appeals court. However, the Council may refer decisions back to the lower courts for reconsideration. Its members are appointed by the King, as are most senior jurists, called muftis. Only the Council may discipline or remove a judge.

There is also the Council of Senior Religious Scholars, which is an autonomous body of 15 senior religious jurists, including the Minister of Justice. It establishes the legal principles to guide lower court judges in deciding individual cases.

Defendants usually appear without an attorney before a judge, who determines guilt or innocence in accordance with Shari'a standards. Defense lawyers may offer their clients advice before trial or may attend the trial as interpreters for those unfamiliar with Arabic. The courts do not provide foreign defendants with translators. Public defenders are not provided. There is no licensing procedure for lawyers. Individuals may choose any person to represent them by a power of attorney filed with the court and Ministry of Justice. Most trials are closed. A woman's testimony does not carry the same weight as that of a man. In a Shari'a court, the testimony of one man equals that of two women.

In the absence of two witnesses, or four witnesses in the case of adultery, confessions before a judge are almost always required for criminal conviction--a situation that repeatedly has led prosecuting authorities to coerce confessions from suspects by threats and abuse.

Sentencing is not uniform. Foreign residents often receive harsher penalties than citizens. Under Shari'a, as interpreted and applied in Saudi Arabia, crimes against Muslims receive harsher penalties than those against non-Muslims. In the case of wrongful death, the amount of indemnity or "blood money" awarded to relatives varies with the nationality, religion, and sex of the victim. A sentence may be changed at any stage of review, except for punishments stipulated by the Koran.

Provincial governors have the authority to exercise leniency and reduce a judge's sentence. In some instances, governors have reportedly threatened and even detained judges over disagreements on their decisions. In general, members of the royal family, and other powerful families, are not subject to the same rule of law as ordinary citizens. For example, judges do not have the power to issue a warrant summoning any member of the royal family.

The King and his advisors review cases involving capital punishment to ensure that the court applied the proper legal and Islamic principles. The King has the authority to commute death sentences and grant pardons except for capital crimes committed against individuals. In such cases, he may request the victim's next of kin to pardon the murderer--usually in return for compensation from the family or the King.

There is insufficient information to determine the number of political prisoners because the Government does not provide information on such persons or respond to inquiries about them. Moreover, the Government conducts closed trials for persons who may be political prisoners and in other cases has detained persons incommunicado for long periods while under investigation. At year's end, at least nine persons were serving prison terms for their connections to the rigidly fundamentalist Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR), an opposition group based in London (see Section 3), and their alleged involvement in a 1994 assault on an Interior Ministry official.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The sanctity of family life and the inviolability of the home are among the most fundamental of Islamic precepts. Royal decrees announced in 1992 include provisions calling for the Government to defend the home from unlawful incursions.

The police must generally demonstrate reasonable cause and obtain permission from the provincial governor before searching a private home, but warrants are not required.

Customs officials routinely open mail for contraband including material deemed pornographic as well as non-Muslim religious material. They regularly confiscate materials deemed offensive. The authorities also open mail and use informants and wiretaps in internal security matters.

The Government enforces most social and Islamic religious norms, which are matters of law (see Section 5). Women may not marry non-Saudis without Government permission; men must obtain approval from the Ministry of Interior to marry women from countries outside the six states of the Gulf Cooperation

Council. Although women are prohibited from marrying non-Muslims, men have the right to marry Christians and Jews, in accordance with Islamic law.

Both citizens and foreigners were targets of harassment by members of the Mutawwa'in and by religious vigilantes acting independently of the Mutawwa'in, though on a lesser scale than in 1995. The Government enjoins the Mutawwa'in to follow established procedures and to offer instruction in a polite manner; following especially egregious altercations, the authorities have exerted tighter control over the Mutawwa'in (see Section 1.d.). The Government, however, has not condemned the actions of religious vigilantes but has sought to curtail their activities.

Mutawwa'in enforcement of strict standards of social behavior included the closure of commercial establishments during the daily prayer observances, insistence upon modest dress in public, and harassment of patrons of videotape rental shops. They remonstrate with Saudi and foreign women for failure to observe strict dress codes and for being in the company of males who are not their close relatives. They also harassed and arrested non-Muslims attempting to conduct religious services (see Section 2.c.).

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The Government severely limits freedom of speech and the press. The authorities do not countenance criticism of Islam, the ruling family, or the Government. Persons whose criticisms align them with an organized political opposition are subject to arrest and detention until they confess their crime or sign a

statement promising not to resume such criticisms, which is tantamount to a confession.

The print media are privately owned but publicly subsidized. A 1982 media policy statement and a 1965 national security law prohibit the dissemination of criticism of the Government. The media policy statement urges journalists to uphold Islam, oppose atheism, promote Arab interests, and preserve the cultural heritage of Saudi Arabia. The Ministry of Information appoints, and may remove, the editors in chief. It also provides guidelines to newspapers on controversial issues. The Government owns the Press Agency (SPA), which expresses official Government views.

Newspapers typically publish news on sensitive subjects, such as crime or terrorism, only after it has been released by the SPA or when it has been authorized by a senior government official. Two Saudi-owned, London-based dailies, Ash-Sharq Al-Awsat and Al-Hayat, are widely distributed and read in Saudi

Arabia. The authorities continue to censor stories about Saudi Arabia in the foreign press. Censors may remove or blacken the offending articles, glue pages together, or prevent certain issues of foreign publications from entering the market. However, the Ministry of Information continued to relax its blackout policy regarding politically sensitive news concerning Saudi Arabia reported in international media, although press restrictions on reporting of domestic news remain very stringent. The terrorist bombing of a U.S. military facility in Al Khobar on June 25 was promptly reported by the government media.

The Government's policy in this regard appears to be motivated in part by pragmatic considerations: Saudi access to outside sources of information, especially Cable News Network and other satellite television channels, is widespread.

The Government tightly restricts the entry of foreign journalists into the Kingdom but admitted a markedly increased number into the country in 1996.

The Government owns and operates the television and radio companies. Government censors remove any reference to politics, religions other than Islam, pork or pigs, alcohol, or any sexual innuendo from foreign programs and songs. Reflecting competition from outside satellite television networks, Saudi television has introduced some program changes, including "Face to Face," a weekly live talk show in which ministers and other senior officials interact with a moderator and answer phone and facsimile questions from citizens.

There are as many as 300,000 satellite receiving dishes in the Kingdom that provide citizens with foreign broadcasts. The legal status of these devices is ambiguous. The Government ordered a halt to their import in 1992, at the request of religious leaders who objected to foreign programming available on satellite channels. In March 1994, the Government banned the sale, installation, and maintenance of dishes and supporting devices, but the number of dishes continues to increase and residents may legally subscribe to satellite decoding services that require a dish.

The Government censors all forms of public artistic expression. The authorities prohibit cinemas and public musical or theatrical performances, except those that are strictly folkloric.

Academic freedom is restricted. The authorities prohibit the study of evolution, Freud, Marx, Western music, and Western philosophy. Some professors believe that government and conservative religious informers monitor their classroom comments.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The Government strictly limits these freedoms. It prohibits public demonstrations as a means of political expression and the establishment of political parties or any type of opposition group (see Section 3). By its power to license associations, the Government ensures that groups conform to public policy.

Public meetings are segregated by sex. Unless meetings are sponsored by diplomatic missions or approved by the appropriate governor, foreign residents seeking to hold unsegregated meetings risk arrest and deportation. The authorities monitor any large gathering of people, especially of women.

c. Freedom of Religion

Freedom of religion does not exist. Islam is the official religion, and all citizens must be Muslims. The Government prohibits the practice of other religions. There are isolated reports of harassment and arrest of foreign workers conducting clandestine worship services, particularly around non-Muslim religious holidays. One Christian worship service was broken up by police and Mutawwa'in, and the man who hosted the service was punished by lashing.

Conversion by a Muslim to another religion is considered apostasy. Public apostasy is a crime under Shari'a law and punishable by death.

Islamic practice is generally limited to that of the Wahhabi sect's interpretation of the Hanbali School of the Sunni branch of Islam. Practices contrary to this interpretation, such as visits to the graves of renowned Muslims, are discouraged.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs directly supervises and is a major source of funds for the construction and maintenance of almost all mosques in the country. The Ministry pays the salaries of all imams and others who work in the mosques. A governmental committee is responsible for defining the qualifications of imams. The religious police, or the Mutawwa'in, receive their funding from the Government and the general president of the Mutawwa'in holds the rank of minister.

The Shi'a Muslim minority (roughly 500,000 of over 13 million citizens) lives mostly in the eastern province. They are the objects of officially sanctioned social and economic discrimination (see Section 5). Prior to 1990, the Government prohibited Shi'ite public processions during the Islamic month of Muharram and restricted other processions and congregations to designated areas in the major Shi'ite cities. Since 1990, the authorities have permitted marches on the Shi'a holiday of Ashura, provided the marchers do not display banners or engage

in self-flagellation. In May Ashura commemorations in the eastern province passed without incident.

The Government seldom permits private construction of Shi'ite mosques. The Shi'a have declined government offers to build state-supported mosques because Shi'ite motifs would be prohibited in them.

The Government does not permit public or private non-Muslim religious activities. Persons wearing religious symbols of any kind in public risk confrontation with the Mutawwa'in. The general prohibition against religious symbols applies also to Muslims. A Muslim wearing a Koranic necklace in public would be admonished. Non-Muslim worshippers risk arrest, lashing, and deportation for engaging in any religious activity that attracts official attention.

d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

The Government restricts the travel of Saudi women, who must obtain written permission from their closest male relative before the authorities will allow them to board public transportation between different parts of the country or travel abroad (see Section 5). Males may travel anywhere within the country or abroad.

Foreigners are typically allowed to reside or work in Saudi Arabia only under the sponsorship of a Saudi national or business. The Government requires foreign residents to carry identification cards. It does not permit foreigners to travel outside the city of their employment or change their workplace without their sponsor's permission. Foreign residents who travel within the country are often asked by the authorities to show that they possess letters of permission from their employer or sponsor.

Sponsors generally retain possession of the workers' passports. Foreign workers must obtain permission from their sponsors to travel abroad. If sponsors are involved in a commercial or labor dispute with foreign employees, they may ask the authorities to prohibit the employees from departing the country until the dispute is resolved. Some sponsors use this as a pressure tactic to resolve disputes in their favor, or to have foreign employees deported.

The Government seizes the passports of all potential suspects and witnesses in criminal cases and suspends the issuance of exit visas to them, until the case is tried. As a result, some foreign nationals are forced to remain in the country for lengthy periods against their will. The authorities sometimes confiscate the passports of suspected oppositionists and their families. Some husbands of women who participated in a 1991

motorcade through the streets of Riyadh in protest of government restrictions on female driving reported that, 5 years later, they still have not had their passports returned. The Government prevents Shi'a Muslims believed to have pro-Iranian sympathies from traveling abroad.

Citizens may emigrate, but the law prohibits dual citizenship. Apart from marriage to a Saudi national, there are no provisions for long-term foreign residents to acquire citizenship. However, foreigners are granted citizenship in rare cases, generally through the advocacy of an influential patron.

The 1992 Basic Law provides that "the State will grant political asylum if the public interest mitigates" in favor of it. The language does not specify clear rules for adjudicating asylum cases. In general, the authorities regard refugees and displaced persons like other foreign workers: They must have sponsors for employment or risk expulsion. Of the 35,000 Iraqi civilians and former prisoners of war allowed refuge in Saudi Arabia at the end of the Gulf War, none has been granted permanent asylum by the Saudis; however, the Government has underwritten the entire cost of providing safe haven to the Iraqi refugees, and continues to provide excellent logistical and administrative support to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other resettlement agencies.

At year's end, approximately 25,000 of the original 35,000 Iraqi refugees had been resettled in third countries or voluntarily repatriated to Iraq. Most of the remaining 10,000 refugees are restricted to the Rafha refugee camp. The UNHCR has monitored over 2,800 persons voluntarily returning to Iraq from Rafha since December 1991 and found no evidence of forcible repatriation.

The Government has temporarily allowed some foreigners to remain in Saudi Arabia in cases where their safety would be jeopardized if they were deported to their home countries.

Section 3. Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

Citizens do not have the right to change their government. There are no formal democratic institutions, and only a few citizens have a voice in the choice of leaders or in changing the political system. The King rules on civil and religious matters within certain limitations established by religious law, tradition, and the need to maintain consensus among the ruling family and religious leaders.

The King is also the Prime Minister, and the Crown Prince serves as Deputy Prime Minister. The King appoints all other

ministers, who in turn appoint subordinate officials with cabinet concurrence.

In 1993 the King appointed 60 members to a Consultative Council, or Majlis Ash-Shura. This strictly advisory body began to hold sessions in 1994, but the Council has maintained a low profile and is not regarded as a significant political force by the citizenry or those in power.

The Council of Senior Islamic Scholars is another advisory body to the King and the Cabinet. It issues decisions based on Shari'a in its review of the Government's public policies. The Government views the Council as an important source of religious legitimacy, and takes the Council's opinions into account when promulgating legislation.

Communication between citizens and the Government is usually expressed through client-patron relationships and by affinity groups such as tribes, families, and professional hierarchies. In theory, any male citizen or foreign national may express an opinion or air a grievance at a majlis--an open-door meeting held by the King, a prince, or an important national or local official. However, as governmental functions have become more complex, time-consuming, and centralized, public access to senior officials has become more restricted. Since the assassination of King Faisal in 1975, Saudi kings have reduced the frequency of their personal contacts with the public. Ministers and district governors more readily grant audiences at a majlis.

Typical topics raised in a majlis are complaints about bureaucratic delay or insensitivity, requests for personal redress or assistance, and criticism of particular acts of government affecting family welfare. Broader "political" concerns--social, economic, or foreign policy--are rarely raised. Complaints about royal abuses of power would not be entertained. In general journalists, academics, and businessmen feel that avenues of domestic criticism and feedback to the regime are closed.

An opposition group, the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights, which advocates a rigidly fundamentalist Islamic viewpoint, was established in 1993 by six citizens. The Government acted quickly to repress the CDLR following its formation. In 1994 CDLR spokesman Mohammed Al-Masari secretly fled to the United Kingdom, where he sought political asylum and established an overseas branch of the CDLR. Al-Masari continued to criticize the Government, using computers and facsimile transmissions to send newsletters back to Saudi Arabia. In March internal divisions within the CDLR spawned the rival Islamic Reform Movement (IRM), headed by Sa'ad Al-Faqih. Al-Masari has expressed the group's "understanding" of two fatal terrorist bombings of American military facilities

and sympathy for the perpetrators. The IRM also implicitly condoned the two terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia, arguing that they were a natural outgrowth of a political system that does not tolerate peaceful dissent.

In April the Saudi Ambassador in the United Kingdom stated publicly that his Government would withdraw from large contracts for British weapons unless the United Kingdom expelled Al-Masari. The British Government denied Al-Masari's initial request for asylum, due to the circumstances of his illegal

entry, but eventually Al-Masari was granted permission to remain in the United Kingdom for 4 years, with the option of applying for permanent residency at the end of that period. There is no evidence of Saudi Government retribution against the British Government for this decision.

Women play no formal role in government and politics, and are actively discouraged from doing so. Participation by women in a Majlis is restricted, although some women seek redress through female members of the royal family. Only 1 of the 60 members of the Majlis Ash-Shura is a Shi'a.

Section 4. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

There are no publicly active human rights groups, and the Government has made it clear that none critical of government policies would be permitted.

The Government does not permit visits by international human rights groups or independent monitors, nor has it signed major international human rights treaties and conventions. The Government disagrees with internationally accepted definitions of human rights and views its interpretation of Islamic law as the only necessary guide to protect human rights. Citations of Saudi human rights abuses by international monitors or foreign governments are routinely ignored or condemned by the Government as assaults on Islam.

Section 5. Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Religion, Disability, Language, or Social Status

Systematic discrimination based on sex and religion are built into the law. The law forbids discrimination based on race, but not nationality. The Government and private organizations cooperate in providing services for the disabled. The Shi'a religious minority suffers social, legal, and religious discrimination.

Women

The Government does not keep statistics on spousal or other forms of violence against women. Hospital workers report that many women are admitted for treatment of injuries that apparently result from spousal violence. Some foreign women have suffered physical abuse from their Saudi husbands, who can prevent their wives from obtaining exit visas.

Foreign embassies receive many reports that employers abuse foreign women working as domestic servants. Embassies of countries with large domestic servant populations maintain safehouses to which citizens may flee to escape work situations that include forced confinement, withholding of food, beating and other physical abuse, and rape. Often the abuse is at the hands of female Saudis. In general, the Government considers such cases family matters and does not intervene unless charges of abuse are brought to its attention. It is almost impossible for foreign women to obtain redress in the courts due to the courts' strict evidentiary rules and the women's own fears of reprisals. Few employers have been punished for such abuses. There are no private support groups or religious associations to assist such women.

By religious law and social custom, women have the right to own property and are entitled to financial support from their husbands or male relatives. However, women have few political and social rights and are not treated as equal members of society. There are no active women's rights groups. Women, including foreigners, may not legally drive motor vehicles and are restricted in their use of public facilities when men are present. Women must enter city buses by separate rear entrances and sit in

specially designated sections. Women risk arrest by the Mutawwa'in for riding in a vehicle driven by a male who is not an employee or a close male relative. Women are not admitted to a hospital for medical treatment without the consent of their male relative. By law and custom, women may not undertake domestic and foreign travel alone (see Section 2.d.).

In public women are expected to wear the abaya, a black garment covering the entire body. A woman's head and face should also be covered. The Mutawwa'in generally expect women from Arab countries, Asia, and Africa to comply more fully with Saudi customs of dress than they do Western women; nonetheless, in recent years they have instructed Western women to wear the abaya and cover their hair.

Some government officials and ministries still bar accredited female diplomats in Saudi Arabia from official meetings and diplomatic functions.

Women are also subject to discrimination in Islamic law, which stipulates that daughters receive half the inheritance awarded to their brothers. In a Shari'a court, the testimony of one man equals that of two women (see Section 1.e.). Although Islamic law permits polygyny, it is becoming less common. Islamic law enjoins a man to treat each wife equally. In practice such equality is left to the discretion of the husband. Some women participated in al-Mesyar (or "short daytime visit") marriages, where the women relinquish their legal rights to financial support and nighttime cohabitation. Additionally, the husband is not required to inform his other wives of the marriage, and the children have no inheritance rights. The Government places greater restrictions on women than on men regarding marriage to non-Saudis and non-Muslims (see Section 2.d.).

Women must demonstrate legally specified grounds for divorce, but men may divorce without giving cause. If divorced or widowed, a woman normally may keep her children until they attain a specified age: 7 years for boys, 9 years for girls. Children over these ages are awarded to the divorced husband or the deceased husband's family. Divorced women who are foreigners are often prevented by their former husbands from visiting their children after divorce.

Women have access to free, but segregated, education through the university level. They constitute 55 percent of all university graduates but are excluded from studying such subjects as engineering, journalism, and architecture. Men are able to study overseas; women may do so only if accompanied by a spouse or an immediate male relative.

Women make up only 5 percent of the work force. Whereas salary and other benefits are the main concerns for men seeking employment, for women the primary goal is merely establishing some toehold in the private or public sector. Most employment opportunities for women are in education and health care, with lesser opportunity in business, philanthropy, banking, retail sales, and the media. Women wishing to enter nontraditional fields are subject to discrimination. Women may not accept jobs in rural areas if they are required to live apart from their families. All workplaces where women are present are segregated by sex. Contact with male supervisors or clients is allowed by telephone or facsimile machine. In 1995 the Ministry of Commerce announced that women would no longer be issued business licenses for work in fields that might require them to supervise foreign workers, interact with male clients, or deal on a regular basis with government officials.

Children

The Government provides all children with free education and medical care. Children are not subject to the strict social

segregation faced by women, though they are segregated by sex in schools starting at age 7. In more general social situations, boys are segregated at age 12, and girls at the onset of puberty. It is difficult to gauge the prevalence of child abuse, since the Government keeps no statistics on such cases and is disinclined to infringe on family privacy. Societal abuse of children does not appear to be a major problem.

People with Disabilities

The provision of government social services has increasingly brought the disabled into the public domain. The media carry features lauding the public accomplishments of disabled persons and sharply criticizing parents who neglect disabled children. The Government and private charitable organizations cooperate in education, employment, and other services for the disabled. The law provides hiring quotas for the disabled. While there is no legislation for public accessibility, newer commercial buildings often include such access.

Religious Minorities

Shi'a citizens are discriminated against in government and employment, especially in national security jobs. Several years ago the Government subjected Shi'a to employment restrictions in the oil industry and has not relaxed them. The Sunni majority discriminates socially against the Shi'a minority.

Shi'a face restrictions on access to several services, despite efforts by the Government to improve the social service infrastructure in predominantly Shi'a areas of the country. Since the Iranian revolution, some Shi'a suspected of subversion have been subjected periodically to surveillance and limitations on travel abroad.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Although racial discrimination is illegal, there is substantial societal prejudice based on ethnic or national origin. Foreign workers from Africa and Asia are subject to various forms of formal and informal discrimination and have the most difficulty in obtaining justice for their grievances.

Section 6. Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

Government decrees prohibit the establishment of labor unions and any strike activity.

In 1995 Saudi Arabia was suspended from the U.S. Overseas Private Investment Corporation insurance programs because of the Government's lack of compliance with internationally recognized worker rights standards.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

Collective bargaining is forbidden. Foreign workers comprise about half of the work force. There is no minimum wage; wages are set by employers and vary according to the type of work performed and the nationality of the worker.

There are no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

Forced labor is prohibited by a 1952 royal decree that abolished slavery. Ratification of the International Labor Organization (ILO) Conventions 29 and 105, which prohibit forced labor, gives them the force of law. However, employers have significant control over the movements of foreign employees, giving rise to situations that might involve forced labor, especially in remote areas where workers are unable to leave their place of work.

Sometimes sponsors prevent foreign workers from obtaining exit visas to pressure them to sign a new work contract or to drop claims against their employers for unpaid salary (see Section 2.d.). In another pressure tactic, sponsors may refuse to provide foreign workers with a "letter of no objection" that would allow them to be employed by another sponsor.

The labor laws do not protect domestic servants. There were credible reports that female domestic servants were sometimes forced to work 12 to 16 hours a day, 7 days a week. There were numerous confirmed reports of runaway maids (see Section 5). The authorities often returned runaway maids to their employers against the maids' wishes.

There have been many reports of workers whose employers have refused to pay several months, or even years, of accumulated salary or other promised benefits. Nondomestic workers with such grievances have the right to complain before the labor courts, but few do so because of fear of deportation. The labor system abets the exploitation of foreign workers because enforcement of work contracts is difficult and generally favors Saudi employers. Labor cases can take many months to reach a final appellate ruling, during which time the employer can prevent the foreign laborer from leaving the country; alternatively, an employer can delay a case until a worker's funds are exhausted and the worker is forced to return to his home country.

d. Minimum Age for Employment of Children

The minimum age for employment is 13 years of age, which may be waived by the Ministry of Labor with the consent of the juvenile's guardian. There is no minimum age for workers employed in family oriented businesses or in other situations that are construed as extensions of the household, e.g., farmers, herdsman, and domestic servants.

Children under the age of 18 and women may not be employed in hazardous or harmful industries, such as mining or industries employing power-operated machinery. While there is no formal government entity charged with enforcing the minimum age for employment of children, the Ministry of Justice has jurisdiction and has acted as plaintiff in the few cases that have arisen against alleged violators. In general, however, children play a minimal role in the work force.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

There is no legal minimum wage. Labor regulations establish a 48-hour workweek at regular pay and allow employers to require up to 12 additional hours of overtime at time-and-a-half pay. Labor law provides for a 24-hour rest period, normally Fridays, although the employer may grant it on another day.

Many foreign nationals who have been recruited abroad have complained that after arrival in Saudi Arabia they were presented with work contracts specifying lower wages and fewer benefits than originally promised. Other foreign workers have reportedly signed contracts in their home countries and were later pressured to sign less favorable contracts upon arrival. Some employees report that at the end

of their contract service, their employers refuse to grant permission to allow them to return home.

The ILO has stated that the Government has not formulated legislation implementing the ILO Convention on Equal Pay and that regulations that segregate work places by sex, and limit vocational programs for women, violate ILO Convention 111.

Labor regulations require employers to protect most workers from job-related hazards and disease. Foreign nationals report frequent failures to enforce health and safety standards. Workers in family operated businesses, farmers, herdsman, and domestic servants are not covered by these regulations. Workers would risk their employment if they were to remove themselves from hazardous work conditions.

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