

# Countries of Particular Concern: Religious Freedom and the Middle East

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Nov 17, 2005

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

On November 8, the State Department released the International Religious Freedom Report, its annual survey of religious freedom across the world ([read \(http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/\)](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/) the report online). Several of the designated "countries of particular concern" (CPCs) are in the Middle East: Iran, Sudan, and embarrassingly, in light of longstanding close diplomatic ties to the United States, Saudi Arabia. Despite legislative requirements, it is unlikely that the designation will have much impact on U.S. policy toward these countries.

## Background: The International Religious Freedom Report

The annual report, required by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRF), is an incredibly detailed -- and, for many U.S. allies, occasionally uncomfortable -- account of religious observance in 192 countries. But the center of its attention is states that have been designated as CPCs by the secretary of state, nations where governments have "engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom." This year, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice did not change the states on this list, which remains mainly centered on Asia: Burma, China, North Korea, and Vietnam. Eritrea is also named. The only other CPCs are the Middle Eastern states of Iran, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia.

Washington argues that religious freedom is a universally acknowledged right; it is at the heart of the American identity; and it is one of the main principles on which the United States was founded. The State Department declares that the United States "has managed to resolve religious conflicts without resorting to sectarian violence, and supports the right of all countries to speak out when human rights, including religious freedom, are abused." That said, the State Department seems to regard its own report as an irritant to its agenda of diplomatic business. The IRF established a U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to make policy recommendations on the subject to the executive and legislative branches. Testifying before a congressional committee on November 15, its chairman, Michael Cromartie, expressed regrets that Pakistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan were not also designated as CPCs in the 2005 report.

The IRF requires the U.S. government to take active steps in response to a CPC designation, without specifying what

those steps might be.

## Religious Freedom in the Middle East

Saudi Arabia. "Freedom of religion does not exist in Saudi Arabia," successive reports have declared. Nevertheless, the kingdom was only designated a CPC in 2004. Riyadh appears unmoved.

In an interview in October, King Abdullah argued that Saudi Arabia should be likened to Vatican City, where only the Roman Catholic form of Christianity is recognized. There are frequent incidents of intolerance. On November 13, Reuters reported from Riyadh that a Saudi teacher had been sentenced to 40 months in prison and 750 lashes for mocking Islam after he praised the Bible and Jews in a class. After Riyadh's designation as a CPC, a March 15, 2005, deadline was set for the required U.S. actions, but the State Department took no action until September 23, when Rice authorized a 180-day waiver "in order to allow additional time for the continuation of discussions." The 2005 report says the U.S. ambassador to Riyadh discussed "concerns over the lack of religious freedom with a wide range of senior government and religious leaders," but gives no indication of progress.

Coincidentally, on same day that Reuters reported the sentence of whipping for the Saudi teacher's statements of religious tolerance, Rice held the first round of a newly established "strategic dialogue" with the Saudis in Jeddah. Six working groups were established, covering counterterrorism, military affairs, energy, economic and financial affairs, consular affairs, and education. All were obvious areas for discussion in the relationship with the world's largest oil exporter and the birthplace of Osama bin Laden, but there was no mention of religious freedom.

The Religious Freedom Commission has already made policy proposals for Saudi Arabia. These include a ban on exports to any Saudi agency responsible for committing severe violations of religious freedom (a measure clearly aimed at the kingdom's religious police); a ban on entry to the United States of Saudi government officials responsible for violations of religious freedom; and a ban on Saudi government officials "responsible for propagating globally an ideology that explicitly promotes hate, intolerance, and human rights violations." None seem likely to be adopted. In his November 15 congressional testimony, Cromartie was reduced to expressing hope for future progress.

Iran. The State Department report is damning: "Members of religious minorities -- including Sunni Muslims, Bahais, Jews, and Christians -- reported imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on their religious beliefs." Since the United States has no diplomatic relations with Iran, Washington is reduced to public statements, encouraging other countries to press for action, and working through the United Nations and nongovernmental organizations. Iran has been a CPC since 1999, when the label was first used (the status has to be renewed every two years), and, unless Tehran radically changes its style of government, looks likely to remain on the list.

Sudan. There is (very) theoretical hope for progress from Khartoum. Sudan's 1998 constitution and its new draft constitution provide for freedom of religion. But the government came to power in 1989 calling for the Islamization of society and continues to discriminate against non-Muslims and, as in the fighting in Darfur, against Muslims from tribes and groups not affiliated with the ruling party. Apart from Darfur, much depends on the protocols negotiated in the peace process ending the civil war between the dominant Muslim north and the non-Muslim and largely Christian south of the country. Officials from the U.S. embassy in Khartoum made efforts to contact Muslim and Christian leaders and explain U.S. policy. In addition, under economic sanctions listed in the IRF, the United States abstains from or opposes decisions by international financial organizations to make loans to Sudan.

Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. The 2005 report's executive summary mentions Egypt, Israel, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. Some improvement is reported in Egypt, but "there continued to be abuses and restrictions." Christians were discriminated against in the public sector and Bahais were denied civil

documents. In Israel, the report says, "some non-Jews, primarily Arab Muslims and Christians, continued to experience discrimination in the areas of education, housing, and employment." But "Palestinian violence" is criticized for preventing "some Israelis from reaching Jewish holy sites in the occupied territories." Turkey is reported for "some deterioration in contrast to previous positive trends." The report disapprovingly notes Turkey's "broad ban on wearing Muslim religious dress in government facilities." The United Arab Emirates, whose government was criticized three years ago for giving a platform to Holocaust deniers, wins plaudits for taking "steps that demonstrated respect for religious freedom."

### The Challenge for US Policy

There remains the danger that the annual State Department report will become a dead letter, serving as a goldmine of information only for academic researchers, and that the Religious Freedom Commission will become increasingly frustrated by its powerlessness. The longest section of the 2005 report's executive summary lists U.S. actions to advance international religious freedom in the CPCs and several other states. That list reflects time and energy invested by U.S. diplomats but also suggests a triumph of form over substance.

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Policy #1051

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