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## **Religious freedom not a US priority toward allies Egypt and Saudi Arabia**

ICC (23.11.2009) / HRWF (24.11.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - A hearing was recently held on Religious Freedom in the Middle East which exposed the failure of the State Department and President Obama to address Human Rights abuses in Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

On November 18, Chairman, Gary L. Ackerman (D-NY), as well as other congress representatives, questioned the Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Michael H. Posner, on the State of Political and Religious Freedom in the Middle East. It was evident that Egypt and Saudi Arabia, both close allies of the US, have not been pressured into compliance with international human rights laws.

Egypt, the world's number two recipient of American aid, having received roughly \$1.3 billion per year in military compensation and more than \$500 million per year in economic assistance since 1979, blatantly violates international human rights laws without penalty. The responsibility for the sudden surge of persecution against Coptic Christians, an explicit assault on religious freedom, is deliberately dismissed by the Egyptian government. When Assistant Secretary Posner was asked if measures are being taken to ensure that Egypt is kept liable for its offenses, no strategic plan was presented. It was also concluded that America does not use its foreign assistance as leverage to demand that Egypt adhere to international human rights laws.

In the same way, Saudi Arabia, a government that denies recognition or protection of any religion other than Sunni Islam, and whose constitutional principles are founded on Sharia law, is not held accountable by the US for its human rights abuses.

When asked by Representative Ackerman if the US places any conditionality upon trade with Saudi Arabia or aid given to Egypt in regards to human rights offenses, Assistant Secretary Posner replied, "Has it been done? It's been done... in various ways and various places. Could it be done more? Yes. Should it be done more? Yes."

Aidan Clay, ICC Regional Manager of the Middle East, said, "Avoiding a strategic plan to address the fundamental democratic principles of religious freedom has not been a top priority of the US government toward Egypt for years. The US is a light to democratic values, and must take the lead in promoting and exporting democratic principles to countries that violate human rights laws. We ask President Obama to develop a strategic plan by applying human rights sanctions on US assistance to Egypt and US dealings with Saudi Arabia, to nominate a Religious Freedom Ambassador, and to affirm human rights as a core objective of US foreign policy."

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## **Saudi clerics urge TV ban on women, music**

### ***Country's hardline religious group is skeptical of push toward moderation***

AP (22.03.2009)/ HRWF (23.03.2009) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - A group of Saudi clerics urged the kingdom's new information minister on Sunday to ban women from appearing on TV or in newspapers and magazines, making clear that the country's hardline religious establishment is skeptical of a new push toward moderation.

In a statement, the 35 hardline clergymen also called on Abdel Aziz Khoja, who was appointed by King Abdullah on Feb. 14, to prohibit the playing of music and music shows on television.

"We have great hope that this media reform will be accomplished by you," said the statement. "We have noticed how well-rooted perversity is in the Ministry of Information and Culture, in television, radio, press, culture clubs and the book fair."

### ***Not expected to have much effect***

Although it raises the pressure on the new minister, the recommendation is likely to have little effect. Khoja's appointment was part of a government shake-up by Abdullah that removed a number of hardline figures and is believed to be part of an effort to weaken the influence of conservatives in this devout desert kingdom.

"No Saudi women should appear on TV, no matter what the reason," the statement said. "No images of women should appear in Saudi newspapers and magazines."

Saudi Arabia was founded on an alliance with the conservative Wahhabi strain of Islam that sees the mixing of sexes as anathema and believes the playing of music violates religious values.

The former information minister, Iyad Madani, earned the ire of hardliners several years ago by allowing music in government-run TV and female journalists to interview men, despite the country's strict gender-segregation rules.

Women also appear on Saudi television with their faces showing, though most in public totally cover themselves.

### ***Bare arms, cleavage painted over***

Newspapers publish pictures of Saudi women, but almost always with their heads covered, while pictures of Western entertainers are shown but bare arms and cleavage are painted over.

The clerics include several professors from the ultra-conservative Imam University, Islamic research scholars, a judge in a court in the resort of Taif and some government employees.

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, in town for meetings with Saudi officials, told a news conference that during lunch he sat between a female Saudi surgeon and a female journalist. He said while one woman is allowed to perform surgery and another is allowed to teach, neither is permitted to drive.

"I find that bizarre," he said.

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## **Saudi Arabia says only mosques allowed**

AP (06.02.2009)/ HRWF (10.02.2009) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - A Saudi Arabian official says mosques can be the only places of worship in his country, rejecting pressure to change heavy restrictions on religious besides Islam.

Saudi Arabia, home to Islam's holiest sites, implements a strict version of Islamic law.

It told a United Nations meeting that the kingdom allows other religions in private.

But the vice president of the Saudi human rights commission said Friday that establishing houses of worship for non-Islamic religions was too sensitive an issue.

Zaid Al-Hussain tells the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva that there could be no debate. Other countries have urged Saudi Arabia to abolish laws that breach basic human rights such as freedom from discrimination on the basis of religion or belief.

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## **Pastor in Saudi Arabia flees death threats**

### ***Religious police, others warn key figure in expatriate church to leave***

By Jeff M. Sellers

Compass Direct (30.01.2009)/ HRWF (03.02.2009) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - A prominent foreign pastor in Saudi Arabia has fled Riyadh after a member of the mutawwa'in, or religious police, and others threatened him three times in one week.

Two of the incidents included threats to kill house church pastor Yemane Gebriel of Eritrea. On Wednesday (Jan. 28), Gebriel escaped to an undisclosed city in Saudi Arabia.

A father of eight who has lived and worked as a private driver in Saudi Arabia for 25 years, Gebriel told Compass that on Jan. 10 he found an unsigned note on his vehicle threatening to kill him if he did not leave the country. On Jan. 13, he said, mutawwa'in member Abdul Aziz and others forced him from his van and told him to leave the country.

"There was a note on my van saying, 'If you do not leave the country, we will kill you,'" Gebriel told Compass by telephone. "Three days after that, [Aziz] said, 'You're still working here, why don't you go out of the country?'"

Aziz, another member of the mutawwa'in and a policeman had waited for Gebriel shortly after 9 p.m. A sheikh at a Riyadh mosque, Aziz raged at Gebriel for about five minutes, accusing him of being a Christian and trying to change the religion of others, said a Christian source in Saudi Arabia.

"He finished by telling Yemane to get out of the country or 'measures' would be taken," said the source, who requested anonymity for security reasons. He said Gebriel was in genuine danger of losing his life. "In meeting with me on the morning of Thursday, Jan. 15, Yemane himself was clearly very frightened," said the source.

That night (Jan. 15), Gebriel told Compass, four masked men – apparently Saudis – 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,'" he said.

Gebriel subsequently took temporary refuge in a safe house in Riyadh, and after consulting with consular officials from four embassies on Tuesday (Jan. 27), the pastor was whisked away to another city the following day.

In 2005, the religious police's Aziz had directed that Gebriel be arrested along with 16 other foreign Christian leaders, though diplomatic pressure resulted in their release within weeks.

"No doubt Sheikh Abdul Aziz is still burning," said the local Christian source. "Nor may such type of death threat be possibly idle words. The current situation and circumstance remind me very much of the machine-gun murder of Irish Roman Catholic layman Tony Higgins right here in Riyadh in August 2004."

### ***Raids feared***

Gebriel, 42, led a church of more than 300 foreign-born Christians, though because of work obligations only a little over 150 are able to meet regularly in his villa for Friday worship. He fled without his family, as his wife and children had managed to relocate in Egypt in August 2007.

Gebriel and three others started the house church in Riyadh 10 years ago, the local source said, and only a few months ago the pastor handed leadership over to others in the church.

"But right now the entire church is very frightened," the source said. "They are expecting a raid one Friday shortly – just like in 2005. The congregation doesn't even know yet that we have whisked Yemane away from them as well as from the religious police."

In April and May of 2005, the mutawwa'in arrested 17 pastors – two Pakistanis, two Eritreans (including Gebriel), three Ethiopians and 10 Indians. None were deported after their release.

"Are there signs that 2009 might prove to be such a year again? I think so," the source said. "Every three or four years, there is a clamp-down in Riyadh. It seems that we should expect 2009 to be a year of repression. However, the underground church here is far better placed than heretofore to manage any such persecution."

The Saudi regime has reportedly begun to restrain the mutawwa'in, which historically has acted as a virtual vigilante force enforcing the kingdom's Sunni Islamic social codes as volunteer agents of the semi-autonomous Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice. The U.S. Department of State's 2008 International Religious Freedom Report noted that abuses by mutawwa'in have continued.

"Mutawwa'in (religious police) continued to conduct raids of private non-Muslim religious gatherings," the report states. "There were also charges of harassment, abuse, and killings at the hands of the mutawwa'in, or religious police. These incidents caused many non-Muslims to worship in fear of, and in such a manner as to avoid discovery by, the police and mutawwa'in."

In the past year, mutawwa'in sometimes have not respected the Saudi policy of allowing private worship for all, including non-Muslims, according to the report. Religious police are not allowed to mete out punishment, but in the past year the Saudi government has investigated several incidents in which the mutawwa'in were accused of violating restrictions on that and other activities, according to the state department report.

The mutawwa'in still wear no uniforms, but the report notes that they are now required to wear identification badges and can act only when accompanied by police. They are

authorized to monitor the practice of non-Muslim faiths, display or sale of pornography, alcohol production, distribution or consumption, and adultery, homosexuality and gambling, among other violations.

While Saudi law forbids public practice of any religion besides Islam, foreigners are generally allowed to worship privately if their congregations do not grow too large.

With the Quran and sayings of Muhammad (Sunna) as its constitution, Saudi Arabia enforces a form of sharia (Islamic law) derived from 18th-century Sunni scholar Muhammad ibn Abd Al-Wahhab that calls for the death penalty for "apostasy," or conversion from Islam to another faith, although the state department's report notes that there have been no confirmed reports of executions for apostasy in recent years.

Saudi Arabia's ruling monarchy restricts media and other forms of public expression, though recently authorities have tolerated criticism of the mutawwa'in and the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice.

"The government-controlled press frequently criticized mutawwa'in activity," the report adds.

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## **Saudi authorities arrest Christian convert**

### ***Blogger incarcerated after writing about conversion, criticizing Islamic judiciary***

By Jeff M. Sellers

Compass Direct (28.01.2009)/ HRWF (29.01.2009) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: [info@hrwf.net](mailto:info@hrwf.net) - Five months after the daughter of a member of Saudi Arabia's religious police was killed for writing online about her faith in Christ, Saudi authorities have reportedly arrested a 28-year-old Christian man for describing his conversion and criticizing the kingdom's judiciary on his Web site.

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 (ANHRI). Bin Saleh, who had been detained for nine months in 2004 and again for a month last November, was reportedly being held in Riyadh's Eleisha prison.

On his web site, which Saudi authorities have blocked, Bin Saleh wrote that his journey to Christ began after witnessing the public beheading of three Pakistanis convicted of drug charges. Shaken, he began an extensive study of Islamic history and law, as well as Saudi justice. He became disillusioned with sharia (Islamic law) and dismayed that kingdom authorities only prosecuted poor Saudis and foreigners.

"I was convinced that the wretched Pakistanis were executed in accordance with the Muhammadan laws just because they are poor and have no money or favored positions, which they had no control or power over," he wrote in Arabic in his Dec. 22 posting, referring to "this terrible prejudice in the application of justice in Saudi Arabia."

A 2003 graduate in English literature from Al Yarmouk University in Jordan, Bin Saleh's research led him to an exploration of other faiths, and in his travels he gained access to a Bible.

"My mind was persistently raising questions and desperately seeking answers," he wrote. "I went on vacations to read about comparative religion, and I got the Bible, and I used

to give these books to anyone before going back to Saudi, as going back there with such books is considered an unforgivable crime which will throw its perpetrator in a dark jail."

After reading how Jesus forgave – rather than stoned – a woman condemned for adultery, Bin Saleh eventually received Christ as savior.

"Jesus . . . took us beyond physical salvation as he offered us forgiveness that is the salvation of eternal life and compassion," he wrote. "Just look and ask for the light of God; there might be no available books to help you make a comparative study between the teachings of Muhammad (which are in my opinion a series of political, social, economical and human disasters) and the teaching of Jesus in Saudi Arabia, but there are many resources on the Web by which you might get to the bosom/arms of the Father of salvation. Seek salvation and you will reach it; may the Lord keep you from the devil's pitfalls."

With the Quran and sayings of Muhammad (Sunna) as its constitution, Saudi Arabia enforces a form of sharia derived from 18th-century Sunni scholar Muhammad ibn Abd Al-Wahhab that calls for the death penalty for "blasphemy," or insulting Islam or its prophet, Muhammad. Likewise, conversion from Islam to another faith, "apostasy," is punishable by death, although the U.S. Department of State's 2008 International Religious Freedom Report notes that there have been no confirmed reports of executions for either blasphemy or apostasy in recent years.

Saudi Arabia's ruling monarchy restricts media and other forms of public expression, though authorities have shown some tolerance for criticism and debate since King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud officially ascended to the throne in 2005, according to the state department report.

A spokesman for the Saudi Arabian embassy in Washington, D.C. would neither confirm the Jan. 13 arrest of Bin Saleh nor comment on the reasons for it.

### ***Previous arrests***

Writing that both Islam and Saudi Arabia promote injustice and inequality, Bin Saleh described himself as a researcher/writer bent on obtaining full rights of the Christian minority in Saudi Arabia.

He noted on his now-banned Web site ("Masihi Saudi," at <http://christforsaudi.blogspot.com>) that he had been arrested twice, the first time in Beirut, Lebanon on Jan. 18, 2004. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees office there had notified Saudi authorities that he had been accepted as a "refugee for ideological persecution reasons," he wrote, but a few days later intelligence agents from the Saudi embassy in Beirut, "with collusion of Lebanese authorities and the government of [former Prime Minister] Rafik Al-Hariri," turned him over to Saudi officials.

After nine months of detention in Saudi Arabia, he was released but banned from traveling, writing and appearing in media.

He was arrested a second time on Nov. 1, 2008. "I was interrogated for a month about some articles by which I condemned the Saudi regime's violation of human rights and [rights of] converts to Christianity," he wrote.

During a Saudi-sponsored, inter-faith dialogue conference at U.N. headquarters in New York involving representatives from 80 countries on Nov. 12-13, according to ANHRI, Saudi authorities released Bin Saleh, then promptly re-arrested him after it was over.

His November arrest came a little less than a year after political critic Fouad Ahmad al-Farhan became the first Saudi to be arrested for Web site postings on Dec. 10, 2007; Al-Farhan was released in April 2008.

In August 2008, a 26-year-old woman was killed for disclosing her faith on a Web site. Fatima Al-Mutairi reportedly had revealed on Web postings that she had left Islam to become a Christian.

Gulfnews.com reported on Aug. 12, 2008 that her father, a member of the religious police or Commission for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, cut out her tongue and burned her to death "following a heated debate on religion." Al-Mutairi had written about hostilities from family members after they discovered she was a Christian, including insults from her brother after he saw her Web postings about her faith. Some reports indicated that her brother was the one who killed her.

She had reportedly written an article about her faith on a blog of which she was a member under the nickname "Rania" a few days before her murder.

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