



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
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IN 2003, THE U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM INCREASED ITS ATTENTION ON SAUDI ARABIA. IN MAY 2003 IT ISSUED A REPORT WITH POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS ON SAUDI ARABIA. ON NOVEMBER 10, 2003, COMMISSIONER KHALED ABU EL FADL PUBLISHED AN OP-ED APPROVED BY THE COMMISSION IN THE *WALL STREET JOURNAL* ADDRESSING THE URGENT NEED FOR CONGRESS TO INITIATE AND MAKE PUBLIC A STUDY ON SAUDI EXPORTATION OF INTOLERANCE. MOST RECENTLY, ON NOVEMBER 18, 2003, THE COMMISSION HELD A HEARING ON CAPITOL HILL TITLED, "IS SAUDI ARABIA A STRATEGIC THREAT?: THE GLOBAL PROPAGATION OF INTOLERANCE."

"...there is no
religious
freedom in
Saudi Arabia."

State Department International
Religious Freedom Report, 2003

Saudi Arabia

FEBRUARY 2004

After it became known that 15 of the 19 hijackers who perpetrated the attacks of September 11, 2001 were Saudi nationals, urgent questions emerged about whether intolerant and repressive policies within Saudi Arabia were promoting extremism and terrorism abroad. There have been a growing number of reports that funding coming from Saudi Arabia has been used to finance religious schools and other activities that are alleged to support religious intolerance, and, in some cases, violence associated with certain Islamic militant and extremist organizations in several parts of the world. Other reports have identified members of extremist and militant groups that have been trained as clerics in Saudi Arabia. These reports raise troubling questions about the Saudi government's role in propagating worldwide an ideology that is incompatible with both the war against terrorism, as well as internationally recognized guarantees of the right to freedom of religion or belief. This, in turn, raises questions about U.S. policy toward Saudi Arabia.

In order to further explore these issues and their implications for U.S. policy, the Commission issued a report on Saudi Arabia in May 2003 and held a public hearing in November 2003 on Saudi Arabia's reported export of intolerance. At the hearing, the Commission heard from four panelists: Dr. Mai Yamani, Research Fellow, Middle East Program, Royal Institute for International Affairs; Ambassador Martin Indyk, Director, Saban Center for Middle East Policy, Brookings Institution; Mr. Robert Baer, former CIA operative and author of *Sleeping with the Devil: How Washington Sold our Soul for Saudi Crude*; and Mr. David Aufhauser, former General Counsel, Treasury Department and former Chair, National Security Council Policy Coordinating Committee on Terrorist Financing. The panelists agreed that Saudi exportation of intolerance, the need to reform the education system, and addressing the virulently inciteful government-controlled media were among the most pressing issues that need to be dealt with both by the Saudis themselves and as a matter of U.S. policy.

Each further confirmed and highlighted Commission concerns and U.S. policy recommendations outlined in the May 2003 report.

The Commission has concluded, as did the State Department, that there is no religious freedom in Saudi Arabia. The ramifications of this are felt both inside Saudi Arabia and around the globe. The Saudi government forcefully and almost completely limits the public practice or expression of religion to a narrow religious ideology commonly known in the West as "Wahhabism."¹ Consequently, non-Wahhabi Sunnis, Shiites, and other Muslims, as well as the more than two million Christian, Hindu, and other non-Muslim foreign workers, have been subject to severe violations of their human rights, including religious freedom. These violations have included harassment, detention, arrest, deportation, imprisonment, and torture. For several years, the Commission has recommended that successive U.S. Administrations designate Saudi Arabia a "country of particular concern" for its "egregious, systematic and ongoing violations of religious freedom."

In recent years, the Saudi government has conceded greater responsibility to its Wahhabi religious establishment in such areas as the judiciary, education, religious guidance (i.e., the *mutawaa* or religious police), and the propagation of Islam globally. The application of repressive religious laws has had a particular impact on Saudi women and female foreign workers. Saudi authorities continue to charge individuals with apostasy and blasphemy, crimes that can be punishable by death. Underlying these repressive policies on religious freedom and other human rights is an education system that is comprised primarily of a religious curriculum – mandatory for all students – that has been found to contain hate-filled and discriminatory material. Anti-Semitic, anti-Christian, and anti-Western sentiment also remains prevalent in the government-controlled media and in sermons delivered by clerics, who are under the authority of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs.

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IN 2003, CONGRESS CONTINUED TO SHOW A SUBSTANTIAL INTEREST IN SAUDI ARABIA. TWO HOUSE RESOLUTIONS (H.CON.RES. 242 AND H.CON.RES. 244) WERE INTRODUCED IN JULY FOCUSING ON REFORMING THE SAUDI EDUCATION SYSTEM AND HIGHLIGHTING HUMAN RIGHTS AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONCERNS, RESPECTIVELY. A SIMILAR SENATE RESOLUTION (S.CON.RES. 14) WAS INTRODUCED IN MARCH 2003 REGARDING THE EDUCATION SYSTEM. H.CON.RES. 244 CALLS ON THE U.S. GOVERNMENT TO URGE SAUDI ARABIA TO IMPLEMENT SEVERAL OF THE SPECIFIC REFORMS THAT THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDED IN ITS MAY 2003 REPORT. IN NOVEMBER, HOUSE AND SENATE BILLS (S. 1888 AND H.R. 3643) WERE INTRODUCED ON SAUDI FUNDING OF CHARITIES, SCHOOLS, AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS OUTSIDE OF THE KINGDOM THAT AID AND ABET TERRORISM. FURTHERMORE, A NUMBER OF CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS, BOTH IN THE HOUSE AND SENATE, WERE HELD IN 2003 ON SAUDI FINANCING OF EXTREMISM AND WAHHABI INFLUENCE IN THE UNITED STATES.

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Religious police enforce strict dress code

BBC photo

Saudi Reform Efforts

Since September 11, 2001, and in particular since the May 2003 terrorist bombing in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, Saudi government officials, including Crown Prince Abdullah, have made statements denouncing religious extremism and highlighting reform efforts in the areas of education, eradicating extremism in mosques and abuses of the *mutawaa*, municipal elections, and funding and oversight of Saudi charities that finance operations outside of the country.

In September 2003, more than 300 Saudi men and women from all regions of the Kingdom signed a document addressed

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David Aufhauser, former General Counsel, U.S. Treasury Department

to King Fahd calling on the government “to recognize that holding out on reform for too long, and not allowing popular participation in decision making, are among the main factors that have contributed to the dangerous turning point at which that our country now finds itself.”²

According to the witnesses at the Commission’s November 2003 hearing, current reform efforts by the Saudi government have not gone far enough to address effectively extremism within the Kingdom, the exportation of intolerance globally, and problems in the education system, among other things. Indeed, in her testimony, Dr. Yamani said, “the Saudi royal family has shown no inclination towards genuine reform.”³

Mr. Aufhauser highlighted some of the Saudi government’s internal reform efforts, but added that if these kinds of reforms are indeed sincere, the Saudi government must expand its domestic efforts to regulate funding activities outside the Kingdom and address the propagation of intolerance by Saudi-trained clerics throughout the world.

The Commission has noted discrepancies among Saudi officials about reform initiatives and other efforts. A recent example is the reported decision of the Saudi government to shut down all Islamic affairs departments in its embassies globally.⁴ A few days after the initial press report quoted

an unnamed Saudi official confirming the intended closings, the Minister of Islamic Affairs publicly said that an article in the *Washington Post* was incorrect and that “the [Islamic affairs] centers are working and they are part of the Kingdom’s message.”⁵ It has been widely reported that Islamic affairs sections in Saudi embassies globally have been responsible for both distributing religious materials with inflammatory and hate-filled language toward non-Wahhabi religious groups and providing diplomatic status to Muslim clerics, even non-Saudi clerics, some of whom have been known to preach hate and intolerance of other religious communities.

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Commission Recommendations for U.S. Policy

The Commission issued several recommendations regarding U.S.-Saudi relations in May 2003, which have been updated to include evidence presented at the hearing.

For four consecutive years, the Commission has recommended that the U.S. government should designate Saudi Arabia a “country of particular concern” for its “egregious, systematic and ongoing violations of religious freedom” under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. To date, successive Administrations have failed to do so.

In general, the U.S. government should press for meaningful progress on reforms and support those seeking reform in Saudi Arabia. These reforms – many of which have already been identified by the Saudis themselves – should address religious freedom and other human rights conditions inside the Kingdom, as well as funding and other avenues of exporting hatred and intolerance. Several specific suggestions are given below.

“As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export.”

President George W. Bush

ADDRESS GLOBAL PROPAGATION

- The U.S. government should task experts designated by the Commission or the General Accounting Office to undertake a public study to determine whether and how – and the extent to which – the Saudi government, individual members of the royal family, or Saudi-funded individuals or institutions are propagating globally, including in the United States, a religious ideology that explicitly promotes hate, intolerance, and human rights violations, in some cases violence, toward members of other religious groups, both Muslim and non-Muslim. Congress should authorize and fund such a study.
- The U.S. government should request the Saudi government to provide an accounting of what kinds of Saudi support go to which religious schools, mosques, centers of learning, and other religious organizations globally, including in the United States.
- The U.S. government should urge the Saudi government to stop funding religious activities abroad until the Saudis know the content of the teachings and are satisfied that they do not promote hatred, intolerance, and other human rights violations.
- The U.S. government should urge the Saudi government to monitor, regulate, and report publicly about the activities of Saudi charitable organizations based outside the Kingdom in countries throughout the world.
- The U.S. government should urge the Saudi government to: a) stop providing diplomatic status to Islamic clerics and educators teaching outside the Kingdom; and b) close down those Islamic affairs sections in Saudi embassies throughout the world that have been responsible for propagating intolerance.

ENCOURAGE REFORM

- The U.S. government should publicly support and encourage implementation of numerous Saudi government statements to carry out political, educational, and judicial reforms in the Kingdom. Specifically, the U.S. government should: a) raise concerns about human rights, including religious freedom, in its anti-terrorism dialogue with the Saudi government; and b) institutionalize a high-level ongoing dialogue on the Saudi reform agenda.
- The U.S. government should urge the Saudi government to cease messages of hatred, intolerance, or incitement to violence against non-Wahhabi Muslims and non-Muslim religious groups in the educational curricula and textbooks, as well as in government-controlled mosques and media.
- The U.S. government should expand its efforts to support initiatives to advance human rights, including freedom of religion and belief, in Saudi Arabia; the U.S. State Department should develop a country plan identifying activities concerning Saudi Arabia and report to Congress on the objectives and details of the plan and its implementation. In particular:
 - a) the State Department should ensure that public diplomacy, democracy, human rights, and other assistance programs directed toward the Middle East include components specifically for Saudi Arabia. This should include, for example, the Middle East Partnership Initiative – a U.S. aid initiative that focuses on political, educational, and economic reforms in the Middle East, as well as the empowerment of women; and
 - b) the U.S. government should take steps to overcome obstacles to broadcasting Radio Sawa – a U.S. government-funded, 24-hour Arabic language news and music radio service – throughout Saudi Arabia.

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“...the Saudi royal family has shown no inclination towards genuine reform.”

Mai Yamani, Royal Institute of International Affairs

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The conditions inside Saudi Arabia, as well as the possibility that the Saudi government has played a role in spreading hatred, intolerance, and even violence against both Muslims and non-Muslims, have very significant implications for U.S. foreign policy. Advancing human rights, including religious freedom, has not heretofore been a public feature of the U.S.-Saudi relationship. The Commission has recommended that it should be.

Exporting Intolerance

Witnesses at the November hearing endorsed the Commission's 2003 recommendation that Congress should authorize a study to determine whether, how, and the extent to which the Saudi government, members of the royal family, or Saudi-funded individuals or institutions are propagating globally a religious ideology that explicitly promotes hate and violence toward members of other religious groups, including disfavored Muslims. Ambassador Indyk testified that “Shining the light on Saudi practices is very important... I would only urge you to go beyond it, to shine the light not just on Saudi practices when it comes to exporting intolerance, but also on the Saudi education curriculum and the Saudi media, which continues to this day to trot out the most intolerant, racist, and anti-Semitic diatribes.”⁶ Mr. Baer testified that the U.S. government should compel the Saudi government to completely “withdraw support for these groups [terrorist groups and madrassas where intolerance is preached].”⁷

Mr. Aufhauser argued that the Saudis should not fund any religious activities abroad unless they are convinced that what is being taught is not intolerant. He noted that while serving in the U.S. government, “more than one minister – prime minister

– told me that they will not even let a Saudi cleric into their land anymore for fear that the preaching would be preaching of hate and revolt and violence rather than religion.”⁸ He added that “when you mix that [financing] with religious teachings and the thousands of madrassas that condemn pluralism and mark nonbelievers as enemies, you have a combustible compound that really needs to be addressed.”⁹

In a September 2003 press report,

study would help assess the effectiveness of reforms announced to date and highlight areas where the U.S. government could urge that further steps be taken.

It is important to note that the Commission is not recommending that the U.S. government conduct a study on the nature of the religion of Islam or the Saudi government's favored interpretation of Islam. Rather, the study would focus on the alleged activities of a government that



Commissioners at November USCIRF hearing

USCIRF Communications Office photo

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud acknowledged that it may be possible that individual Saudis have funded religious schools abroad that preach intolerance.¹⁰ He has stated publicly that the Saudi government would welcome information about this funding, which he characterized as a crime in Saudi Arabia. However, Prince Saud has not addressed the possibility that members of the royal family or Saudi government also may have contributed funds.

As pointed out by Commissioner Khaled Abou El Fadl in a November 10, 2003 *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, “What we seek are facts – whether they vindicate or implicate Saudi Arabia.” The problem is serious and warrants investigation. The

may have a strong effect on the protection of religious freedom and the promotion of violence and terrorism worldwide, where both Muslims and non-Muslims are adversely affected.

In his landmark speech in November 2003 commemorating 20 years of the National Endowment for Democracy, President Bush, even though speaking to the larger Middle East, fittingly described Commission concerns about the lack of religious freedom in the Kingdom and Saudi Arabia's global exportation of intolerance: “As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export.”

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1 Those in Saudi Arabia who espouse the Wahhabi doctrine generally refer to themselves as Salafi (one who returns to the pure roots of Islam) or muwahhidun (unitarians).
2 Khalid Al-Dakhil, “Saudi Arabia's Reform Movement: A Historical Glimpse,” Arab Reform Bulletin, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2003 (<http://www.ceip.org/files/Publications/ARB-10-15.asp?from=pubtype>, accessed December 5, 2003).
3 U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, “Is Saudi Arabia a Strategic Threat?: the Global Propagation of Intolerance,” November 18, 2003 (<http://www.uscirf.gov/hearings/18Nov03/saudi.php3>, accessed December 2, 2003).
4 Susan Schmidt and Caryle Murphy, The Washington Post, “U.S. Revokes Visa of Cleric at Saudi Embassy,” December 7, 2003, A1. For further developments on this issue, see Caryle Murphy and Susan Schmidt, The Washington Post, “U.S. Revokes Visas of 16 at Islamic Institute,” January 29, 2004, A10.

5 Saudi Press Agency, “Saudis Deny Closing Religious Centers,” December 9, 2003.
6 U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, “Is Saudi Arabia a Strategic Threat?”
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Lisa Beyer, “Inside the Kingdom,” Time, 51, September 15, 2003.