

[Français](#)[Home](#)[Contact Us](#)[Help](#)[Search](#)[canada.gc.ca](#)[Home](#) > [Research](#) > [Responses to Information Requests](#)

RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

[New Search](#) | [About RIR's](#) | [Help](#)

10 November 2004

SAU43129.E

Saudi Arabia: al-Islahiyeen (a group of liberal reformers in Saudi Arabia); treatment by the government; size; goals

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

An Associate Professor of political science at the University of Vermont, who is also the director of the University's Middle East Studies program and has written extensively on Saudi Arabia, provided the following information to the Research Directorate in 9 November 2004 correspondence.

Goals

A "loose-knit group of Saudi intellectuals and political activists," the Islahiyeen (Reformers) strives for political reform in Saudi Arabia. Rather than forming a political party or an underground movement, the Islahiyeen is a relatively informal group of individuals who share similar goals, their activities consisting of peaceful measures, such as coordinating petitions, discussion groups, and other political projects. As such, participants differ on some ideological levels; while some are "liberal," others who the associate professor describes as "moderate Islamists" are inspired by a more religious Islamic philosophy. Subjects of dispute may include the rights of women and social freedom. However, they all have the common aspiration of a Saudi Arabia which welcomes greater "political expression and participation" through elected political institutions and whose ruling family is held to higher accountability.

Government Response

According to the associate professor, "the government response has varied." In early 2003, many members of the royal family, including the Crown Prince, publicly endorsed the Islahiyeen. However, several reformers have recently been arrested and there is presently a trial in Saudi Arabia involving three reformers who refused to agree to the cessation of their reform activities. Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

Size

While the associate professor highlighted the difficulty in estimating the size of the Islahiyeen group of reformers, due to their informal nature and the fact that they are an "elite group [without] a mass following," Islahiyeen petitions typically carry between approximately 100 and 600 signatures.

Leadership

Due to their informal, "ad-hoc" organizational structure, the associate professor indicated that the Islahiyeen had no clear leadership.

Recent History

While its roots can be traced back through Saudi history, the Islahiyeen emerged as a political and

intellectual group after the 11 September 2001 attacks as well as the attacks in Riyadh in May and November of 2003, and can thus be qualified as a very recent group. Additional and/or corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Reference

Associate Professor of political science specializing in Saudi Arabia, University of Vermont. 9 November 2004. Correspondence received.

Additional Sources Consulted

Five academics specializing in Saudi Arabia did not respond to the Research Directorate within time constraints.

Internet Sites, including: Amnesty International (AI), *Arab News*, Arabic News, European Country of Origin Information Network (ECOI), Human Rights Watch (HRW), *The Saudi Gazette*, Saudi Press Agency (SPA), United States Department of State, World News Connection (WNC).

Publications: *Europa 2004*, *Political Handbook of the World 2000-2002*, *Political Parties of the World 2002*.

 [Top of Page](#)

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