

SAUDI ARABIA 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

Freedom of religion is neither recognized nor protected under the law and the government severely restricted it in practice. According to the 1992 Basic Law, Sunni Islam is the official religion and the country's constitution is the Quran and the Sunna (traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). The legal system is based on the government's application of the Hanbali School of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence. The public practice of any religion other than Islam is prohibited, and there is no separation between state and religion. Shia and other Muslims who did not adhere to the government's interpretation of Islam faced political, economic, legal, social, and religious discrimination, including limited employment and educational opportunities, underrepresentation in official institutions, restrictions on religious practice, and restrictions on places of worship and community centers. The government detained individuals on charges of insulting Islam, encouraging or facilitating conversion from Islam, "witchcraft and sorcery," and for engaging in private non-Muslim religious services. The Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) continued to harass and abuse individuals for religious reasons at a similar rate as the previous year. The CPVPV continued to receive periodic online criticism, both in traditional and social media. There were also reports some citizens had resisted CPVPV officer harassment. Government revision of school textbooks to remove objectionable content continued, but was delayed repeatedly by bureaucratic obstacles. Some intolerant content remained, even in revised textbooks, including justification for the social exclusion and killing of Islamic minorities and "apostates;" claims that Jews, Christians, and Islamic minorities do not properly adhere to monotheism; and intolerant allusions to Shia and Sufi Muslims and other religious groups.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Religious vigilantes sometimes harassed and assaulted citizens and foreigners.

Senior U.S. government officials raised religious freedom issues at the highest levels of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowment, Call, and Guidance (MOIA); Ministry of Interior (MOI); Ministry of Justice (MOJ); Human Rights Commission (HRC); Ministry of Education (MOE); and Ministry of Culture and Information (MOCI) during the year. U.S. government officials continued to meet with

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members of religious minorities, including Shia Muslims, and with non-Muslim foreign residents to discuss religious freedom concerns. Since 2004, Saudi Arabia has been a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. In connection with the Secretary of State's redesignation of Saudi Arabia as a CPC in August 2011, the Secretary issued a waiver of sanctions "to further the purposes of the act."

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 27 million (July 2013 estimate). Approximately 85 to 90 percent of citizens are Sunni Muslims who predominantly adhere to the Hanbali School of Islamic jurisprudence. Very small but growing numbers of Muslims, particularly in and around Jeddah, exhibit some diversity of Islamic thought and practice. Shia constitute 10 to 15 percent of the citizen population. Approximately 80 percent of Shia in the country are "Twelvers" (followers of Muhammad ibn Hasan al-Mahdi, whom they recognize as the Twelfth Imam) and are primarily located in the Eastern Province. Nakhawala, or "Medina Shia," are also Twelvers and reside in small numbers in the western Hejaz region. Estimates place their numbers at approximately 1,000. Twelver Shia adhere to the Jafari school of jurisprudence. Most of the remaining Shia population are Sulaimaniya Ismailis, also known as "Seveners" (those who branched off from the Twelvers to follow Isma'il ibn Jafar as the Seventh Imam). Seveners number approximately 700,000 and reside primarily in Najran Province, where they represent the majority of the province's more than one million inhabitants. Pockets of Zaydis, another offshoot of Shia Islam, number approximately 20,000 and exist primarily in the provinces of Jizan and Najran along the border with Yemen.

Foreign embassies indicate the foreign population in the country, including many undocumented migrants, may exceed 10 million. Comprehensive statistics for the religious denominations of foreigners are not available, but groups include Muslims from the various branches and schools of Islam, Christians (including Eastern Orthodox, Protestants, and Roman Catholics), Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and others.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

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The Basic Law and other laws and policies restrict religious freedom. According to the Basic Law, Islam is the official religion, and the country's constitution is the Quran and the Sunna (the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad). There is no legal recognition or protection of religious freedom, but the government generally allows the private practice of other religions.

The Basic Law establishes the country as a sovereign Arab Islamic state. Neither the government nor most members of society accept the concept of separation of state and religion.

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 government's official interpretation of Islam is based on the Hanbali school of Sunni jurisprudence and is influenced by the writings and teachings of 18th-century Sunni religious scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who advocated a return to what he considered to be the practices of the early Muslim era and urged Muslims to adhere to the strictest interpretation of Islam. Outside the country this variant of Islamic practice is often referred to as "Wahhabism," a term the Saudis generally do not use.

The Islamic judicial system is based on laws derived from the Quran and the Sunna, and on legal opinions and fatwas (rulings) of the Council of Senior Religious Scholars (ulema). Established in 1971, the council is an advisory body of 20 persons that reports to the king. The Basic Law recognizes the council, supported by the board of research and religious rulings, as the supreme authority on religious matters. It is headed by the grand mufti and is composed of Sunni religious scholars and jurists. Government universities provide training on all four Sunni schools of jurisprudence, but focus on the Hanbali school; consequently, most Islamic law judges follow its system of interpretation. Three members of the council belong to non-Hanbali schools, representing the Maliki, Hanafi, and Shafi'i schools. There are no Shia members. Scholars are chosen at the king's discretion and serve renewable four-year terms, with most members serving for life. Islamic law is not based on precedent and rulings can diverge widely. In theory, rulings can be appealed to the appellate and supreme courts, but these higher courts must agree to hear the case.

The government permits Shia judges in the Eastern Province to use the Jafari school of Islamic jurisprudence to adjudicate cases in family law, inheritance, and endowment management. There are seven Shia judges, all appointed by the government and located in the Eastern Province cities of Qatif and al-Ahsa, where

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the majority of Shia live. Some Shia citizens state the judges are chosen with no input by Shia clerics or leaders, and often have only minimal qualifications. Jurisdictionally these courts are only allowed to rule on cases in the Qatif and al-Ahsa areas; Shia from other regions (including those living in other parts of the Eastern Province, Najran Province, and the western Hejaz region) have no access to local, regional, or national Shia courts. The powers of Shia courts are limited because any litigant who disagrees with a ruling can seek a new decision from a court of general jurisdiction with Sunni judges. Rulings of courts of general jurisdiction can void Shia court rulings, although the government discourages such rulings. Government departments can choose not to implement judgments rendered by Shia judges.

The calculation of accidental death or injury compensation is discriminatory. 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 other non-Muslims are only entitled to receive one-sixteenth the amount a male Muslim would receive. Judges may discount the testimony of non-practicing Muslims or individuals who do not adhere to the official interpretation of Islam, and they may disregard the testimony of a non-Muslim in favor of the testimony of a Muslim. In adherence to the government's interpretation of the Quran, courts place the value of a woman's testimony in capital punishment cases as one-half that of a man's.

The Majlis al-Shura (the Consultative Council) is responsible for advising the king and can debate and propose legislation for approval by the Council of Ministers. The king appoints the Consultative Council's president and 150 members. There are only six Shia members. In January the king appointed 30 women to the previously entirely male council, two of whom are Shia. The Consultative Council's members are appointed to four-year terms and are limited in the number of terms they may serve.

Mosques are the only public places of worship, and the construction of churches, synagogues, or other non-Muslim places of worship is not allowed. The MOIA is financially and administratively responsible for Sunni mosques, which according to MOIA officials, number around 60,000, including 15,000 Friday mosques (larger mosques that host Friday prayers and include a sermon). The MOIA retains approximately 60,000 Sunni imams and 15,000 Sunni Friday khateeb (sermon leaders) to staff these mosques. Imams are not considered government employees and typically hold additional employment. Imams require MOIA approval to deliver sermons, for which they receive monthly "incentives" of approximately

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2,000 riyals (\$533). The two mosques in Mecca and Medina do not come under MOIA jurisdiction, but rather are the responsibility of the General Presidency for the Affairs of the Two Holy Shrines, which reports directly to the king. The General Presidency for the Affairs of the Two Holy Shrines' head holds a rank equivalent to a government minister. Thousands of government-supported mosques are prominently located in both large and small cities. Thousands more exist in private homes, at rest stops along highways, in malls, and a variety of other locations throughout the country.

The MOIA determines the qualifications of Sunni clerics and is responsible for investigating complaints against them, particularly clerics who make intolerant statements or promote intolerance, violence, or hatred. The MOIA operates 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 through scheduled and unscheduled visits and accept public complaints. Based on their reports, the committees summon clerics accused of preaching "extremist ideologies." If the provincial committees are not able to dissuade these clerics from their approach, the clerics are referred to a central committee or dismissed. The MOIA has removed at least 3,550 imams from duty since the program began in 2003. Additionally, government officials report more than 20,000 imams have been retrained since 2003 to espouse tolerance in their preaching. Under a 2010 decree issued by King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz to curb extremist and "absurd" fatwas, only members of the Council of Senior Religious Scholars and those whom the king permits may issue public fatwas.

The government's stated policy is to permit private worship within personal residences for all, including non-Muslims, and to address violations of this policy by government officials as they occur; however, the CPVPV sometimes does not respect this policy. Individuals who experience infringements on their ability to worship privately may address their grievances to the MOI, the government's official Human Rights Commission (HRC), the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR), a quasi-autonomous nongovernmental organization (NGO), and when appropriate, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The CPVPV, a semiautonomous government agency, at times referred to as the "religious police" in international media, has authority to monitor social behavior and enforce morality consistent with the government's interpretation of Islam and in coordination with law enforcement authorities. The 1980 law that formally defines the CPVPV's mission describes it as "guiding and advising people to observe the religious duties prescribed by Islamic Sharia, and to prevent

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committing [acts] proscribed and prohibited [by sharia], or adopting bad habits and traditions or taboo [sic] heresies.” The purview of the CPVPV includes public socializing and private contact between unrelated men and women (gender mixing); practicing or displaying emblems of non-Muslim faiths or failing to respect 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. Full-time CPVPV field officers are known as *mutawwa’een*; they do not wear uniforms, but are required to wear identification badges and can only legally act in their official capacity when accompanied by a regular policeman. CPVPV members reportedly may no longer interrogate subjects or determine charges against them, although they retain authority to arrest those they deem to violate religious edicts or moral customs. According to the CPVPV’s 2011 statistics, the agency has 4,389 staff members located throughout the country. Additionally there are more than 1,600 administrative support personnel. The CPVPV reports to the king through the Council of Ministers, and the MOI oversees its operations on the king’s behalf.

The Council of Ministers established the 24-member HRC in 2005 to address human rights abuses and promote human rights within the country. The board includes at least two Shia members. The HRC regularly follows up on citizen complaints, including complaints of favoritism or unfair court decisions, but does not specifically address issues of religious freedom and tolerance.

No law requires all citizens to be Muslim, but non-Muslims and many foreign and Saudi Muslims whose beliefs are deemed not to conform with the government’s interpretation of Islam must practice their religion in private and are vulnerable to discrimination, harassment, detention, and, for noncitizens, deportation. Children born to Muslim fathers are deemed Muslim by law, and conversion from Islam to another religion is considered apostasy, which can be punishable by death. Blasphemy against Sunni Islam also can be punished with death, but the more common penalty is a long prison sentence, lengthy detention without trial, or protective custody. There have been no confirmed reports of executions for either apostasy or blasphemy since 1992.

The law discriminates against adherents of religious groups deemed “polytheistic” and to a lesser extent against Christians and Jews, who are mentioned in the Quran as “People of the Book.” The government officially does not permit non-Muslim clergy to enter the country to conduct religious services, although some do so

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under other auspices and are generally able to hold private services. These entry restrictions make it difficult for non-Muslims to maintain regular contact with clergy. This is particularly problematic for Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians, whose religious traditions require that they receive sacraments from a priest on a regular basis. Many non-Muslims continue to gather, however, for private worship.

The government requires noncitizen legal residents to carry an identity card containing a religious designation for “Muslim” or “non-Muslim.” Older residency cards bear more specific religious designations such as “Christian.”

The naturalization law requires applicants attest to their religious affiliation and requires applicants to obtain a certificate endorsed by a Muslim religious authority. Non-Muslims must convert to Islam before they are eligible to naturalize.

The government severely limits freedom of religious assembly, including by not allowing non-Muslims to worship publicly and hindering the establishment and maintenance of non-Sunni places of worship.

All new mosques require the permission of the MOIA, the local municipality, and the provincial government, which is functionally part of the MOI. The MOIA supervises and finances the construction and maintenance of most Sunni mosques, including the hiring of clerical workers, while the other approximately 30 percent of Sunni mosques are at private residences or were built and endowed by private persons. Individuals responsible for the supervision of a mosque are selected from the local community.

The government does not finance construction or maintenance of Shia mosques, and the process for obtaining a required government license for a Shia mosque is unclear. Shia manage their own mosques, however, under the supervision of Shia scholars.

Discussion of sensitive religious issues such as sectarian differences is rare, and criticism of Islam, including expression deemed offensive to Muslims, is forbidden on the grounds of preserving social stability. The government prohibits the public propagation of Islamic teachings that differ from the official interpretation of Islam and restricts public religious training of non-Sunni groups and clergy.

The government allows religious materials for personal use; customs officials and the CPVPV do not have the authority to confiscate personal religious materials.

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The government's stated policy for its diplomatic and consular missions abroad is to inform foreign workers applying for visas they have the right to worship privately and possess personal religious materials. The government also provides the name of the offices where grievances can be filed.

Regardless of a student's personal religious traditions, public school students at all levels receive mandatory religious instruction based on the government's interpretation of Islam. Private religious schools not based on the official interpretation of Islam are not permitted. Students in private international schools are not required to study Islam

Government Practices

There were reports of imprisonment and detention. Unlike in previous years, there were no reports of killings by authorities on account of religious beliefs or practices. The government generally enforced legal and policy restrictions on religious freedom. Some activists held for extended periods without charge were released, but at least one who was arrested and charged in 2012 with apostasy and blasphemy, which carry potential death penalties, remained in detention. Individuals were detained and charged with "witchcraft" and "sorcery," which carry potential death penalties. The government reportedly broke up private non-Muslim religious meetings held by foreign residents and deported foreigners for worshipping privately.

Shia continued to face discrimination, and public Shia celebrations were restricted, even in some areas with large Shia populations. Shia also faced significant obstacles to building social and religious centers and were underrepresented in government and educational positions. A government school textbook reform project was delayed, and intolerant language remained in both edited and unedited textbooks. Ismailis reported improved conditions, but two Ahmadi men arrested in 2012 for refusing to renounce their faith remained in detention.

Raef Badawi remained in prison at year's end after being arrested in June 2012 on charges of apostasy, insulting Islam and Saudi religious leaders, and violating cyber crime laws by setting up the Free Saudi Liberals Web site in 2008. The website was intended as a platform for debating religious and political matters in Saudi Arabia. In January an appeals court remanded the charge of apostasy to a lower court. On July 29, the lower court sentenced Badawi to seven years imprisonment and 600 lashes, although the apostasy charge did not figure into the sentence. Badawi appealed the sentence. In early December an appeals court

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remanded the case to a criminal court. On December 25, the criminal court judge remanded the case further to a general court with the recommendation that Badawi be tried before the highest court on a renewed charge of apostasy.

A court in Ta'if in March reportedly sentenced a man to death for practicing “witchcraft.” Police investigations and CPVPV reports alleged the man had participated in more than 40 abortions and a number of “witchcraft activities.”

On May 11, a court sentenced a Lebanese man to six years in prison and 300 lashes for allegedly facilitating the conversion of a Saudi female to Christianity and helping her escape to Sweden. A Saudi man accused of being an accomplice received a sentence of two years in prison and 200 lashes. The men have been in detention since their arrest in July 2012.

On February 6, an appeals court upheld a Qatif criminal court sentence of 8 lashes against a woman who in 2012 reportedly sent a text message containing a Shia cleric’s name and phone number to a man in Medina by mistake. The man complained to authorities that the woman was trying to convert him.

Hamza Kashgari, a blogger and activist arrested in early 2012 for posting social media messages deemed blasphemous, was released from detention in October after 20 months imprisonment. Following public calls for severe punishment in 2012 in the wake of his messages, Kashgari had fled the country; he was detained in Malaysia at the request of the Saudi government and forcibly repatriated. After returning to Saudi Arabia, Kashgari publicly “repented” before a court.

On June 5, novelist and political commentator Turki al-Hamad was reportedly released from detention. He was arrested in December 2012, allegedly for social media messages calling for a reformation of Islam and criticizing Islamists.

Some non-Muslims in different parts of the country were reportedly detained, harassed, and ultimately deported for worshipping privately. In February the CPVPV reportedly arrested more than 50 Ethiopian Christians in a private residence in Dammam pursuant to allegations by government authorities of violating labor and passport laws. International media outlets reported three leaders of the group were charged with seeking to convert Muslims to Christianity. At least 43 of those arrested were deported; the others remained in detention at year’s end.

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On July 19, local police reportedly attempted to access an al-Khobar residential compound to raid a private Christian religious gathering attended primarily by Westerners. Although compound management denied the police entry, Eastern Province Governor Saud bin Naif was reportedly alerted to the situation by the police and requested the group discontinue its meetings.

According to the CPVPV, the agency handled 314,122 infractions in 2012, of which it claimed 92 percent were settled informally when the perpetrators signed pledges to refrain from wrongful behavior. The CPVPV referred the other 8 percent to the police and or the legal system.

In November CPVPV officers in Riyadh detained two individuals for offering free hugs on public streets on charges of “indulging in exotic practices and offending public order.” The two individuals were reportedly released after being forced to sign a pledge agreeing not to offer hugs again.

In April CPVPV members harassed several Western diplomats at the annual Saudi Jenadriyah festival, complaining about a female diplomat’s uncovered hair and another female’s accompaniment by a man who was not her husband. In June CPVPV members harassed Western diplomats in a Jeddah restaurant, demanding a female diplomat accompany them to a police station for dining with a man who was not her husband. During the same week religious police conducted an unprecedented raid on a private upscale Jeddah beach.

CPVPV leadership and law enforcement authorities made sporadic efforts to hold officers accountable for unlawful actions beyond the scope of their authority. Five CPVPV officers were found guilty of second degree murder following a September 23 car chase during which two men pursued by the officers died when their car careened off a bridge. In the wake of the incident, CPVPV head Abd al-Latif Al al-Sheikh reportedly barred the organization’s field officers from pursuing suspects. He also issued directives to investigate allegations that three CPVPV officers in Riyadh had assaulted a Saudi national for praying inside his shop instead of in a mosque.

In April security personnel reportedly removed a CPVPV administrator from the Jenadriyah festival after he attempted to storm the stage to stop a children’s folk dance performance on the grounds it contained music. The incident drew support among the public for the CPVPV administrator and criticism of the security guards.

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Pressure on Shia clerics continued. Awamiyah-based Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr was arrested in July 2012 after a series of sermons in which he demanded greater rights for Shia and defended four men accused of celebrating the death of then-Crown Prince Naif, whom they viewed as promoting anti-Shia discrimination. On March 25 prosecutors in a court hearing charged him with “sowing discord” and “undermining national unity” and called for the death penalty. He remained incarcerated at the end of the year. Al-Nimr had been arrested twice before, in 2004 and 2006, although no charges had been filed. An arrest warrant was issued for al-Nimr in 2009 after he called for Eastern Province secession if Shia did not receive equal rights. Large protests erupted in Awamiyah after the warrant was issued and al-Nimr was not arrested at that time.

Al-Ahsa cleric Tawfiq al-Amer was arrested in March 2011 and convicted in December 2012 on charges of inciting unrest, calling for changes in the political system, and raising the Shia call to prayer, among other charges. He was sentenced to three years in prison followed by a five-year travel ban. In June his sentence was extended to four years by an appeals court that ruled he had also insulted the Prophet Muhammad.

Some authorities indicated they consider Ahmadiyya Muslims to be Muslims, but their legal status remained unclear. Ahmadis were not allowed to perform pilgrimages. Mainly foreign workers from India and Pakistan, Ahmadis hid their faith to avoid arrest and deportation. In 2012, two brothers, Sultan Hamid and Saud Falih al-Enezi, were reportedly arrested on apostasy charges and imprisoned after refusing to recant their beliefs. Their families and community members were not allowed to contact them, and there was no information on their judicial status or process during the year.

The government blocked access to some internet websites with religious content it considered offensive or sensitive, including the Shia news website Al-Rasid, which publishes Friday sermons and op-eds by prominent Shia clerics. Blocking the websites was consistent with a broader official policy of censoring objectionable content, including political discourse and illicit materials.

More than 1,000 Eastern Province Shia were arrested over the last three years in connection with public protests demanding greater rights for Shia. At year’s end, approximately 200 remained in detention. The government continued to prohibit public non-Muslim religious activities across the country and further restricted non-Sunni activities in predominantly Sunni areas. Public commemorations of Ashura, a Shia religious holy day, and lesser Shia holidays were permitted in Qatif,

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an in the Eastern Province whose population is almost completely Shia. The same commemorations were required to be conducted in private, however, in al-Ahsa, an area in the Eastern Province with an almost equal proportion of Sunnis and Shia.

Many of the reported government actions related to public non-Muslim religious activities and non-Sunni activities were difficult to corroborate because of witnesses' or victims' fears that disclosing such information might cause harm to themselves or to others. Information regarding government practices was generally incomplete because judicial proceedings usually were not publicized or were closed to the public, despite provisions in the criminal procedure law requiring court proceedings to be open. There were reports some trials were open to family members of the accused and to journalists. Many non-Muslims worshiped in secret because of continuing fear of harassment and intimidation by police or the CPVPV, as well as police detention or deportation. Online criticism of the CPVPV increased during the year, and individuals, particularly women, on several occasions reportedly challenged CPVPV personnel who harassed them in public.

According to the media, police detained and imprisoned persons on charges of "sorcery", "black magic", and "witchcraft." Authorities reportedly charged more than 100 people with "sorcery" and "witchcraft," and the CPVPV arrested 215 "magicians," according to Abd al-Latif Al al-Sheikh, head of the CPVPV. The CPVPV continued a campaign against sorcery and established a field unit in 2012 to arrest "sorcerers and charlatans" and refer them to relevant authorities, describing sorcery as one of the "key causes of religious and social instability in the kingdom."

The government continued to combat "extremist" ideology by scrutinizing religious clerics and teachers closely and dismissing those found promoting views it deemed intolerant or extreme. The MOIA reportedly established criteria for recruiting mosque imams, including requirements that imams graduate from a Saudi religious university, pass an evaluative interview, espouse "moderate" religious views, and receive recommendations from three religious scholars. The MOIA also provided training courses and other programs for imams and monitored and posted counter-arguments on extremist online forums and websites.

The government restricted the ability of religious leaders and activists to express views critical of the religious establishment. There were reports Sunni clerics, who received government stipends, occasionally used anti-Semitic, anti-Christian, and anti-Shia language in their sermons. Anti-Shia rhetoric in Sunni mosques in the

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Eastern Province reportedly increased during the year, and occasionally preachers in rural mosques reportedly ended Friday sermons with a prayer for the well-being of Muslims and the humiliation of polytheism and polytheists.

The government generally limited public religious practice to activities conforming to the official interpretation of Islam. Practices diverging from the official interpretation, such as public celebrations of Maulid al-Nabi (the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad) and visits to the tombs of renowned Muslims, were forbidden. Enforcement was more relaxed in some communities than in others. For example, authorities allowed Shia in the Eastern Province city of Qatif greater freedom in their religious practices, while in other areas with large Shia populations, such as al-Ahsa and Dammam, authorities restricted Shia religious activities, including public marches and loudspeaker broadcasts of clerics' lectures from Shia community centers (known as Husseiniyas). The government closed a number of Husseiniyas during Ashura.

Shia mosques in mixed religious neighborhoods reportedly were required to recite the Sunni call to prayer, which is distinct from the Shia call. In some predominantly Shia areas of al-Ahsa, however, Shia mosques previously required to use the Sunni call to prayer began using the Shia call. Although Shia combine two of the five daily Sunni prayers, Shia businessmen often were forced to close their shops during all five prayer times in accordance with the country's official Sunni practices.

Some Shia faced obstacles constructing mosques and Husseiniyas. Shia mosques needed to receive government approval, but did not receive any government support for their construction or operations, which most Sunni mosques received. The government approved construction of some new Shia mosques in Qatif and al-Ahsa – often after lengthy delays due to the numerous steps required – but did not approve construction of Shia mosques in Dammam, home to many Shia. Constructing new Shia mosques in al-Ahsa was much more difficult than building a Sunni mosque. Shia mosques had to receive permission from all of the neighbors to start construction, and were not allowed to be built as closely together as Sunni mosques. Virtually all existing mosques were unable to obtain licenses and faced the threat of closure at any time. Shia in other parts of the country were not allowed to build Shia-specific mosques. Ismailis in Najran Province reportedly did not face similar obstacles to building and renovating mosques, however.

The government would not approve any construction of Husseiniyas, even in Qatif, and no Husseiniyas in Qatif or al-Ahsa were legally licensed to operate, although

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they had tacit permission to do so. The government monitored activities in the Husseiniyas and periodically shut down those that did not follow rules about avoiding political topics. During the month of Muharram, during which Ashura occurs, the government closed all Husseiniyas in Dammam, as well as several in al-Ahsa that were accused of breaking rules during Ashura commemorations the previous year.

The government did not officially recognize several centers of Shia religious instruction located in the Eastern Province, provide financial support, recognize certificates of educational attainment for their graduates, or provide employment for their graduates, all benefits which the government provided to Sunni religious training institutions.

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

Widespread prejudice against Shia remained. Reports persisted that Shia faced discrimination in education, employment, the military, political representation, the judiciary, religious practice, and the media, although they were represented in these fields. Primary reasons cited for discrimination included historical Sunni-Shia animosity, suspicion of Iranian influence on Shia actions, and the view Shia were polytheists who committed apostasy in practicing some of their religious rites.

The government continued to exclude Shia perspectives from the state's extensive religious media and broadcast programming. Shia bookstores reportedly could not be licensed. In addition, terms like "rejectionists" that were considered insulting to Shia were commonly found in public discourse.

In higher education the government discriminated against Shia in the selection process for students, professors, and administrators at public universities. For example, Shia constituted an estimated 5 percent of professors at a leading university in al-Ahsa, an area with a population at least 50 percent Shia.

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At the primary and secondary levels of education in al-Ahsa, there continued to be severe underrepresentation of Shia among school principals. There were no female Shia principals in the 200 schools for girls in al-Ahsa, and 20 male Shia principals in the 200 schools for boys in al-Ahsa.

Shia faced significant employment discrimination in the public sector. A very small number of Shia occupied high-level positions in government-owned companies and government agencies. Many Shia reportedly believed openly identifying themselves as Shia would negatively affect career advancement.

Qatif community leaders stated zoning laws and restrictions on use of land held by Aramco, the government-owned oil and natural gas company, and members of the royal family surrounding Qatif prevented investment and development in these areas and aimed to limit the density of the Shia population in any given area.

Government entities discriminated against Shia in hiring. Although Shia constituted approximately 10 to 15 percent of the total citizen population and approximately one-third to one-half of the Eastern Province population, they were underrepresented in senior government positions. Shia were significantly underrepresented in national security-related positions, including the Ministry of Defense, the National Guard, and the MOI. Shia representation was higher in the ranks of traffic police, municipalities, and public schools in predominantly Shia areas. There were no Shia 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 Shia. Shia held six of 11 elected seats on Eastern Province municipal councils. An elected Shia headed the Qatif municipal council.

Nakhawala Shia faced more discriminatory practices in comparison to the Twelvers in the Eastern Province. Discrimination in employment and education was based on the Nakhawala surname “al-Nakhly,” which roughly translates as “farmers” and identifies their minority status and group.

The Sulaimaniya Ismaili community reported improving conditions in Najran Province, although community leaders asserted the government discriminated against them by prohibiting their religious books. Ismailis reportedly occupied government positions in Najran Province, including military and police positions.

Revisions to textbooks for grades 10, 11, and 12, which were slated for review and reform, had not been undertaken by year’s end. The textbooks retained

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inflammatory and anti-Semitic material. For example, the textbooks stated apostates from Islam should be killed if they did not repent within three days of being warned, and described Islamic minorities and Christians as heretics. Some Quranic passages likening Jews and Christians to apes and swine continued to be included. The textbooks also stated treachery was a “permanent characteristic” of non-Muslims, especially Jews, propagated conspiracy theories that international organizations such as Masons support Zionism, and presented historical forgeries, such as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, as fact.

The Ministry of Education stated the textbooks for grades one through nine were reformed in 2012 to remove intolerant language. Textbooks for these grades continued to contain directives to kill “sorcerers” and socially exclude infidels as well as accusations that Jews, Christians, Shia, and Sufis did not properly adhere to monotheism.

Textbooks at all levels contained positive statements as well, including rejection of terrorism, acknowledgement that some People of the Book (understood to be Jews and Christians) “are prone to goodness,” and support for religious tolerance.

Some leading government and religious officials, including the king and crown prince, made public statements against extremism and advocated tolerance and moderation. In his annual Hajj message on October 18, King Abdullah urged Muslims to deal with others “with a forgiving humanity that does not reject others just because they believe in different religions.” In a joint statement on July 10 commemorating the start of Ramadan, King Abdullah and Crown Prince Salman emphasized the Quranic verse, “there is no compulsion in religion,” and stated, “we will not allow extremists to misuse religion in order to realize their vested interests.”

Deputy Foreign Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Abdullah said in an international forum on education reform on November 19, “we should be cautious about spreading negative ideas about followers of other religions through curricula or history books. We should not accept such antagonistic practices.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. In addition to the religious basis on which the government claims its authority and the significant role of the country’s religious leadership, there was intense societal pressure on the population to conform to

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cultural-religious norms. As a result, a majority of citizens supported a state based on Islamic law, although there were differing views as to how this should be realized in practice.

Shia faced employment discrimination in the private sector. There was no formal policy concerning the hiring and promotion of Shia in the private sector, but anecdotal evidence suggested in some companies, including in the oil and petrochemical industries, a “glass ceiling” existed and Shia were passed over for promotion over less-qualified Sunni colleagues. Further, Shia reportedly were indirectly discriminated against in competition for positions at public universities through a requirement in interviews to answer religious questions designed to reveal their Shia beliefs.

Contributors to internet forums frequently asserted the Nakhawala Shia descended from Persians or black Africans and were therefore untrustworthy and second-class citizens.

Discrimination based on religion was a factor in the mistreatment of foreign workers by citizen employers and coworkers. Employers reportedly sometimes required their foreign domestic workers and drivers to convert to Islam to keep their jobs.

Religious vigilantes and/or volunteers unaffiliated with the CPVPV also existed but often acted alone, sometimes harassing and assaulting citizens and foreigners.

There continued to be unconfirmed reports that Sunni imams, who receive government stipends, used anti-Semitic, anti-Christian, and anti-Shia language in their sermons. During the year the MOIA issued periodic circulars to clerics and imams in mosques directing them to include messages on the principles of justice, equality, and tolerance and to encourage rejection of bigotry and all forms of racial discrimination in their sermons.

Particularly at times of heightened political tensions with Israel, editorial cartoons featured stereotypical images of Jews along with Jewish symbols. Anti-Semitic comments by journalists, academics, and clerics occasionally appeared in the media.

A Saudi imam reportedly visited the former Auschwitz death camp in Poland in May with a group of 14 Muslim leaders from across the globe. The delegation also

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met with Catholic and Jewish leaders as part of their Holocaust awareness and anti-genocide program.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy officials pressed the government to respect religious freedom and honor its public commitment to permit private religious worship by non-Muslims, eliminate discrimination against minorities, promote respect for non-Muslim religious belief, and combat violent extremism. Senior U.S. government officials, including the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, the Assistant Secretary and a Deputy Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor emphasized these concerns in meetings at the senior levels of the MOIA, MOJ, MOI, HRC, MOE, and MOCI. Embassy officials continued to meet with members of religious minorities, including Shia Muslims, and with non-Muslim foreign residents to discuss religious freedom concerns. Additionally, the embassy regularly included government officials in U.S. visitor programs to promote tolerance and interfaith dialogue.

Since 2004, Saudi Arabia has been designated a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. In connection with the Secretary of State's redesignation of Saudi Arabia as a CPC in August 2011, the Secretary issued a waiver of sanctions "to further the purposes of the act."