



STATUS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND PERSECUTION IN SAUDI ARABIA

BACKGROUND

According to the Open Doors country “Watch List” for 2009, the Wahhabi kingdom of Saudi Arabia ranks **second only to North Korea** on the list of countries suffering under the **worst religious persecution** in the world.¹ In Saudi Arabia, there is no legal recognition of, or protection under the law for, freedom of religion, and it is severely restricted in practice.² The country is a monarchy and the King is both head of state and government. The legal system is based on the government’s official interpretation of Shari’a law. Sunni Islam is the official religion. Sunni Muslims comprise 90 percent of the population while approximately ten percent are Shi’a Muslims. Of the 8 million foreigners, there is a small Christian population (including Eastern Orthodox, Protestants, and over one million Roman Catholics).³

The Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice (“CPVPV”) is a semiautonomous agency with the authority to monitor social behavior and enforce morality consistent with the Government’s interpretation of Islam. Volunteer field officers (“the religious police”) of the Ministry of Interior are known as **mutawwa’in**. Their mission:

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 heresies.⁴

The mutawwa’in are known for torturing and sometimes killing those they arrest and detain. The mutawwa’in also confiscate the personal religious material of non-Muslims (such as Bibles and crucifixes).⁵

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Many religious abuses are difficult to report due to fear of persecution. Information regarding government practices is also incomplete because judicial proceedings are often closed to the public despite Saudi Criminal Procedure Laws from 2002 requiring court proceedings to

¹ *N. Korea Top Persecutor Again*, OPEN DOORS, available at <http://www.opendoorsusa.org/content/view/916/139/> (last visited June 3, 2009) [hereinafter *OPEN DOORS WATCH LIST*].

² U.S. DEP’T OF STATE, INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT 2008, SAUDI ARABIA (2008), available at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2008/108492.htm> [hereinafter *RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT 2008*].

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.* (alteration in the original).

⁵ *Id.*; see also *Religious police accused of torture by Saudi Society for Human Rights*, ASIANEWS.IT, <http://www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=14810&size=A> (last visited June 3, 2009).

be open.⁶ Trial proceedings in Saudi Arabia do not typically meet international fair trial standards.⁷ They usually take place behind closed doors without adequate legal representation. Many people are convicted because of confessions obtained “under duress, including torture or other ill-treatment during incommunicado detention **Those who are sentenced to death are often not informed of the progress of legal proceedings against them or of the date of execution until the morning they are taken out and beheaded.**”⁸

- The Basic Law says that the Qur’an and the Sunna are the constitution.⁹
- Christians are not allowed to publicly profess or practice their faith and are vulnerable to discrimination, harassment, detention, and if a noncitizen, deportation.¹⁰
- Neither the Government, nor society in general, accepts the concept of separation of religion and state.¹¹
- **Blasphemy, apostasy, and proselytizing by non-Muslims are punishable by death.**¹²
- The judicial system is based on Shari’a law. The Consultative Council is responsible for approving laws and regulations that are compatible with Shari’a.¹³
- **The Government restricts the establishment of places of worship and public training of non-Sunni clergy.**¹⁴
- The public education system enforces the teaching of Islam, and the textbooks are intolerant of Christianity and other religions.¹⁵

GOVERNMENTAL ABUSES OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM¹⁶

- Throughout 2008, non-Muslims throughout the country were detained and harassed for private worship.
- Many non-Sunnis worshiped in secret because of continuing fear of harassment, intimidation, detention, or deportation by the police or mutawwa’in.

⁶ RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT 2008, *supra* note 2.

⁷ *Man Beheaded and Crucified in Saudi Arabia*, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, June 1, 2009, available at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/news/man-beheaded-and-crucified-saudi-arabia-20090601> (last visited June 3, 2009) [hereinafter *Man Beheaded*].

⁸ *Id.* (emphasis added).

⁹ RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT 2008, *supra* note 2.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *See id.* The next four bullet points in this section are from the RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT 2008.

- Women, and especially foreign women, were harassed by the mutawwa'in for failure to observe strict dress codes, such as the failure to wear headscarves. The mutawwa'in are encouraged to take an active role in enforcing the rules about religious clothing, even with violence.
- In 2008, Government-paid Sunni used anti-Christian language in their sermons. **Mosque speakers sometimes prayed for the death of Jews and Christians.** These instances included prayers from the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina.

SPECIFIC INSTANCES OF PERSECUTION

- **January 2009:** The mutawwa'in threatened a prominent Eritrean pastor three times in one week. The pastor told Compass Direct News that on Jan. 10 he found an unsigned note on his vehicle threatening to kill him if he did not leave the country. "There was a note on my van saying, 'If you do not leave the country, we will kill you . . . Three days after that, [the religious police] said, 'You're still working here, why don't you go out of the country?'" Two days later, four masked Saudi men in a small car cut off the van he was driving. They said, "We will kill you if you don't go away from this place—you must leave here or we will kill you." The pastor, a father of eight, escaped to an undisclosed city in Saudi Arabia.¹⁷
- **Late 2008: the daughter of a member of the religious police was killed** for writing about her faith in Christ online.¹⁸ Several months later, Saudi police arrested a 28-year-old Christian man for describing his conversion on his personal website.¹⁹ Saudi police **arrested Hamoud Bin Saleh on Jan. 13 "because of his opinions and his testimony that he had converted from Islam to Christianity,"** according to the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information.²⁰ He was originally sentenced to death for apostasy but was released in March and then **banned from travelling outside Saudi Arabia or appearing in the media.**²¹
- **May 23, 2008:** Government officials arrested 15 Indian Christians for private religious worship. During the raid, a CPVPV member **slapped the community's pastor twice on his face. Christian songbooks and Bibles were confiscated.** After questioning, the police transported the Indians to the local jail.²²
- **August 2007:** Saudi Arabian Airlines had posted on its English-language Web site a notice that the country bans "Bibles, crucifixes, statues, carvings, [and] items with

¹⁷ *Saudi Arabia: Pastor Flees Death Threats*, COMPASS DIRECT NEWS, Jan. 30, 2009, available at <http://www.compassdirect.org/en/display.php?page=news&idelement=5781&lang=en&length=short&backpage=archives&critere=saudi%20arabia&countryname=&rowcur=0> (last visited June 3, 2009).

¹⁸ *Saudi Arabia: Authorities Arrest Christina Convert*, COMPASS DIRECT NEWS, Jan. 28, 2009, available at <http://www.compassdirect.org/en/display.php?page=lead=en&length=long&idelement=5779>; see also *OPEN DOORS WATCH LIST*, *supra* note 1.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.* (emphasis added).

²¹ *Id.*

²² RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT 2008, *supra* note 2.

religious symbols such as the Star of David.” These items appeared under the list of forbidden articles within the “Customs Regulations” portion of the site, although the Government’s stated policy was that such items were allowed for private religious purposes.²³

- **October 2006:** Police arrested a Filipino Christian man in Jeddah and falsely charged him with drug possession. The police later dropped those charges and formally charged him with proselytizing. **He was detained for 8 months, received 60 lashes, and deported in May 2007.**²⁴

OTHER HORRIFIC PERSECUTION AND ILL-TREATMENT

- **February 2009:** According to AsiaNews.it, A 23-year-old victim of a gang rape became pregnant but was subsequently **arrested for “adultery” and condemned to one year in prison, and, after her baby is born, she will receive 100 lashes.**²⁵
- **June 2009:** As is typical for carrying out death sentences under Islamic law, in June there was a public execution and crucifixion of a man in Saudi Arabia: A man was beheaded and his body crucified in a public place for various alleged crimes.²⁶

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Jeddah, gang-raped woman sentenced to prison, one hundred lashes*, ASIANEWS.IT, <http://www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=14486&size=A> (last visited June 3, 2009).

²⁶ *Man Beheaded*, *supra* note 7.