

The Crisis of Religious Freedom in Saudi Arabia



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Preface

This report is issued in connection with the upcoming visit of Saudi King Abdullah to the United States to attend the religious dialogue conference organized at his request by the United Nations General Assembly. The king's visit is scheduled to start on November 10, 2008.

This report provides an overview of the crisis of religious freedoms and oppressive policies practiced by the government of Saudi Arabia toward its citizens and non-citizens alike.

The Institute for Gulf Affairs

The Institute for Gulf Affairs is an independent, nonpartisan, tax exempt organization that disseminates reliable information about the Gulf region (the Gulf Cooperation Council countries plus Iraq) and produces thoughtful analyses of Gulf politics and international relations. Based in Washington, DC, the Institute is at the center of a global network of reliable individuals, some of whom, due to the closed nature of the Saudi and Gulf political systems, have no other outlet for their views. In order to fulfill this mission, the Institute:

- Convenes conferences in Washington, where informed analysts debate major issues concerning the Gulf countries and US-Gulf Relations.
- Conducts independent research and investigations, reports of which are posted on this website: www.gulfinstitute.org
- Fosters a deeper understanding of the Gulf countries among Washington and international policymakers and members of the press corps by providing them with up-to-date and exclusive information, and by putting them in contact with reliable analysts.
- Sponsors task forces whose reports help define the foreign policy agenda.

The Hadi Al-Mutif Program for Human Rights

The Hadi Al-Mutif Program for Human Rights at the Gulf Institute encompasses all human rights-related initiatives implemented by the Institute at present time. The program is named after Hadi Al-Mutif, a 34-year old citizen of Saudi Arabia and a Fatimid Shi'a, who has been imprisoned since 1993 and kept on death row since 1994. Hadi has been kept in solitary confinement for most of 16 years he has spent behind bars.

Executive Summary

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the largest absolute monarchy in the world today under the sole rule of the tribe of al-Saud. The country is characterized by a complete absence of mechanisms that allow for public participation in the political process.

King Abdullah Bin Abdul-Aziz's carefully crafted image as a reformer is at odds with reality. Since taking office in 2005 the king implemented greater restrictions on political freedoms, cracked down on reform advocates and concentrated power in the hands of the ruling family.

Saudi Arabia is a leading violator of human rights in the world. Citizens' basic human rights are violated every day. Torture is common, and arbitrary arrests are widespread. The government bans the formation of independent human rights and civil society organizations.

Religious freedom in Saudi Arabia does not exist. Non-Muslims are banned from practicing their faith or even possessing its symbols and artifacts. The government also imposes severe restrictions on its citizens, and especially on those who do not follow the Wahhabi strain of Islam.

The religious policies of the Saudi government have contributed to the rise of extremism and terror groups worldwide, including Al-Qaeda and others. Saudis are leading contributors of money and support to international terrorist groups and make up the highest numbers of suicide bombers around the world, which often occurs with either the direct support or the tacit approval of Saudi authorities.

The Saudi educational system provides an ideological foundation for violence and future jihadists. The textbooks currently used in Saudi schools, including those in the U.S. and Europe, preach hatred toward other Christians, Jews, other religions, and even most Muslims.

Saudi Arabia leads the world in discrimination against women and is the only country that practices gender apartheid. Women are treated as the property of their male guardians, and are legally considered unfit to make their own decisions. The Saudi government does not allow women to vote, study most sciences, work in public, drive, play sports, hold senior public positions, travel alone, mix with men, or attend public gatherings.

Freedom of the press is severely limited by the Saudi government through direct intervention and the resulting self-censorship of reporters and editors. Independent media is not allowed in the country and those who operate on the internet are blocked and prosecuted.

Overview

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the largest absolute monarchy in the world today under the sole rule of the tribe of al-Saud. The country is characterized by a complete absence of mechanisms that allow for public participation in the political process.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is ruled by a single tribe that maintains a complete monopoly on power by using its princes to ensure loyalty. The Al-Saud tribe controls the army and the security forces that are used to suppress dissent in the kingdom, often violently. The Saudi equivalent of a constitution is the basic law that was issued *by royal decree* in 1992. The absence of accountability mechanisms permits the government to operate behind a veil of secrecy and avoid public scrutiny. Members of the ruling family are immune from prosecution and are officially exempted from laws applied to Saudi citizens.

In 2007 King Abdullah established a Succession Commission that has further consolidated the power of the Al-Sauds as the sole political force in the country, denying Saudi citizens any role in choosing future monarchs.

The only elections in Saudi Arabia are for 50% of the seats in largely powerless municipal councils. Women are banned from voting in those, which effectively shuts out 54% of the population. Saudi Arabia stance on women's participation in the government is reminiscent of the South Africa's apartheid regime that banned blacks from voting, except segregation in the kingdom is based on gender and not race. Additionally, all members of the ruling family have boycotted municipal elections by refusing to vote.

Political parties and groups in the kingdom are banned, and dissent is not allowed. The government routinely arrests citizens based on their political views; these dissidents are subject to arbitrary detention and even torture. The leading academic Dr. Matrook Al-Falah has been incarcerated in solitary confinement since May 2008 for peaceful criticism of treatment of political prisoners.

Freedom of expression in Saudi Arabia is severely limited. Government critics face sanctions at work and are often targeted for arbitrary arrests and detention by authorities. Government forces (acting on orders from senior officials) use anti-terror crackdowns to round up democracy activists. Earlier this year, the Saudi Arabian government detained 10 men on accusations that they were terrorist financiers. The American government suspects that only two of the men were actually involved in terrorist financing, and suspects that the rest were pro-democracy activists.

The Saudi government of King Abdullah bans movie theaters, and music concerts in the country. There are no music teaching institutions in the country, public or private, due to government bans.

Saudi Arabia leads the world in discrimination against women and is the only country that practices gender apartheid. Women are treated as the property of their male guardians, and are legally considered unfit to make their own decisions. The Saudi government does not allow women to vote, study most sciences, work in public, drive, play sports, hold senior public positions, travel alone, mix with men, or attend public gatherings.

Saudi Arabia earns the title "World's Worst Violator of Women's Rights" due to a long list of discriminatory practices against women. Contrary to King Abdullah's "reformer" image, he supports some of the harshest forms of discrimination against women. For example, King Abdullah chairs the annual festival "Janadriya" (dubbed "Festival of Segregation") that bans women's attendance, except on "Women Only Days". In 2002 the King warned women nurses and doctors at the King Fahad National Guards hospital in Riyadh from driving golf carts used to travel within the hospital grounds. Marriages of female children as young as seven years old continue to happen with government approval.

Lack of Religious Freedom

Religious freedom in Saudi Arabia does not exist. Non-Muslims are banned from practicing their faith or even possessing its symbols and artifacts. The government also imposes severe restrictions on its citizens, and especially on those who do not follow the Wahhabi strain of Islam.

Anyone who fails to follow the official state religion in Saudi Arabia faces harassment, imprisonment, and torture. Conversion from Islam is punishable by death under Saudi law. Those born to non-approved religions, including Christians (both residents and transients), Jews and non-Wahhabi Muslims, such as Shia's or even other Sunni sects, face harsh treatment by the Saudi regime.

The Saudi government bans Christian, Buddhist and other expatriate workers (which number in the millions) from celebrating their religious and cultural holidays, including social and national holidays. Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world without a church despite the presence of millions of Christians in the country. It is also the only country in the world to ban its residents from celebrating the Western New Year and Valentine's Day.

Interestingly, Saudi Arabia takes full advantage of religious freedoms and rights worldwide, and has financed mosques in major world cities such as Washington DC, London, Dublin, and Vienna. Saudi government-sponsored imams are free to lead these mosques and even spread their doctrines of hatred via Saudi-sponsored schools outside of the kingdom.

Saudi Arabia maintains a tight grip on the nation's clerics. Access to government television and radio, and local media is restricted to the Wahhabi clerics funded by the

Saudi government or the ruling tribe. The government does not employ Shia clerics for its religious institutions or allow them to appear on TV and radio.

Blasphemy and Apostasy Cases

Saudi Arabia leads the world in trying people on the charges of apostasy and heresy. The victims are typically Shia Muslims, non-Wahhabi Sunnis, or Saudi secular and liberals. The court system is controlled by the Wahhabi religious establishment that views other religious schools and opinions as heretical.

The threshold for conviction in Saudi courts is very low, resulting in easy convictions without, in some cases, any evidence at all. The majority of apostasy cases have been prompted by the accusations of religious police or Wahhabi zealots, which are rarely verified independently.

Shia Muslim victims included Sadeq Mallallah, executed in 1992, Mohsen Al-Turki, jailed in 2007, Hadi Al-Mutif, on death row since 1993, Ali Al-Misaad, spent 8 months in prison, Mohamed Al-Wail spent 18 months in prison after a death sentence was canceled by King Fahd. Recently, two Turkish Alevi's were released from death row in Saudi Arabia after the Turkish President and Prime Minister intervened directly with the Saudi King.

King Faisal's Prize in Bigotry

Another example of Saudi official religious bias is King Faisal Foundation, owned by the foreign minister Saud Al-Faisal's family, that awards annual prizes in several categories such as service to Islam, medicine and literature. While its recipients include over 200 people from approximately 30 countries worldwide, it has never recognized a single Jew or Shia Muslim scientist, writer, or philanthropist in its entire 30-year history.

Christians and Jews

Symbols of Christianity are banned by the Saudi government. This includes Bibles, crucifixes, crosses and other holy symbols even for personal use. The Saudi government bans the construction of churches in Saudi Arabia. Non-Muslims cannot be buried in Saudi Arabia and must be sent to their home country for burial as they are considered unclean unbelievers by the Saudi government religious establishment.

Christians are often subject to arrest and detention by Saudi forces, when they are caught privately worshipping according to their religion. Some of these prisoners of conscience have even been deported by the authorities for practicing their beliefs. Christian, Jewish and non Muslim prisoners are not allowed to receive religious counseling according to their faith.

Shia Arabs

The Saudi government has the dubious honor of being recognized as the most anti-Shia government in the world. Shia Muslims who make up around 20% (over 4 million) of the people of Saudi Arabia are severely discriminated against and are considered heretics by the Saudi government official religious establishment. They are not allowed to play any political, social, and religious role in the country, or to serve in the army and other security services. The government bans Shia books, education, music, and art. Shia testimony is not allowed in Saudi courts.

Shia's in Saudi Arabia are not allowed to hold any senior government positions. There are no Shia ministers, diplomats, security officers, army commanders, air force pilots, religion teachers, head of government agencies, judges, mayors, official imams, royal advisors, heads of public companies, and many senior governments positions. There is not a single Shia Muslim from Saudi Arabia among the ranks of the huge Saudi delegation traveling to the United States with King Abdullah.

The Fatimid Shia (Ismailis) of Najran, an ancient indigenous community with a 1200-year history, are severely treated by the Saudi government. Over 3000 members of their community have been forcibly transferred from their homes to other cities around the country. In September Human Rights Watch issued a damning report on the status of the Ismaili communities of Najran and the threat to their survival. Dozens of religious prisoners from that community remains in prison, among them is Hadi Saeed Al-Mutif who was arrested in 1993 and is currently on death row in Najran Mabhith prison.

Hadi, a Saudi Arabian man who has been imprisoned for nearly 15 years because of his religious beliefs. Hadi was 18 years old when he was arrested in 1993 after making a comment during prayer at his mosque. Because he is a member of the Ismaili Shia's, a sect of Islam persecuted by the intolerant Saudi policies, he was sentenced to death. This harsh sentence was a direct form of persecution for his religious beliefs by the Wahhabi extremists running the Saudi government.¹

Hadi was denied access to legal representation and his sentencing showed a distressing degree of bias toward the rights of religious minorities.

After nearly 16 years in prison, solitary confinement and little contact with his family, Hadi urgently needs medical care. He has been hospitalized several times after his hunger strike last year in an effort to bring attention to his plight. His case was the focus of efforts of international human rights organizations,



Hadi Al-Mutif on Death Row for 16 Years

including the Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, as well as the United Nations and the U.S. Dept. of State. However, he remains in prison facing death by the sword.

The government builds most mosques in the country, but even privately built ones must be turned over to the government for control. It is impossible for Shia and non-Wahhabi Sunni Muslims to build their own mosques. For example, there have been instances where Saudi authorities refused to issue the necessary permit for mosques or cut off power and utilities to mosques they reject. There are very few Shia mosques in the country; the first time one obtained a government permit to be built was in 2001.

Sufi Muslims

Another community that faces discrimination from Saudi Arabia is the followers of Sufi Islam, often portrayed as heretical by the Saudi authorities. They have been essentially forced underground by the Saudi authorities until very recently. Wahhabi Muslims routinely harass Sufis, and damage and destroy their shrines and the Saudi government still bans Sufi literature from being printed or possessed.

Religious Oppression Linked to Terrorism

The religious policies of the Saudi government have contributed to the rise of extremism and terror groups worldwide, including Al-Qaeda and others. Saudis are leading contributors of money and support to international terrorist groups and make up the highest numbers of suicide bombers around the world, which often occurs with either the direct support or the tacit approval of Saudi authorities.

Leading Saudi religious officials routinely issue fatwas that advocate violence and hatred toward followers of other religions. In July 2007 it became known that Saudis made up the majority of foreign fighters in Iraq and conducted most of the horrific suicide bombings. The Saudi government has not taken any meaningful actions to stop the flow of Saudis into Iraq.



King Adullah with Al-Alshaikh and Luhaidan 2007

Senior Wahhabi clerics appointed by King Abdullah such as Sheik Saleh al-Luhaidan, the chief of the Saudi judiciary, approved the transfer of men and money to Al-Zarqawi from Saudi Arabia. Luhaidan's job is to prosecute terrorists - but he was caught encouraging them. In April 2005, the Institute for Gulf Affairs (then called the Saudi Institute) gave NBC a tape of Luhaidan instructing Saudis to send money and men to Iraq

in order to aid Zaraqawi. NBC confirmed the authenticity of the tape by calling Luhaidan. Yet Luhaidan remains at his position to date, with no action ever being taken against him by the Saudi government. Instead, Luhaidan meets with King Abdullah frequently. In recent month Luhaidan issued a fatwa broadcast by the government radio calling for execution of owners of “immoral” satellite TV stations.

The current Saudi Mufti Sheikh AbdulAziz Al-Sheikh issued a fatwa on May 11, 2000 approving cyber terrorism by hacking, destroying and sending viruses to websites and email accounts “used for immoral purposes.”²

Saudi School Textbooks

The Saudi educational system provides an ideological foundation for violence and future jihadists. The textbooks currently used in Saudi schools, including those in the U.S. and Europe, preach hatred toward other Christians, Jews, other religions, and even most Muslims.

A 2006 investigation by the Institute for Gulf Affairs and Freedom House’s Center for Religious Freedom found that the textbooks teach the Protocols of the Elders of Zion as fact and implicitly endorse slavery of non-believers. The constant theme of these books is that those who do not follow Islam exactly as the Salafi clerics dictate are not worthy of respect by “good” Muslims.

The Saudi Academies in Washington DC, Berlin, Bonn, Rome, Madrid, London, and Ankara among others are using these same textbooks to teach both Saudi and local students hatred against others, contradicting the morals and values children are expected to learn in the European countries. Many of these teachings clash with the European criminal and civil codes on xenophobia, racism, and hate.

These textbooks teach that Muslims are engaged in permanent battle with Christians and Jews until the Day of Judgment. Thus, these textbooks are breeding a new generation of terrorists. Saudi government schoolbooks encouraged extreme hatred against the Jewish people and its faith. It also encourages the annihilation of Jews, in the famous talking tree narration.

Ninth Grade Saudi textbook on Hadith says “Narrated by Abu Hurayrah: The Prophet said, The hour [of judgment] will not come until the Muslims fight the Jews and kill them. [It will not come] until the Jew hides behind rocks and trees. [It will not come] until the rocks or the trees say, 'O Muslim! O servant of God! There is a Jew behind me. Come and kill him.' Except for the gharqad, which is a tree of the Jews.”

Tenth Grade textbook on Monotheism contains a lengthy discussion condemning as “polytheists” other Islamic traditions that interpret the Qur’an differently, alluding to other Sunnis, Shiites and Sufis, who together comprise the majority of Muslims residing in Saudi Arabia, as well as in the world at large. The followers of the Asharite doctrine

(Sunni Muslims found throughout the world) and the Maturidi doctrine (Sunni Muslims found primarily in Pakistan and India), who comprise hundreds of millions of Sunni Muslims in the world, are referenced by name as “polytheists,” or idol worshipers:

Public Executions

There are over 2000 people currently on death row in Saudi jails. All executions are carried out in public using the medieval method of beheading. The Saudi government continues to refuse to use modern methods for executions, or to carry them out inside prisons. Children as young as 12 years old have been sentenced to death by beheading. A recent report by a Saudi-owned news channel revealed that at least 126 children under age 17 are on death row in Saudi Arabia.³

The justice system is primitive and sectarian in nature. Only Muslims following the official state religion (Wahhabi Islam) are allowed to be judges, which excludes the majority of Saudi citizens, and is especially harmful to religious minorities. Judges are not independent arbiters but rather follow the ruling family and its supporters. Criminal trials are closed to the public, creating a lack of accountability in the justice system. Witnesses are not allowed to participate in trials, which is a violation of due process. The accused have very limited rights to counsel, and are not permitted to participate in their own defense.

¹ <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/10/10/saudia14372.htm>

² ©Al-Dawa Magazine issue 1741 May 11, 2000

³ http://www.alarabiya.net/save_print.php?save=1&cont_id=18468