



Saudi Arabia

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2009

October 26, 2009

Freedom of religion is neither recognized nor protected under the law and is severely restricted in practice. The country is a monarchy and the King is head of both state and Government. The legal system is based on the Government's official application of Islamic laws. Sunni Islam is the official religion.

As a matter of policy, the Government guarantees and protects the right to private worship for all, including non-Muslims who gather in homes for religious services. This right was not always respected in practice and is not defined in law. Moreover, the public practice of non-Muslim religions is prohibited, and the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) continued to conduct raids on private non-Muslim religious gatherings. Although the Government also confirmed its stated policy to protect the right to possess and use personal religious materials, it did not provide for this right in law, and the CPVPV sometimes confiscated the personal religious materials of non-Muslims.

Although overall government policies continued to place severe restrictions on religious freedom, there were incremental improvements in specific areas during the reporting period, including better protection of the right to possess and use religious materials; increased scrutiny of and training for the CPVPV; somewhat greater authority and capacity for official human rights entities to operate; limited education reform; and selective measures to combat extremist ideology, including close government scrutiny of Friday sermons, and encouraging leading clerics to preach tolerance in their sermons. The King launched an Inter-Faith Dialogue Initiative (IDI) to bring leaders and followers of various faiths together for discourse and to intensify a national dialogue to promote tolerance and moderation.

The U.N. General Assembly endorsed the IDI in a special session on religious tolerance in November 2008. Although the IDI has not brought about any changes to the country's law, the King's speech at the U.N. session, which endorsed the concept of tolerance and respect for different religions, received extensive coverage in national media. Several educational institutions and private groups, including the National Center for Dialogue, held interfaith and national dialogue events throughout the year, including in public schools, indicating a greater willingness in the country to discuss religious tolerance.

The King's official title is "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques," reflecting the importance the royal family attaches to upholding Islam within the country as a central pillar of the royal family's legitimacy, both domestically and within the global Muslim community. The deep connection between the royal family and the religious establishment results in significant pressure on the state and society to adhere to the official Saudi interpretation of Islam and conservative societal norms. Most citizens accept the idea that their lives should be governed by Shari'a; the debate is not about whether citizens should become more or less religious but about which interpretation of Islamic laws and traditions should guide their society. Notwithstanding the pressure for orthodoxy, there are varying views among the citizenry on what should constitute Shari'a and how it should be implemented.

Despite the diversity of individual views, the Government continued to enforce its official interpretation of Sunni Islam. Some Muslims who 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. The largest group affected was the Shi'a. Non-Muslims, most of whom are citizens of other countries, also face significant restrictions on the practice of their faith. There were fewer charges of harassment and abuse at the hands of the CPVPV, but incidents of CPVPV excesses continued to cause many non-Muslims to worship in secret, for fear of the police and CPVPV. Textbooks continued to contain some overtly intolerant statements against Jews and Christians and subtly intolerant statements against Shi'a and other religious groups, notwithstanding Government efforts to review educational materials to remove or revise such statements. The Government continued to screen and monitor prospective and current teachers who espoused extremist religious views; however, there were reports of teachers who, in defiance of government policy, promoted intolerant views in the classroom and did not face disciplinary measures. The Government also continued to screen and monitor government-paid clerics in mosques throughout the country, although some public officials and clerics made discriminatory and intolerant statements.

Senior U.S. officials discussed a number of key policies concerning religious practice and tolerance with the Government, as well as specific cases involving infringement of the right to religious freedom. On January 16, 2009, the Secretary of State re-designated the country as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC).

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 1,225,000 square miles and a population of more than 28.5 million, of whom approximately 22 million are citizens. There is no accurate figure for the number of foreign residents. The Government estimates the foreign population at approximately 6.5 million. Figures from other embassies indicate the foreign population in the country, including many undocumented migrants, is more than 10 million. Estimates provided by other countries' embassies include 1.8 million Indians, 1.5 million Bangladeshis, 1.4 million Filipinos, 1.23 million Pakistanis, 1 million Egyptians, 600,000 Indonesians, 600,000 Yemenis, 400,000 Syrians, 400,000 Sri Lankans, 350,000 Nepalese, 250,000 Palestinians, 150,000 Lebanese, 100,000 Eritreans, and 50,000 Americans.

Accurate religious demographics are difficult to obtain. Approximately 85 to 90 percent of citizens are Sunni Muslims, who predominantly subscribe to the Hanbali School of Islamic jurisprudence. A number of Sunni citizens also subscribe to the other Sunni schools of jurisprudence (the Hanafi, Maliki, and Shafi'i schools).

Although estimates of the Shi'a population range from 5 to 20 percent, more reliable statistics put the figure at 10 to 15 percent. Approximately 80 percent of Shi'a are "Twelvers" (followers of Muhammad ibn Hasan, who they recognize as the Twelfth Imam) and are primarily located in the Eastern Province. Approximately 20 percent of the Shi'a population are Sulaimaniya Isma'ilis, also known as "Seveners" (followers of Isma'il ibn Jafar, who they recognize as the Seventh Imam), and they reside primarily in Najran Province, around the residence of their sect's spiritual leader in Al Mansourah. In the western Hejaz region, there are approximately 100,000 Ashraf (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad) and 150,000 Nakhawala.

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

Although exact figures from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowment, Call, and Guidance (MOIA) were not available, MOIA is responsible for 73,000 Sunni mosques and more than 50,000 Sunni clerics around the country. The two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina do not come under MOIA jurisdiction. They are the responsibility the

General Presidency for the Affairs of the Two Holy Shrines, which reports directly to the King; its head holds a rank equivalent to a government minister. Thousands of other mosques exist in private homes, at rest stops along highways, and elsewhere throughout the country. No public non-Muslim houses of worship exist, but private Christian religious gatherings take place throughout the country.

In December 2008 the country hosted approximately 2.5 million Muslim pilgrims from around the world and representing all branches of Islam for the annual Hajj. Muslim pilgrims visit the country year-round to perform the Umrah, or lesser pilgrimage in Mecca, and to visit holy sites there and in Medina.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

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

The Government considers its legitimacy to rest in part on its custodianship of the two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina and its promotion of Islam. The official interpretation of Islam is derived from the writings and teachings of 18th-century Sunni religious scholar Muhammad ibn Abd' Al-Wahhab. Ibn Abd' Al-Wahhab's stance was originally a reaction to a number of popular practices of his time that he believed represented a regression to pre-Islamic polytheism. He taught that the Muslims of his day had become apostates, and that Allah was punishing them by allowing outsiders to colonize Arabia. He urged Muslims to be stricter in their obedience to Islam and advocated a return to what he considered the practices of the first three centuries of the Muslim era, arguing that every idea added to Islam after this period contradicted Islamic teachings and should be eliminated. The country's religious teaching opposes attempts by the Muslim reform movements of the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries to reinterpret aspects of Islamic law in light of economic and social developments, particularly in areas such as gender relations, personal autonomy, family law, and participatory democracy.

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.

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

The judicial system is based on Islamic laws derived from the Qur'an and the Sunna (traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). The Government recognizes all four Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence and the Shi'a Ja'fari School of jurisprudence; however, since Al-Wahab's teachings were based on the Hanbali School, it is the dominant school of Sunni jurisprudence in the country. Government universities provide training on all the Sunni schools, but focus on the Hanbali School; consequently, most Shari'a judges follow its system of interpretation.

The Majlis al-Shoura (The Consultative Council) is responsible for approving laws and regulations, including those derived from Shari'a. The Consultative Council's 150 males and 12 females are appointed by the King. There are five Shi'a members. According to the Council Charter, the members should be "scholars and men of learning." There are no term limits for the Consultative Council's members; however, every four years the king must replace 50 percent of the Council.

Established in 1971, the Council of Senior Religious Scholars (Ulema) is an advisory body of 21 persons that reports to the King. It is headed by the Grand Mufti and is composed of scholars, Sunni religious jurists, and the Minister of Justice. The Council, supported by a Board of Research and Religious Rulings (Fatwas), is recognized as the supreme authority on religious rulings by The Basic Law (article 45). As such, its opinions (fatwas) form the basis of the legal system. Three members of the Council belong to non-Hanbali schools of Islamic jurisprudence, representing the Maliki, Hanafi, and Shafi'i schools; however, none is Shi'a. Scholars are chosen at the king's discretion, and serve renewable four-year terms.

The Government permits Shi'a judges presiding over courts in the Eastern Province to use the Ja'fari School of Islamic Jurisprudence to adjudicate cases in family law, inheritance, and endowment management. There were only seven Shi'a judges, all located in the Eastern Province cities of Qatif and al-Ahsa, where the majority of Shi'a live. Shi'a living in other parts of the Eastern Province, Najran Province, and the western Hejaz region have no access to local, regional, or national Shi'a courts. Two of the Shi'a judges serve on the Qatif Court and two 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 Government's official interpretation of Islam, the law discriminates against religions held to be polytheistic. Christians and Jews, who are mentioned in the Qur'an 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; all others 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 carry less weight than testimony by Sunnis or be ignored in courts of law, despite official government statements that judges do not discriminate based on religion when they hear testimony. Moreover, courts adhere to the Qur'an teaching that the value of a woman's testimony is only one-half that of a man'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.

Other than the secular National Day on September 23, the Islamic religious feasts of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, each lasting several days, are the only recognized national holidays.

The CPVPV is a semiautonomous agency with the authority to monitor social behavior and enforce morality consistent with the Government's interpretation of Islam primarily, but not exclusively, within the public realm. Founded by King Abdul Aziz in 1926 in the Nejd region, the CPVPV gradually expanded, and in 1991 the General President of the CPVPV ordered the establishment of a branch of the Commission in each of the country's 13 provinces. The CPVPV reports to the King through the Council of Ministers. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) coordinates with, but does not have authority over, the CPVPV. Full-time or volunteer CPVPV field officers are known as mutawwi'in. They do not wear uniforms, but are required to wear identification badges and can only act in their official capacity when accompanied by a regular policeman. The 1980 law defined the CPVPV's mission as "guiding and advising people to observe the religious duties prescribed by Islamic Shari'a, and to preclude committing [acts] proscribed and prohibited [by Shari'a], or adopting bad habits and traditions or taboo [sic] heresies."

The 1980 law does not clearly define the CPVPV's jurisdiction, but the law's Executive Regulations state that the CPVPV is authorized to monitor various practices including public gender mixing and illegal private contact between men and women; practicing or displaying non-Muslim faiths or disrespecting Islam; displaying or selling media contrary to Islam, including pornography; producing, distributing, or consuming alcohol; venerating places or celebrating events inconsistent with approved Islamic practices; practicing sorcery or magic for profit; and committing or facilitating lewdness, including adultery, homosexuality, and gambling.

According to an October 25, 2008, article in the English language daily *Arab News*, the CPVPV has more than 5,000 staff members, including 3,557 CPVPV field officers throughout all 13 provinces. In a February 16, 2008, interview with the English language daily *Saudi Gazette*, the CPVPV President stated that all new staff members served a one-year probationary period before they were allowed to work in the field. A study reported in the November 3, 2007, *Saudi Gazette* stated that 44 percent of CPVPV members were college graduates and 79 percent were high school graduates. Reportedly, 4 percent had traveled abroad, 15 percent spoke only Arabic, and 23 percent were considering a career change.

In 2006 the Government declared that the CPVPV could no longer detain or interrogate suspects or violate the sanctity of private homes. A decree by Interior Minister Prince Nayif bin Abdulaziz Al Saud rolled back the previous year's prohibition on entering private homes but reaffirmed the need for the CPVPV to hand over any suspects to police for detention. Additionally, the CPVPV is not allowed to administer any kind of punishment, as the Commission's role ends with the arrest of the person. The press often criticized CPVPV 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 CPVPV sometimes did not respect this policy. Individuals whose ability to worship privately had been infringed could address their grievances through the MOI, the government's official Human Rights Commission (HRC), the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR, a quasi-autonomous non-governmental organization), and when appropriate, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The HRC and NSHR reported that they received and acted on complaints against the CPVPV. The Government made no information available on the number of complaints filed against the CPVPV during the reporting period or the official response to these complaints.

The Government also stated a policy that religious materials for private personal use are allowed in the country, and customs officials and the CPVPV do not have the authority to confiscate personal religious materials. Furthermore, the Government's stated policy for its diplomatic and consular missions abroad is to inform foreign workers applying for visas that they have the right to worship privately and possess personal religious materials, and to provide the name of the appropriate offices where grievances can be filed. During the reporting period, there was no evidence the Government consistently carried out this policy, either orally or in writing, and there were no reports of any grievances filed by such workers.

The 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. Unlike for Sunni mosques, 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 and khateebis (Friday sermon leaders), 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 from \$500 to \$800 (1,875 to 3,000 riyals). Khateebis who deliver Friday prayers receive an additional monthly stipend of \$425. These stipends are low

compared to other civil service salaries; however, the stipends are considered supplemental, rather than a primary source of personal income. Most clerics have private businesses or full-time government jobs. Shi'a clerics are not funded by the MOIA and instead rely on community contributions, which can vary widely, depending on the number of congregants they serve. Some private mosques employ clerics of other nationalities.

A MOIA committee defines the qualifications of Sunni clerics, and the MOIA is responsible for investigating complaints against clerics for promoting intolerance, violence, or hatred. The Government's policy, although it is not always followed, is to advise clerics in tolerance and moderation, particularly those who issue intolerant fatwas or promote intolerance, violence, or hatred. In 2003 the MOIA created a program to monitor all government-paid clerics. Provincial committees of senior religious scholars supervise full-time MOIA employees who monitor all mosques and clerics. Based on their reports, the committees summon clerics accused of preaching intolerance. If the provincial committees are not able to dissuade these clerics from their thinking, the clerics are referred to a central committee. MOIA officials state that 1,300 clerics were dismissed during the first phase of this program, from 2003 to 2006. The second three-year phase will end in 2009. On March 25, 2009, the Minister for Islamic Affairs told *Okaz Online* that over the five years since the program's inception, 3,200 clerics have been dismissed.

The 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 complaints of human rights violations, including infractions by the CPVPV and detentions and arrests of religious leaders and human rights activists. The HRC also has a mandate to improve human rights awareness in the country, including the promotion of tolerance. In this endeavor, the HRC worked with the Ministry of Education and provided materials and training to police, security forces, and the CPVPV on protecting human rights. The King issued a decree that ministries must respond to complaints filed by the HRC within three weeks.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Public religious practice was generally limited to activities that conform to the official interpretation of Islam. Contrary practices, such as celebrating Maulid Al-Nabi (birthday of the Prophet Muhammad) and visits to the tombs of renowned Muslims, are forbidden, although enforcement was more relaxed in some communities than in others. The Government also prohibited the public propagation of Islamic teachings that differ from the official interpretation of Islam.

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

Sunni clerics, who receive government stipends, occasionally used anti-Jewish, anti-Christian, and anti-Shi'a language in their sermons. This language has decreased in frequency since the Government began encouraging moderation following a series of domestic terror attacks in 2003, but instances continued in which mosque speakers prayed for the death of Jews and Christians, including at the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. The MOIA dismissed some clerics for espousing intolerant ideas, but other clerics who said such things were allowed to continue. It was common for preachers in mosques, including the mosques of Mecca and Medina, to end Friday sermons with a prayer for the well-being of Muslims and for the humiliation of polytheism and polytheists.

The Government restricted the establishment of places of worship and public training of non-Sunni clergy. The Government officially did not permit non-Muslim clergy to enter the country to conduct religious services, although some did so under other auspices, and the Government generally allowed them to perform discreet religious functions. Such restrictions made it difficult for 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 noncitizen legal residents to carry an identity card containing a religious designation for "Muslim" or "non-Muslim." There were unconfirmed reports that some CPVPV members pressured sponsors and employers not to renew the residency cards of non-Muslims they had sponsored for employment if it was discovered or suspected that those individuals had led, sponsored, or participated in private non-Muslim worship services. Similarly, there were reports that CPVPV members pressured employers and sponsors to reach verbal agreements with non-Muslim employees that they would not participate in private non-Muslim worship services.

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

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 with a population that is at least 50 percent Shi'a. At the primary and secondary levels of education in al-Ahsa, there continued to be severe underrepresentation of Shi'a among school principals, with approximately 1 percent of area principals Shi'a, and none in al-Ahsa female schools. In Qatif, where Shi'a comprise approximately 90 percent of the population, many male principals and even some male religious teachers in primary schools were Shi'a; however, there were no Shi'a principals or religious teachers in Qatif's public female primary schools. There are no private schools for girls in Qatif, and the Ministry of Education did not grant requests to open such schools.

There were reports that Shi'a students experienced intolerance 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. Other teachers told their students that Shi'a were not Muslims, but rather unbelievers, rejectionists, infidels, or polytheists. Despite stated government policy to the contrary, these teachers were not reprimanded, although in some cases they were transferred to other schools. In addition, there were reports that some public schools routinely punished Shi'a students academically for absence during Shi'a holidays the Government does not recognize, and there continued to be reports of prejudicial questions on exams.

Regardless of their personal religious traditions, public school students at all levels receive a mandatory religious instruction based on the Government's interpretation of Islam. Students in private international schools were not required to study Islam. Muslim students of other nationalities must obtain a waiver from the MOE to attend private international schools, but obtaining the waiver is rarely a problem. Private religious schools not based on the official interpretation of Islam were not permitted. Despite some government revisions to elementary and secondary education textbooks, they retained language intolerant of other religious traditions, especially Jewish, Christian, and Shi'a beliefs. At the end of the reporting period, the Government's review of intolerant language in government textbooks was incomplete.

Shi'a faced considerable employment discrimination in the public and private sector. A very small number of Shi'a occupied high-level positions in government-owned companies and government agencies. Many Shi'a believed that

openly identifying themselves as Shi'a would have a negative impact on career advancement. There was no formal policy concerning the hiring and promotion of Shi'a, but anecdotal evidence suggested that in some companies, including the oil and petrochemical industries, a "glass ceiling" existed and well-qualified Shi'a were passed over for less qualified Sunni colleagues. In the public sector, Shi'a were significantly underrepresented in national security-related positions, including the Ministry of Defense and Aviation, the National Guard, and the MOI. Shi'a were better represented in the ranks of traffic police, municipalities, and public schools in predominantly Shi'a areas. Qatif community leaders described allegedly prejudicial zoning laws that prevent construction of buildings over a certain height in various Shi'a neighborhoods. The leaders claimed the laws prevented investment and development in these areas and aimed to limit the density of Shi'a population in any given area.

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 to 15 percent of the citizen population and approximately one-third to one-half of the Eastern Province population, they were underrepresented in senior government positions. There were no Shi'a ministers, deputy ministers, governors, deputy governors, or ministry branch directors in the Eastern Province, and only three of the 59 government-appointed municipal council members were Shi'a. However, the Shi'a were well-represented among the elected members of the municipal councils, as they held 10 of 11 seats on the Qatif and al-Ahsa councils. An elected Shi'a headed the Qatif municipal council. On February 14, 2009, the King appointed 81 new members to the Consultative Council. Although the number of Shi'a members was increased from three to five, their overall proportional representation on the Council remains approximately 3 percent.

Judicial discrimination against Shi'a was evident during the reporting period. Shi'a courts' powers are limited by the fact that any litigant who disagrees with a ruling can seek a new decision from a Sunni court. Sunni court rulings can void Shi'a court rulings and government departments can choose not to implement judgments rendered by Shi'a judges. Shi'a leaders argue that the one Court of Appeals on which Shi'a judges sit has no real authority and only verifies documents. Jurisdictionally, these courts are only allowed to rule on cases in the Qatif and al-Ahsa areas; Shi'a from other regions cannot use such courts. Due to the Shi'a courts' lack of authority, six of their seven judges threatened to resign in September 2007, but no action was taken by the Government or the judges. On April 13, 2008, the Government unexpectedly replaced Sheikh Mohammad Al-Obaidan, the senior of the two Shi'a court judges in Qatif. Although there was no official reason given for replacing Sheikh Al-Obaidan, he had been critical of the Government for giving only limited resources and authority to the Ja'fari courts. The perceived arbitrary nature of this action caused an outcry in the Shi'a community.

Many Shi'a were also subjected to systematic 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 provincial government, which is functionally part of the MOI. Constructing Sunni mosques did not require approval from the Government. The Government approved construction of new Shi'a mosques in Qatif and some areas of al-Ahsa, sometimes after lengthy delays due to the numerous approvals required, but did not approve construction of Shi'a mosques in Dammam, home to many Shi'a. Shi'a leaders attributed the refusals to a government desire to discourage the growth of Shi'a populations in these communities. In addition, on May 22, 2008, *Al-Rasid*, a privately owned Shi'a website, reported that al-Ahsa municipal authorities halted construction of the Imam Rida mosque, the largest Shi'a mosque in al-Ahsa, on orders of the local government, due to building code violations; no further explanation was provided.

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

that the closures were due to improper zoning and lack of appropriate permits.

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

The Government does not officially recognize several centers of Shi'a religious instruction located in Eastern Province, provide financial support to them, recognize certificates of educational attainment for their graduates, or provide employment for their graduates, all of which it does for Sunni religious training institutions. These centers were also subject to forced closures without explanation. Authorities closed a women's center on Tarut Island in the Qatif area in early June 2008. Public religious training for non-Sunni religious groups is prohibited.

The Government refused to approve construction or registration of Shi'a community centers. Shi'a were forced to build areas in private homes to serve as community centers. These community centers sometimes did not meet safety codes, and the lack of legal recognition made their long-term financing and continuity considerably more difficult.

While 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, authorities continued to restrict Shi'a religious activities. 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 Shi'a community centers, and, in some instances, gatherings within those centers.

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

The Medina Shi'a are a small, deeply rooted community of diverse believers including the Nakhawala, who are laborers by tradition. Nakhawala community leaders claim they face more issues than Shi'a Twelvers in the Eastern Province because they are not allowed to construct mosques, women's centers, or community centers, nor do they have access to Shi'a courts. They also claim to hear anti-Shi'a sermons and statements regularly in their neighborhoods. Unlike in the Eastern Province, there are no prominent Nakhawala Shi'a in government bodies such as the Consultative Council or the Human Rights Commission. In addition, the Nakhawala aver that their surname ("al Nakhly," which roughly translates as "farmers" and identifies their minority status and sect) facilitates systematic discrimination against them in employment and education.

The Sulaimaniya Isma'ili community continued to face obstacles in Najran Province. Community leaders asserted that the Government discriminated against them by prohibiting 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. Relations between the Isma'ilis and the Government improved markedly, however, since the King appointed a new provincial governor in Najran in February 2009.

Since the Government's interpretation of Islam holds that veneration of humans, including the Prophet Muhammad,

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

The CPVPV continued to launch public outreach campaigns targeting the "dangers of sorcery and witchcraft." In December 2008 the CPVPV prepared an exhibition in Jizan Province aimed at primary and secondary school students. The exhibit includes writings, herbs, and insects used in practices the CPVPV consider un-Islamic. In May 2009, the CPVPV announced it had approved a new national strategy for combating sorcery in the Kingdom.

The CPVPV continued to monitor Valentine's Day, New Year celebrations, and even the Janadriya Heritage Festival, the government-sanctioned celebration of culture and traditions. Media reported that, as in years past, the CPVPV warned shopkeepers not to sell Valentine's Day or New Year items.

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. Non-Muslim groups in different parts of the country were detained and harassed for worshipping privately. Harassment of Shi'a during religious worship and communal gatherings continued. 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 intolerant views. For example, a sheikh who was named to lead extra Ramadan prayers at the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 2008, a prestigious appointment, classified Shi'a clerics as "infidels" in two separate interviews with the BBC in May and June of 2009. This sheikh also opined that Shi'a clerics are not entitled to join the Council of Senior Religious Scholars, the highest religious body in the country.

Although the Government's stated policy is that persons are free to practice their faith in private, the Government continued to prohibit public, non-Muslim religious activities, and non-Sunni activities in dominantly Sunni areas. Many of the reported abuses were difficult to corroborate, however, because of witnesses' or victims' fears that disclosing such information might harm themselves or others. Moreover, information regarding government practices was generally incomplete because judicial proceedings usually were closed to the public, despite provisions in the 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 police or the CPVPV.

CPVPV members, when accompanied by police officers, have the authority to confront individuals who violate social standards, but the Government also requires CPVPV members to follow established procedures and to offer instruction in a polite manner. Individual CPVPV members often failed to comply with these requirements. The CPVPV harassed women, especially foreign Muslim women, for failure to observe strict dress codes, particularly failure to wear headscarves. Moreover, some provincial authorities in the provinces of Mecca and al-Jawf took a more active role in encouraging the CPVPV to enforce traditional standards of appearance on younger citizens.

Due to a number of high-profile CPVPV cases, the reporting period saw increased public discussion of the nature of khulwa, a private get-together of an unrelated man and woman, versus ikhtilat, or public mixing of men and women. Shari'a prohibits khulwa, but public mixing is not illegal, although Saudi social standards discourage it. Since there were no defined rules for what constitutes these activities, CPVPV members were free to impose their individual interpretations on situations they encountered. Some CPVPV members incorrectly accused couples interacting in public of khulwa, often leading to harassment or more serious consequences, although the number of

such incidents was fewer than in previous reporting periods.

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

On May 24, 2009, police in Khobar arrested Hajj Abdullah Saleh Al-Muhanna, a Shi'a, for leading prayer services in his home. Over the previous year, authorities had carried out a campaign of harassment against Al-Muhanna. Without facing trial, al-Muhanna was released from prison on June 30, 2009.

On May 18, 2009, Rasid.com, a Shiite blog, reported the arrest of prominent religious figure Sheikh Ali Hussein Al-Amar for collecting money and spending it on hussainyat (Shi'a places of worship). Sources indicated that the arrest was a direct order by Al-Isha Governor Bader bin Jalawi.

On March 28, 2009, Hamoud Saleh Al-Amri was released from prison on the condition that he not travel outside the country or appear in the media. On January 13, 2009, Al-Amri was arrested for discussing his Christian faith on his blog. The case received international attention and advocacy groups such as the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) campaigned for Al-Amri's release. The country's penalty for apostasy is death, although in recent years there have been no known cases of citizens or non-citizen Muslims convicted and sentenced to capital punishment for the offense. This was the third time Hamoud had been detained; he was held for nine months in 2004 and for one month in 2008.

On March 24, 2009, CPVPV members in Mecca attempted to question a woman who was in a car with an unrelated male. The woman fled into a women's job training center, supposedly off limits to males. However, the CPVPV members entered the facility and eyewitnesses reportedly saw them "dragging a woman by her hair down the stairs of the building." Eyewitnesses filed complaints, as men are not allowed to enter all-female facilities; the CPVPV stated later they were investigating the incident, but issued no public report by the end of the reporting period.

On March 13, 2009, a Shi'a cleric from Awamiya Village in Qatif gave a controversial sermon wherein he raised the possibility of a separate Shi'a state. Following this sermon, the cleric reportedly went into hiding to avoid arrest. On March 19, 2009, several hundred Shi'a conducted a sit-in protest in Awamiya in support of the cleric; reports indicated more than a dozen Shi'a were arrested. At the end of the reporting period, some of those detained were still in custody.

On February 20, 2009, a group of Shi'a trying to visit the Baqi'a cemetery in Medina clashed with police and the CPVPV. Licensed media outlets in the country did not report on this incident; however, the international press and blogs in the country widely covered the sectarian tension that followed. Several religious and political leaders from the Shi'a community wrote open letters to the King calling for the release of Shi'a youth who had been detained as a result of the Baqi'a incident. Eventually, a delegation of Shi'a from Qatif, al-Ahsa, and Medina met with the King, after which the King announced the immediate release of all detainees.

On January 29, 2009, Sabri Bogday, a Turkish barber, returned to Turkey after the King pardoned him. On March 31, 2008, Bogday was sentenced to death after two men reported to authorities that he blasphemed God and the Prophet Muhammad in his barber shop. On May 1, 2008, an appellate court upheld his conviction of blasphemy, necessitating the pardon.

On January 28, 2009, Yemane Gebriel, an Eritrean pastor, fled the country to an undisclosed location after multiple threats from the CPVPV. Gebriel had led a church of more than 300 foreign-born Christians for the past 10 years. In 2005, Gebriel was arrested and released a few weeks later due to diplomatic efforts on his behalf.

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

On November 8, 2008, *Shams Daily* reported that the CPVPV in the Eastern Province denied Internet reports that it had forcibly arrested blogger and poet Rushide Al-Dowsary for promoting witchcraft and sorcery.

In October 2008 police issued deportation orders to the sponsors of a group of 14 Indian Christians living in Makkah Province. On April 25, 2008, the same group of Christians had been imprisoned for 24 hours. Following this incident, officials made three separate attempts to deport them, including the October 2008 orders, and each time higher authorities intervened to rescind the orders on their behalf. No further harassment was reported after the October 2008 deportation orders were rescinded.

On August 23, 2008, Rasid.com reported that authorities arrested Shiite religious figure and reformer Sheikh Nemer Baqer Al-Nemer after a series of declarations in which he demanded religious freedom reforms. He was released from prison less than 24 hours after his arrest. The website Al-Sahat stated a royal order secured his release.

On August 12, 2008, Okhdood.com and Gulfnews.com reported that a member of the CPVPV in the Eastern Province murdered his sister after confirming she had converted to Christianity. She had reportedly revealed the story of her conversion on a website posting. The story was picked up and widely reported by other Internet news outlets, some of which provided additional detail, including that she wrote about her family's hostility toward her after heated discussions about her new faith. There was one report that government authorities detained the killer and were investigating this as an honor killing. At the end of the reporting period, no further information was available.

Sulaimaniya Isma'ili activist Ahmad Turki al-Saab remained in detention at the end of the reporting period. Al-Saab had organized a petition campaign demanding the removal from office of Najran's governor for alleged discrimination against the minority Shi'a community. On April 26, 2008, he presented the petition personally to the King; al-Saab was subsequently summoned from Najran Province to the capital and detained on May 13, 2008.

On April 26, 2008, prominent Isma'ili activists presented a petition to the King calling for the release of 17 Sulaimaniya Isma'ili Shi'a jailed after riots in Najran Province in 2000 who remained imprisoned at the end of the reporting period. There was no official response. 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.

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

harassment from the local authorities.

On February 13, 2008, Human Rights Watch (HRW) issued a public letter to the King requesting that he halt the execution of Fawza Falih Muhammad Ali for witchcraft. Arrested by CPVPV in May 2005, she was sentenced to death in April 2006 for allegedly bewitching a man in Quraiyat. There was reportedly weak evidence and the court procedures were highly irregular. In September 2006 an appeals court reversed the trial court's ruling due to insufficient evidence and remanded the case to the trial court. According to HRW, the trial court reinstated the death sentence against her on a "discretionary" basis in the "public interest" to "protect the creed, souls, and property of this country." Her case was transferred to the Royal Court in January 2008. At the end of the reporting period, she remained imprisoned.

On February 9, 2008, Human Rights First, an independent, unlicensed non-governmental organization (NGO), published a petition with 115 signatures asking the King to free Sulaimaniya Isma'ili Shi'a Hadi Al-Mutif, who has been in prison for more than 16 years under a death sentence for "insulting the Prophet Muhammad." Reportedly the sentence has been commuted to life imprisonment, but Al-Mutif's advocates are seeking a royal pardon. The King has refused to intervene due to the claim that Al-Mutif's alleged offense was a hadd crime, referring to a crime whose explanation and punishment are explicitly described in the Qur'an and thus not subject to civil authority. If the sentence were to be rescinded and re-issued under ta'azir (punishment determined by a judge), the King could pardon him. NGOs reported that Al-Mutif has been in solitary confinement for more than a year, reportedly in response to two suicide attempts, and the Government has moved him to a second prison. When his father died in April 2007, he was not allowed to attend the funeral. The Supreme Judicial Council decided not to take up Al-Mutif's case. At the end of the reporting period, the HRC had taken up his case, although Al-Mutif remained in prison.

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

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

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

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. No additional information was available at the end of the reporting period.

On May 23, 2007, Salman Al-Huraisi, a security guard, died in a CPVPV office in Riyadh. According to his father and brother, at least 18 CPVPV members 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 at the hands of the CPVPV. Two CPVPV 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.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

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. It announced additional policies that, if carried out, would continue progress. Moreover, the King and other government and religious leaders called for interfaith dialogue and national dialogue to promote 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 CPVPV, increased media coverage and criticism of the CPVPV, somewhat greater authority and capacity for official human rights entities to operate, and measures to combat extremist ideology.

In addition to the King's Interfaith Dialogue Initiative, the King continued his national dialogue campaign to increase tolerance and encourage moderation and understanding. The King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue had more than 1,200 certified trainers who conducted 2,677 training programs and workshops on "the culture and importance of open dialogue and communication skills" for more than 150,000 men and women. During the reporting period, a mix of high-level government and religious officials openly supported this campaign. They advocated against religious extremism and intolerant language, especially in mosques and schools.

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

Public discussions and challenges to the role of the CPVPV in monitoring social interactions under their religious mandate increased in number and intensity, especially among younger citizens, given that 70 percent of the population is under age 30. In particular, some younger females continued to demonstrate eagerness to expand restrictive social and legal boundaries.

The CPVPV devised additional training sessions and courses for its employees on the laws and procedures applying to their "field work," and on ways of dealing with and advising the public. These university-level courses were held at institutions such as the King Fahd Security College, the Diplomatic Institute, and Om al-Qura University in Makkah. More than 3,100 CPVPV members attended training programs, a 48percent increase over the previous reporting period.

In February 2007 the Government authorized \$2.4 billion dollars (nine billion riyals) to support a six-year implementation of a pilot program in educational modernization. One of the chief goals of the program is to supplement traditional religious instruction with more "knowledge-based" subject matter such as science and computer literacy. At the end of the reporting period, more than 83 school districts in more than 27 different regions and provinces were participating in the project, which included highly structured retraining of teachers on the new curriculum. The new Minister of Education publicly and privately supported rapid implementation of the program. Additionally, the Ministry of Education (MOE) signed a five-year collaboration agreement with the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue to promote religious and cultural tolerance in the classroom through teacher training programs and seminars.

Although a comprehensive review of the country's textbooks was incomplete at the end of the reporting period, the Government continued to address and remove intolerant and extreme language while promoting tolerance and interfaith and intercultural understanding in textbooks. The Government mandated that certain references to controversial terms such as jihad and "emancipation from non-Muslims" be removed from textbooks. Instead, verses stating that "Muslims should not force others to embrace Islam" and "There is no compulsion in religion" were placed in textbooks. In addition, MOE officials continued to monitor teachers for intolerant and extreme language.

Unprecedented media criticism of government educational materials took place during the reporting period. On November 25, 2008, *Al-Hayat* ran a full-page interview with a King Abdulaziz University professor who strongly criticized religious textbooks. On February 17, 2009, Mohamed Abdul Latif Al-Shaikh, a writer for *Al-Jazeera*, criticized the education system. He called for reforms of the history, religion, and Arabic literature curricula, and criticized incompetent teachers.

The NSHR continued to receive and respond to complaints concerning transgressions by CPVPV members. On April 3, 2009, *Al-Madinah Arabic Daily* reported that the new president of the CPVPV, Abdul Aziz Al-Humain, fired three of his officials for violating regulations. At the end of the reporting period NSHR was developing a new human rights curriculum for schools, investigating other Arab countries' experiences in promoting respect for human rights, and advising the Government on how to introduce in school curricula concepts of human rights and a culture of respect for others. The NSHR continued to call for modification of the CPVPV's authority.

The MOIA continued to monitor education materials used at religious summer camps, to prevent teaching of extremist ideologies to children. In 2008 Prince Khalid Al Faisal, the Governor of Mecca Region, cancelled all religious summer camps in Jeddah and Mecca after determining they were spreading intolerant ideas to school children.

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

On June 6, 2009, local papers reported that the Council of Senior Religious Scholars issued a fatwa permitting non-Muslims to be buried alongside Muslims. The fatwa resulted from a 2007 gas pipeline fire at al-Hawiya that killed 34 persons of Asian nationalities and a number of citizens. Most of the victims could not be identified as Muslim or non-Muslim for burial. It was not clear whether this fatwa applied only to this particular case, or whether it provided a wider precedent.

On February 14, 2009, the King dismissed two powerful religious officials, the head of the CPVPV, Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Ghaith, and the country's most senior judge, Sheikh Salih Ibn Al-Luhaydan. Sheikh Al-Luhaydan caused

controversy in September 2008 when he stated it was permissible to kill owners of satellite TV channels that broadcast immoral programs.

On the same day, the King removed the governor of Najran, Prince Mishal bin Saud Al-Saud, after years of troubled relations with the Isma'ili community, and appointed his own son, Prince Mishal bin Abdullah, as the new governor of Najran. Governor Mishal reached out to improve relations with the Isma'ili community. He distributed 460 square miles of land to the Najranis as a "personal gift of his Majesty."

On July 23, 2008, Princess Al Johara bint Fahd, President of Riyadh University for Girls, announced a six-week summer training program for female students in English, marketing, communications, and computer programming, thus providing new options to religious camps. The four-year program plans to train more than 40,000 female students.

On November 6, 2007, local and international papers reported on the meeting between the King and Pope Benedict XVI in Rome, discussing interfaith dialogue, tolerance, and denouncing terrorism. This was the first meeting of a Saudi king with the Pope and it was reportedly set up at the request of the Saudis. On March 22, 2008, BBC News reported that Archbishop Paul Mouned Al-Hachem, a senior Middle East representative of the Pope, said the Vatican was holding talks with the Government on building churches in the Kingdom. Al-Hachem said discussions began a few weeks earlier. At the end of the reporting period there were no plans in place to build any churches inside the Kingdom.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Discrimination based on religion was a factor in mistreatment of foreign workers by citizen employers and coworkers. There were reports that some employers withheld pay or residency card renewal based on religious factors.

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

On May 3, 2008, the Al-Toomar website reported that Amin Al-Bedawy, a Shi'a lawyer, filed a lawsuit in a Dubai court against the Al-Sahat website 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.

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. 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. Other 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 toward all religions. 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 in these matters. U.S officials also raised specific cases and instances of religious freedom violations with senior government officials.

Senior U.S. officials called on the Government to enforce its public commitment to allow private religious practice and to respect the rights of Muslims who do not follow the Government's official form of Sunni Islam. In addition, embassy officers met with Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials to discuss other matters pertaining to religious freedom. An official from the U.S. Department of State's Office of International Religious Freedom visited Jeddah, Riyadh, and Dhahran to promote U.S. views on religious freedom.

In January 2009 the U.S. Secretary of State re-designated Saudi Arabia as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for violations of religious freedom. In connection with this designation, the Secretary issued a waiver of sanctions "to further the purposes of the Act."