



## U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

### Kuwait

#### International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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

The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government placed some limits on this right. The constitution also provides that the state shall protect the freedom to practice religion in accordance with established customs, provided that it does not conflict with public policy or morals. The constitution declares that Islam is the state religion and that Shari'a (Islamic law) is a main source of legislation.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period. Government officials met with various religious groups in the country and hosted a conference to promote religious tolerance. The Government made efforts to promote moderation through the formation of a special committee on strengthening moderation through information campaigns in schools and training sessions for religious leaders. The new emir sponsored an international conference in London on moderation in Islam and pledged to sponsor two more conferences in the coming year, one in the United States and one in Russia.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. Tensions came to the surface during the reporting year as a result of an attack on a Shi'a mosque and requests made by minority religious groups to build or gain recognition for religious-based institutions.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The embassy hosted events designed to bring different religious groups together, sent religious leaders to the United States on professional exchange programs, and promoted a dialogue between U.S. military chaplains and local imams.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 6,880 square miles, and its population is approximately 2.9 million, of which 973,000 are citizens. The remaining residents are foreign workers and their families. More than 100,000 Bidoon (stateless) Arabs, with residence ties to the country, either have no documentation, or are unwilling to disclose their nationality. The national census did not distinguish between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. Estimates suggested that approximately 70 percent of citizens, including the ruling family, belonged to the Sunni branch of Islam. Most of the remaining 30 percent were Shi'a Muslims. These estimates came from voting, which often occurs along sectarian lines, and personal status documents. There are approximately 150 to 200 Christian citizens, and a small number of Bahai citizens. Some 100,000 of the noncitizen residents are Shi'a. Some areas had relatively high concentrations of Sunnis or Shi'a; for instance, Jahra province had a small Shi'a population compared to Sunnis. For the most part, however, the country was fairly integrated religiously.

The primarily expatriate Christian population is estimated to be more than 300,000, with alternate estimates at more than 400,000. The Christian community included: the Anglican (Episcopalian) Church with approximately 100 members (several thousand other Christians also used the Anglican Church for worship services); Armenian Orthodox Church with approximately 4,000 members; Coptic Orthodox Church with at least 65,000 members; Greek Catholic (Melkite) Church with approximately 1,000 to 2,000 members (Greek Catholics worship in a rented house, not at the Catholic cathedral in Kuwait City); Greek Orthodox Church (referred to in Arabic as the Roman Orthodox Church, a reference to the Eastern Roman Empire of Byzantium) with an estimated 3,500 members; National Evangelical (Protestant) Church with more than seventy congregations serving approximately 40,000; and the Roman Catholic Church, with two official churches and a third worship facility in a rented house, with an estimated 250,000 members (Latin, Maronite, Coptic Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Malabar, and Malankara congregations all worshipped at the Catholic cathedral in Kuwait City).

There were many other unrecognized Christian sub-groups, totaling tens of thousands of members. These included: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Indian Orthodox Syrian Church, Mar Thoma, and Seventh-day Adventists.

There are also communities of Baha'is (estimated 400 adherents), Buddhists (estimated 100,000), Hindus (estimated 300,000), and Sikhs (approximately 10,000 to 20,000).

Missionary groups in the country served non-Muslim congregations. The Government prohibits non-Muslims from proselytizing to Muslims.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government placed some limits on this right. The constitution also provides that the state shall protect the freedom to practice religion in accordance with established customs, provided that it does not conflict with

public policy or morals. The constitution declares that Islam is the state religion and that Shari'a is a main source of legislation.

The Government exercises direct control of the dominant Sunni strain of Islam. This creates certain advantages and disadvantages for both Sunnis and Shi'a. For example, the Government appoints Sunni imams and monitors their Friday sermons. It also finances the building of Sunni mosques. The Government does not exert this control over Shi'a mosques and Shi'a must fund their own mosques.

The 2006 Press and Publications Law specifically prohibits the publication of any material that attacks religious groups or incites persons to commit crimes, create hatred, or spread dissension among the public. There are laws against blasphemy, apostasy, and proselytizing. These laws sometimes were used to restrict religious freedom.

The Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs has official responsibility for overseeing religious groups. Officially recognized churches must deal with a variety of government entities, including the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor (for visas and residence permits for pastors and other staff) and the Municipality of Kuwait (for building permits and land concerns). While reportedly there was no official government list of recognized churches, seven Christian churches had at least some form of official recognition enabling them to operate openly. These seven churches had open files at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, allowing them to bring in pastors and staff to operate their churches.

Four Christian sub-groups are widely understood to enjoy full recognition by the Government and are allowed to operate compounds officially designated as churches: Anglican, Coptic Orthodox, National Evangelical (Protestant), and Roman Catholic. They faced quotas on the number of clergy and staff they could bring into the country. Some of the churches find the quotas adequate. Others found them insufficient and considered their existing facilities inadequate to serve their respective communities. They faced significant problems in trying to build new facilities.

The Greek Catholic (Melkite) Church had an open file at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor. Greek Catholics worshipped in a rented house (two other Indian Catholic denominations also used the house for worship services).

The Armenian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox churches were allowed to operate openly, hire employees, invite religious speakers, and conduct other such activities without Government interference; however, according to Government records, their facilities were registered only as private homes. They rented facilities from private citizens for worship services and other religious purposes, putting them in a vulnerable position if the owner decides to stop renting to them since it is difficult to find other landlords willing to rent to religious groups. No other churches or religious groups had legal status, but adherents generally were allowed to operate freely in private homes provided that they did not violate laws limiting public assembly or prohibiting proselytizing.

The procedures for registration and licensing of religious groups appear to be connected to those for non governmental organizations (NGOs). In 1993, the Council of Ministers ordered all unlicensed NGOs to cease activities, but this order has never been enforced. There were hundreds of unlicensed, informal NGOs, clubs, and civic groups in the country. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor issued an increasing number of new NGO licenses including sixteen during the reporting year. At the end of the reporting period, there were 163 NGO applications pending with the Ministry. Nonrecognized Christian groups perceived it as impossible to gain official recognition and contented themselves with worshipping in private.

In February 2005 the Government announced it would remove all street-side Islamic charity boxes, due to difficulty monitoring and confirming whether the funds were diverted to uses other than the intended charitable cause; removal was completed in March 2005. All charitable contributions of licensed Islamic charities in the country require Central Bank approval. There is a charitable organizations department within the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor that is responsible for regulating religious charities based in the country, which reviews their applications for registration and monitors their operations.

The Higher Advisory Committee on Completion of the Application of Islamic Shari'a Provisions is tasked with preparing society for the full implementation of Shari'a in all fields. The committee makes recommendations to the emir on ways in which current laws can be brought into better conformity with Shari'a, but it has no authority to enforce such changes. The constitution states Shari'a is a main source of legislation, but some Islamists would like to amend that to the only source of legislation.

The following Islamic holy days are considered national holidays: Islamic New Year, Birth of the Prophet Mohammad, Ascension of the Prophet, Eid al-Fitr, and Eid al-Adha. The workweek in the country is generally Saturday through Wednesday. Most Christians attended church on Fridays and did not cite the inability to go on Sunday as a religious concern. Some workers are able to arrange with their employers to have time on Sunday for worship. Private employers can decide whether to give their non-Muslim employees time off for their holidays.

The Government requires Islamic religious instruction in public schools for all students. The Government also requires Islamic religious instruction and prohibits other religious instruction in private schools that have one or more Muslim students.

In March 2006 the Government, through the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, sponsored a conference entitled "We and the Other," to emphasize Islam's openness to cooperation with persons of other religious groups. It also screened for foreign diplomats a film proposal for a television series on the life of the Prophet Muhammad. In May 2006, it held in London the first of a series of three international conferences on moderation in Islam. Government officials continued to meet with Muslim leaders and the heads of various Christian denominations to promote interfaith understanding. The Government designated a committee specifically designed to strengthen religious moderation, which undertook an education campaign in the schools to encourage respect for the opinions and beliefs of others. As part of the moderation program, the Government planned to open an institute devoted to promoting moderation amongst Muslims and increased understanding of Islam by non-Muslims.

## Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Shi'a are free to worship according to their faith without Government interference, and the overall situation for Shi'a remained stable during the reporting period. An attack on a Shi'a mosque in October 2005 by alleged Sunni extremists caused concern among the Shi'a community, but it proved to be an isolated incident. Members of the Shi'a community have expressed concern over the relative scarcity of Shi'a mosques due to the Government's slow approval of the construction of new mosques and the repair of existing ones. (There were approximately thirty-five Shi'a mosques compared to more than 1,000 Sunni mosques in the country.) Since 2001 the Government has granted licenses for and has approved the construction of six new Shi'a mosques. Three of these mosques were reportedly in the final stages of construction and were scheduled to open in 2006.

There were approximately 650 Shi'a *husseiniyas* (Shi'a gathering places) in the country, most of which are informal or unlicensed. *Husseiniyas* are used for social gatherings, funerals, and for annual religious observances. Generally, the country's *husseiniyas* are privately owned and associated with prominent Shi'a families.

Family law is administered through religious courts. The Government permits Shi'a to follow their own jurisprudence in matters of personal status and family law at the first-instance and appellate levels. In 2003, the Government approved a long-standing Shi'a request to establish a Shi'a court of cassation (Supreme Court) to handle Shi'a personal status and family law cases at the highest judicial level. However, the court has not yet been established because there are no Shi'a (Ja'fari) judges for this level of jurisdiction. In November 2003, the Government publicly announced its approval of another long-standing Shi'a request for the establishment of an independent Shi'a (Ja'fari) Waqf, an agency to administer religious endowments in accordance with the Ja'fari school of jurisprudence. The Shi'a Waqf has been able to carry out its work freely.

Shi'a who aspire to serve as imams are forced to seek appropriate training and education abroad (mainly in Iraq and Iran, and to a lesser degree in Syria), due to the lack of Shi'a jurisprudence courses at Kuwait University's College of Islamic Law (Faculty of Shari'a). The Ministry of Education was reviewing a Shi'a application to establish a private college to train Shi'a clerics. Shi'a leaders have called on the Ministry of Education to remove references from high school Islamic education textbooks declaring Shi'a as nonbelievers. Sunni scholars author the books, which are entirely based on the Sunni interpretation of Islam. A governmental committee was formed to study the issue of removing references that are offensive to Shi'a Islam.

One of the leading Shi'a imams in the country gave a Friday sermon that led members of parliament to demand that he be suspended. The Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs sent the imam a letter telling him to stop preaching. The imam continued preaching without government interference.

Shi'a remained under-represented in upper levels of government. In 2006 four Shi'a were elected to the fifty-member National Assembly, compared with five Shi'a in the previous assembly and six in the assembly before that. A new cabinet was formed in February 2006, after the death of the country's long-serving emir and installation of new government leaders. The new prime minister retained the only Shi'a Minister from the previous cabinet (Dr. Ma'asouma Mubarak, Minister of Planning, and the country's first female minister) and added another Shi'a (Dr. Yousef Al-Zalzal, Minister of Commerce and Industry, who was a member of parliament as well). Another new cabinet, also with two Shi'a members, was formed after the June 2006 parliamentary elections. Dr. Ma'asouma Mubarak became Minister of Communications while Dr. Abdul Hadi Al-Salih took on the position of State Minister for National Assembly Affairs. There were no known Shi'a in the Kuwait State Security (KSS) forces, and they were reportedly under-represented in the National Guard.

In March 2004 the Government permitted Shi'a to stage a public reenactment of the Battle of Karbala depicting the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the Prophet Muhammed's grandson. Television networks, also for the first time, broadcast programs on the Shi'a religious holiday of Ashura. The Government denied a Shi'a request during 2005. In 2006 the Government allowed and provided security for public celebrations, marches, and reenactments during Ashura, without giving official permits.

The Anglican, Armenian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, National Evangelical, and Catholic churches operated freely on their premises and hold worship services without Government interference. Their leaders also state that the Government generally was supportive of their presence, providing police security and traffic control as needed. Other Christian denominations (including Indian Orthodox, Mar Thoma, Mormons, and Seventh-day Adventists) were not recognized legally but were allowed to operate in rented villas, private homes, or the facilities of recognized churches. Members of these congregations reported that they were able to worship without government interference, provided that they did not disturb their neighbors or violate laws regarding assembly and proselytizing. Churches outside of the four recognized denominations are prohibited from displaying exterior signage, including a cross or the congregation's name, or engaging in other public activities, such as ringing bells. Some churches without the financial resources to rent a location were able to gather in schools on the weekends, although representatives from the churches reported that the schools were pressured to stop allowing such gatherings.

In September 2005 there was an announcement that the Government had approved the Melkite Catholics' application for a plot of land to build a new church, although this decision had not been approved by all the relevant governmental institutions. The Melkites applied for the land because they worshiped in a rented villa whose owner wanted to evict them. After repeated delays, however, the Municipal Council rejected the Church's request outright after the period covered by this report. The ostensible reason for the rejection was traffic concerns, but religious opposition to church-building was almost certainly the reason for refusal. The Government has the power to reverse the Municipal Council's decision. In general, churches have found it all but impossible to get permission to build new facilities.

Some church officials reported that domestic workers complained of not being allowed to leave their homes by their employers, thus making it impossible for them to worship with their congregations.

There have been past examples of anti-Semitic rhetoric in government-sponsored education curricula, such as citing Qur'anic verses to denounce the political intentions of the Jewish people, specifically in reference to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Members of religious groups not sanctioned in the Qur'an, such as Bahá'ís, Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs, may not build official places of worship since these religious groups lack legal status, but they are allowed to worship privately in their homes without government interference.

The Sikh community was able to worship freely in private homes. In past years they had used a rented apartment designated for worship, but the building was destroyed for reasons unrelated to the Sikhs' presence. The community reported that it had not been able to find another landlord willing to rent them a space to be used for religious purposes. They have been unable to gain permission for a crematorium to cremate their deceased. Sikhs also engaged in other religious activities, including public marriage and other celebrations, without government interference.

In 2003 the Government reportedly closed the file on the National Evangelical Church (NEC) due to the NEC's alleged failure to comply with the National Manpower Support Law by employing the requisite number of citizens. The Government had reinstated the NEC's open file status by May 2004, and the church was able to apply for and renew visas for pastors and staff; however, in accordance with the Law, the Government imposed substantial annual fines for every visa application or renewal submitted on behalf of non-citizen staff, in addition to routine visa and residency fees. Church leaders negotiated with Government authorities to resolve the fine issue and exempt the church from the law's Kuwaitization requirements. NEC church leaders continued to report that they did not have access to the number of visas they would like to fully staff their activities.

The law prohibits organized religious education for religious groups other than Islam, although this law was not enforced rigidly. Informal religious instruction occurs inside private homes and on church compounds without government interference; however, there were reports that government inspectors from the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs periodically visited public and private schools outside of church compounds to ensure that religious teaching other than Islam did not take place. During the reporting period, the Government still had not responded to the request from the Catholic Church to permit Catholic students in certain private schools to study the Catechism separately during the period allotted for instruction in Islam. The National Evangelical Church requested a license for its school, which it has operated for several decades. After receiving approval from numerous governmental bodies, the Church's request was denied by the Municipal Council amid erroneous media reports that the Church planned to take over a historic site for the school and for the purpose of proselytizing. Press statements by Municipal Council members suggested the request was refused on ideological grounds rather than on zoning or other technical grounds. The Municipal Council controls access to Government land and has become a focus for society's internal division over granting land to non-Muslim religious institutions.

The Catholic Church faced severe overcrowding at its two official church facilities. Its cathedral in downtown Kuwait City regularly drew tens of thousands of worshippers to its more than twenty weekly services in several languages. Due to limited space on the compound, the church was unable to construct any new buildings. The National Evangelical Church, which served a weekly average of 20,000 worshippers in more than seventy congregations, was also overcrowded. The Church would like more land to build a new church but had not made an official request.

The Coptic Orthodox Church reported that it had excellent relations with the Government and faced no difficulties in bringing church workers and guests into the country. The Government has been extremely cooperative in providing permits to erect tents on adjacent lots to handle the crowds during Christian holidays. The Church's main challenge was the overcrowding at its small compound facility in Kuwait City. The Government planned to level the current Coptic Church building to make way for a road project. It had granted the Church 6,500 square meters of new land in Hawally district to build a new place of worship; however, it has not offered any financial assistance to construct the new church. Construction began in the first quarter of 2006, and the Church expected it to take more than a year to complete the project. The church agreed to move to a temporary facility if the road project began while the church was under construction. No date had been set for the church's demolition.

In December 2004 and 2005, a group of Salafi Islamists in the region of Jahra forced merchants to remove Christmas items such as trees and greeting cards from their stores, claiming holiday items connected to Christmas and New Year's celebrations were contrary to Islamic teachings. In 2004 the group reportedly produced a petition with 350 signatures demanding the removal, asserting that allowing such goods to be available was haram (forbidden).

The Government prohibits missionaries from proselytizing among Muslims; however, they may serve non-Muslim congregations. In November, the police arrested five preachers, none of whom were country natives, who went door-to-door espousing the ideology of al-Qaeda.

The Government controls the content delivered by imams and preachers in their sermons. The Government banned a number of religious leaders, including the imam of the Grand Mosque, from giving Friday sermons after they strayed from government-approved topics. The Government especially clamped down on preachers at unlicensed mosques and those who commented too directly on politics.

The Government does not permit the establishment of non-Islamic religious publishing companies or training institutions for clergy. Nevertheless, several churches publish religious materials solely for their congregations' use.

A private company, the Book House Company Ltd., was permitted to import a significant number of Bibles and other Christian religious materials, including videotapes and compact discs, for use solely by government-recognized church congregations. The Book House Company Ltd. was the only company that had an import license to bring in such materials, which requires approval by government censors. The company supplied only bookstores operated within the Christian compounds. There were reports of customs officials confiscating non-Islamic religious materials from private citizens upon their arrival at the airport. Domestic workers reported that their employers confiscate religious articles such as Bibles and rosary beads, along with nonreligious items. In 2003, police arrested five foreign workers for allegedly proselytizing with Bibles in the Andalus district. State security officials later released the individuals on the condition they sign commitments pledging to refrain from proselytizing.

In April 2006 the Government banned eighteen books from being displayed at an Islamic book festival organized by the Social Reform Society, a religiously conservative NGO affiliated with the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood. The banned books were authored by or contained the writings of individuals associated with the Wahhabi/Salafi movement in Islam.

The Islam Presentation Committee (IPC), under the authority of the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, actively encouraged proselytizing Islam to non-Muslims. The IPC maintained an office at the Central Prison to provide religious education and information to inmates.

Although there was a small community of approximately 150 to 200 acknowledged Christian citizens, a 1980 law prohibits the naturalization of non-Muslims; however, citizens who were Christians before 1980 are allowed to transmit their citizenship to their descendents.

The law forbids marriage between Muslim women and non-Muslim men. A non-Muslim female is not required by law to convert to Islam to marry a Muslim male. In practice many non-Muslim women face strong economic and societal pressure to convert. Failure to convert may mean that, should the couple later divorce, the Muslim father would be granted custody of any children. A non-Muslim woman who fails to convert also is ineligible to inherit her husband's property or to be naturalized.

Women continued to experience legal and social discrimination. In the family courts (i.e. those controlled by religious bodies), one man's testimony is sometimes given the same weight as that of two women; however, in the civil, criminal, and administrative courts, the testimony of women and men is considered equally.

Bidoon (stateless) Arabs continued to face great difficulty in obtaining documents necessary to travel abroad, including for travel to participate in the Hajj. The Government declared in early 2006 that it would facilitate the obtaining of travel documents by Bidoon, but whether these declarations would have a tangible effect remained unclear.

Inheritance is governed by Islamic law, which differs according to the branch of Islam. In the absence of a direct male heir, Shi'a women may inherit all property, while Sunni women inherit only a portion with the balance divided among brothers, uncles, and male cousins of the deceased.

During the reporting period, there were no reports of the Government prohibiting state employees from displaying or practicing any elements of their faith. However, in late 2003, the headmistress of a public high school in Farwaniya district reportedly dismissed several female students for failure to wear the Islamic hijab (headscarf). The school readmitted the students and the headmistress was criticized widely in the local media.

The law requires jail terms for journalists who defame religion. Academic freedom is limited in practice by self-censorship. Academics and journalists are legally prohibited from criticizing Islam. The law also provides that any Muslim citizen may file criminal charges against an author if the citizen believes that the author has defamed Islam, the ruling family, or public morals.

In 2004, an appeals court sentenced a journalist to a 1-year suspended sentence for a 2004 article deemed to defame the Qur'an. The publication's editor received a 50KD fine (equivalent to \$175 USD) in 2004. Three Islamist activists filed the complaint resulting in the court case.

In January 2004 the Court of Misdemeanor sentenced a Shi'a citizen to one year in jail with hard labor and fined him approximately 1,000 KD (\$3,500 USD) for producing and distributing an audiotape allegedly defaming the Islamic (Sunni) religion, degrading its rituals and rites, and defaming and abusing the Prophet Muhammed's Companions. In February 2004, the citizen reportedly was released from prison in error by an Amiri pardon issued on the occasion of the country's National Day. The Government subsequently issued a warrant for his arrest, but he reportedly remained at large. In March 2004, the Appeals Court dismissed the original misdemeanor verdict and referred the citizen's case to the Public Prosecutor for re-trial by the Criminal Court. As a result, the citizen also faced more serious charges of violating the State Security Law. In May 2004, the Criminal Court sentenced him to ten years in jail *in absentia* on charges of defaming Sunni Islam. Most Shi'a believe that hardline Sunni Islamist pressure was behind the Government's harsh action against the individual, even though they too publicly condemned his anti-Sunni statements and the audiocassette incident.

In February 2006 a new Press and Publications law was passed which increased fines and jail sentences for those who publish material denigrating Islam. It also expanded the scope of what cannot be criticized to include the companions of the Prophet Muhammad.

The Ministry of Interior, General Customs Department, arrested and deported thirty-two individuals in 2004 for allegedly practicing sorcery and confiscated alleged sorcery-related materials during the reporting period.

The Government does not designate religion on passports or national identity documents.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

#### 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. There have been cases in which U.S. citizen children have been prevented from returning to the United States; however, there were no reports that such children were forced to convert to Islam, or that forced conversion was the reason the children were not allowed to return to the United States.

## Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The Ministry of Education continued to review a Shi'a proposal to establish a private college to train Shi'a clerics; however, at the end of the reporting year, no action had been taken. The Ministry also continued to review a request from the Catholic Church to allow Catholic students at certain private schools to study the Catechism during the time allotted for Islamic instruction.

Interfaith dialogues took place among Christian denominations through the framework of a council representing Christian leaders from various churches and numerous informal meetings. Government officials promoted interfaith understanding by meeting with Shi'a and Sunni leaders. The Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs also sponsored a conference and screened a film in an attempt to increase religious tolerance.

In 2005, more than 10,000 worshippers from the Bohra community celebrated the Sultan of Bohra's birthday without interference. The Bohra participants, who are Shi'a Muslims mainly from Gujarat in western India, gathered at their community center.

The death of Pope John Paul II received wide press coverage throughout April 2005, including full-page spreads in local newspapers. In a country where the Catholic Church estimates its population as 10 percent of all residents (although this could not be independently verified), the Government issued a public statement expressing "agony of the Christian brothers" following the Pope's death. Senior Government officials attended commemoration events at the Catholic cathedral, and an Amiri envoy led a delegation representing the Government at the Pope's funeral at the Vatican. Local newspapers provided extensive coverage of Christmas and Easter celebrations in 2005 and 2006. The play Nonsense had a successful run in the country without incident despite its portrayal of Christian nuns.

Christian churches held memorial services after the death of Amir Shaykh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah.

## Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

In general there were amicable relations among the various religious groups, and citizens generally were open and tolerant of other religious groups; however, there was a small minority of ultraconservatives opposed to the presence of non-Muslim groups.

While some discrimination based on religion reportedly occurred on a personal level, most observers agreed that it was not widespread. There was a perception among some domestic employees and members of the unskilled labor force that there would be better treatment from employers as well as from society as a whole if they converted to Islam; however, others did not see conversion to Islam as a factor in this regard.

The conversion of Muslims to other religions is forbidden. While such conversions reportedly have occurred, they have been done quietly and discreetly. Known converts faced harassment, including loss of job, repeated summonses to police stations, arbitrary detention, physical and verbal abuse, police monitoring of their activities, and property damage without legal recourse.

In the June 2006 elections, an openly declared atheist ran for parliament on a platform of separating church and state. She was not subject to any restrictions or harassment.

In 2004 some well-known Salafis called on Muslims to refrain from congratulating non-Muslims on their holidays. In December 2004, the Chairman of the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society's (RIHS) Good Word Committee announced in an Arabic daily newspaper that it is forbidden for Muslims to imitate non-Muslims in all matters, including participating in non-Muslim festivals and holidays. The announcement stated that Muslims are "prohibited from sharing the Christian and other infidel religious groups' holidays in any form, whether by attendance, exchange of gifts, or expression of joy."

There were incidents of unofficial anti-Semitic commentary from media pundits and some mosque preachers. On August 7, 2005, a private citizen purchased newspaper space to run an advertisement with anti-Semitic imagery. On August 10, 2005, the Government referred the two newspapers that carried the advertisement to the attorney general for prosecution under the law, which forbids publishing religious material without a license.

In October 2005 a group of several dozen or perhaps as many as 200 alleged Sunni extremists attacked a Shi'a mosque in the Jahra area. The attack stirred fears of Sunni-Shi'a tension in the country, since the mosque had been attacked previously. No further incidents were reported. Despite initial reports that the Government had provided insufficient security for the mosque, the Government made arrests and the mosque owner was satisfied with the response.

In 2005, an extremist Salafi cleric preached violent jihad in the country. The Government blocked access to the Salafi preacher's website in February and banned him from preaching at his mosque in March. He then was detained by KSS forces for alleged links to two of the January shoot-outs between law enforcement officials and militants.

The Government's moderation program was an attempt to temper the effects of any such intra-religious tension. The program was well received in general, despite one member of parliament's publicly labeling the advocates of moderation "terrorists with deviant ideas." The same member of parliament lost his seat in the 2006 elections.

Shi'a complain of a "glass ceiling" that prevents them from obtaining promotions as easily as their Sunni counterparts. They reportedly had more difficulty in obtaining appointments in certain government agencies. The appointment of two Shi'a Ministers in the February 2006 cabinet and in the July 2006 cabinet was a positive step.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Intensive monitoring of religious freedom matters has long been an embassy priority. U.S. embassy officials meet frequently with recognized Sunni, Shi'a, and Christian groups, as well as representatives of various unrecognized religious groups and of NGOs that deal with religious freedom concerns.

The ambassador and other embassy officers actively encourage the Government to address the concerns of religious leaders, such as overcrowding, lack of adequate worship space, lack of access to religious materials, insufficient staffing, and bureaucratic delays in processing routine requests. During the reporting period, embassy officials met with senior representatives from the major recognized Christian denominations in the country, encouraged them to present their concerns in a unified manner to the Government, and advocated on their behalf in high-level meetings with government officials.

The embassy has made an effort to increase its dialogue with and understanding of the Municipal Council, whose control over land grants and other permits give it a key role in allowing religious institutions to flourish.

In an effort to develop a dialogue with Muslim moderates, the embassy worked with the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs to send two imams to the United States on a Single-Country International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) entitled, "Religion in the U.S." The project showed the participants the scope of religious freedom in the United States and encouraged the promotion of tolerance and interreligious understanding. A third official of the ministry participated in another IVLP, "Interfaith Dialogue in the U.S." Both projects consisted of three-week visits to five representative cities in the United States. Participants met with counterparts of different religious backgrounds. All three participants said that the visit radically transformed their preconceived notions about life in the United States. They reported that they gained an appreciation for the interreligious dialogue in the United States, the freedom of worship that Muslims have in America, and the tolerant diversity they discovered in their interaction with American clergy.

Embassy facilities are used for weekly services by Protestant and Catholic congregations largely composed of official personnel and western expatriates. Official premises are used for these services due to overcrowding and security concerns at compounds located in the downtown area.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)