



JANUARY 2007

COUNTRY SUMMARY

Saudi Arabia

Overall human rights conditions remain poor in Saudi Arabia, an absolute monarchy. Despite international and domestic pressure to implement reforms, King Abdullah has not met expectations of improvements following his succession to the throne in August 2005. The government undertook no major human rights reforms in 2006, and there were signs of backsliding on issues of human rights defenders, freedom of association, and freedom of expression.

Saudi law does not protect many basic rights and the government places strict limits on freedom of association, assembly, and expression. Arbitrary detention, mistreatment and torture of detainees, restrictions on freedom of movement, and lack of official accountability remain serious concerns. Saudi women continue to face serious obstacles to their participation in society. Many foreign workers, especially women, face exploitative working conditions.

The United States in 2006 transferred 29 Saudi detainees at Guantanamo Bay to Saudi custody. Nine of the 29 were released after three months, in addition to three other former Guantanamo detainees who had been transferred in July 2005.

Political and Social Reform

Nascent political reform stalled in 2006. The government did not take up the recommendations of the fifth and most recent National Dialogue session of December 2005, or of previous Dialogue sessions, such as considering women for judgeships.

Conservative views hardened in response to small steps in social liberalization. In February 2006 conservatives including the religious police harassed visitors and authors, especially women, at the Riyadh International Book Fair, which displayed a Bible and works by the banned author Turki al-Hamad for the first time. In March

conservatives rallied against proposals to reform the education curriculum, which had received strong US support.

Several court decisions raised concern over a lack of standardized canon law to rein in biased judges. In February a judge barred a Saudi Shia from bearing legal witness to the marriage of his Sunni boss's son. Another judge annulled a marriage, finding the husband "inadequate" because he followed the Ismaili (Shia) creed and not the prevailing Wahhabi (Sunni) creed like his wife. A third judge annulled a marriage, finding in favor of a man who claimed the inferior tribal lineage of his sister's husband made the latter ineligible to marry into their family, although Saudi sharia law places no conditions of heritage on couples who intend to marry.

Arbitrary Detention, Torture and Ill-Treatment, and the Death Penalty

Dr. Saud al-Musaibih, the head of a special consultative committee of the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, said 700 detainees "who were not involved in terrorist acts," but suspected of "harboring extremist thoughts," had been released, the newspaper *Okaz* reported on October 12.

Dammam secret police (*mabahith*) moved Shia activist Kamil 'Abbas Al Ahmad from the General Prison to their own prison one week before his five-year sentence was due to expire in July. *Mabahith* officials denied all knowledge of Al Ahmad when Human Rights Watch telephoned giving the date of his transfer. After the governmental Human Rights Commission intervened, the *mabahith* released Al Ahmad in September.

A former prisoner in Mecca General Prison alleged to Human Rights Watch that prison guards regularly beat him, burned his back on a hot metal block, and kept him in solitary confinement for six months. He said such abuse was routine during his time as an inmate between 2002 and 2006. Thirty-six inmates of al-Ha'ir prison in Riyadh in late 2005 issued a "Cry for Help to Global Rights Organizations" detailing their "despondence" due to beatings in prison and public lashings.

Saudi judges routinely issue sentences of thousands of lashes as punishment, often carried out in public. The beatings lead to severe mental trauma and physical pain, and the victims do not receive medical treatment.

The kingdom carried out some 22 executions as of November 2006, around one-fourth the figure for 2005.

Freedom of Expression, Assembly, and Association

In February 2006 Saudi authorities briefly closed *al-Shams* newspaper for republishing cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad deemed offensive. In March 2006 the *mabahith* arrested Muhsin al-'Awaji for several days for openly criticizing the king's alleged heavy reliance on the advice of liberals. In April the *mabahith* arrested Rabbah al-Quwa'i for "harboring destructive thoughts" displayed in his internet writings critiquing al Qaeda. The judge extracted an unspecified pledge from al-Quwa'i, who described himself as "half-free" to Human Rights Watch following his release. In June the *mabahith* arrested Sa'd bin Zu'air for 20 days for saying in an interview on *al-Arabiya* television that the death of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi (the head of al Qaeda in Iraq) was "sad for most Muslims."

In February 2006 the authorities arrested several Shia publicly celebrating their religious holiday '*Ashura*' in Safwa. In August security forces stopped Shias who had begun to demonstrate against Israeli attacks in Lebanon. In October security forces arrested four Shia in the Eastern Province for several days for displaying Hezbollah emblems.

In September 2006 around 300 Ismailis demonstrated peacefully and undisturbed in Najran against discrimination, amidst a heavy security presence.

In March the appointed national Shura (Advisory) Council did not pass a draft law regulating nongovernmental organizations that would have further restricted freedom of association, including by giving a governmental National Commission extensive and excessively intrusive supervisory powers over nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Human Rights Defenders

More than one year after the king pardoned three prominent reformers, Ali al-Dumaini, Abdullah al-Hamid, and Matruk al-Falih, and their lawyer, Abd al-Rahman al-Lahim, the government has not responded to their demands to lift a ban on their traveling abroad.

In September the *mabahith* detained women's rights activist Wajeha al-Huwaider, forcing her to pledge to refrain from speaking to the media and to cease her human rights advocacy as a condition for release. Saudi non-judicial authorities often extract such pledges from regime critics.

In August 2006 the government failed to reply to a request to open a new human rights organization. The government also continued to refuse to license Human Rights First in Saudi Arabia, an independent group that nonetheless continued to monitor violations.

The government-approved National Society for Human Rights (NSHR) became more active and outspoken in 2006. It proposed an HIV patients bill of rights, and publicly criticized the draft NGO law. The NSHR also called for judicial reforms to ensure equal sentences for the same crime.

The Ministry of Interior approved the long-delayed governmental Human Rights Commission's 24-member board, but has yet to announce the members who reportedly include several Shia (including one Ismaili), but no women. The king has instructed all government bodies to cooperate with the commission.

Women's Rights

Women in Saudi Arabia continue to suffer from severe discrimination in the workplace, home, and the courts, and from restrictions on their freedom of movement and their choice of partners. The religious police enforce strict gender segregation and a women's public dress code of head-to-toe covering. Women are excluded from the weekly *majlis* (council), where senior members of the royal family listen to the complaints and proposals of citizens.

Women need permission from their male guardian to work, study, or travel. In February 2006 the Transport Committee of the Shura Council declined a motion to discuss the possibility of allowing women to drive. Minister of Information Iyad al-Madani, however, said there was no obstacle to women applying for driver's licenses.

A directive to replace male staff in lingerie shops with Saudi women under a new provision in the labor law allowing women to work in jobs "suitable to their nature" met with strong conservative objections. In December 2005 women could cast ballots for women running for local chamber of commerce boards; women won seats in Jeddah, Lama al-Sulaiman, and Nashwa al-Ta'her.

Migrant Worker Rights

Many of the estimated 8.8 million foreign workers face exploitative working conditions, including 16-hour workdays, no breaks or food and drink, and being locked in dormitories during their time off. The government promised to publish in November 2006 a special annex to the new labor law that regulates domestic migrant workers' rights. Women domestic workers, whom the labor law currently does not protect, are often at risk of serious abuse in private homes.

In September the government began to ease its discriminatory ban of August 2004 on all Chadians renewing their residency permits, attending school, and accessing emergency medical care. Security forces in October rounded up 7,000 mostly illegal immigrants around the Bukhariya quarter of Ta'if, the Hindawiya and Karantina quarters of Jeddah, and elsewhere. The authorities deported tens of thousands of illegal immigrants in 2006 without assessing whether they have a well founded fear of persecution in their home country.

Key International Actors

Saudi Arabia is a key United States ally. The US-Saudi Strategic Dialogue, initiated in 2005, held its second round of working meetings in March 2006, but human rights discussions in the working group on "Education, Exchange and Human Resources" produced no results.

The 2006 US State Department's international religious freedom report maintained Saudi Arabia's designation as "a country of particular concern," but no longer claimed that "freedom of religion does not exist." Citing a Saudi undertaking in July to reform school textbooks, curb the religious police's powers of arrest, and strengthen the Human Rights Commission, the US government did not impose sanctions for religious freedom violations.

The United Kingdom in August reportedly agreed to sell Saudi Arabia 72 advanced Eurofighter "Typhoon" war planes worth around \$10 billion. The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office's *Human Rights Report 2006* continued to list Saudi Arabia as a "major country of concern."