



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on February 25, 2013

Saudi Arabia Continues Crackdown on Private Christian Worship

Officials in Saudi Arabia are notorious for their intolerance of outsiders observing the Christian faith within Saudi borders, and on February 8 the country's religious police re-enforced that reputation when they arrested 53 Ethiopian Christians involved in a private prayer service in the Saudi city of Dammam, shutting down the service and hauling the believers off to jail.

According to the [World Evangelism Alliance](#), a total of 46 women and six men were arrested in the raid, and three of the Christians, identified as leaders of the private house church, were charged with trying to convert Muslims to the Christian faith.



In December 2011, the Saudi religious police, known as the *mutaween*, arrested 35 Ethiopian Christians, 29 of them women, on charges of "illicit mingling" after the authorities raided a private prayer meeting in Jeddah. According to Human Rights Watch, some of the Christians were tortured, and the women were subjected to arbitrary body cavity searches.

In September 2012, a Saudi Arabian girl who converted to Christianity fled to Dammam, a Saudi center for petroleum and natural gas production and a major seaport. The girl was eventually granted asylum in Sweden last month, according to Dammam's *Al-Yaum* newspaper.

In its 2012 annual report, the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) (USCIRF) noted that Saudi Arabia continues to oppress non-Muslim religious observers, with Christians taking a big share of the abuse. "The Saudi government persists in banning all forms of public religious expression other than that of the government's own interpretation of one school of Sunni Islam," said the report. It also "prohibits churches, synagogues, temples, and other non-Muslim places of worship; uses in its schools and posts online state textbooks that continue to espouse intolerance and incite violence; and periodically interferes with private religious practice."

The strict form of Sunni Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia is Wahhabism, which has been tied to many of the most notorious acts of terrorism across the Earth. Nineteen of the terrorists tied to the deadly 9/11 attacks in the United States were Wahhabi Muslims from Saudi Arabia.

Said the USCIRF report: "More than 10 years since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, the Saudi government has failed to implement a number of promised reforms related to promoting freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief."

The report called Saudi Arabia a "country of particular concern" for its crackdown on religious freedom, linking it with such oppressive regimes as Iran, North Korea, China, and Sudan.

Dwight Bashir, the USCIRF's deputy director for policy, said that the crackdowns by the *mutaween* are coming even as the Saudi government does lip service to religious freedom. "During an official USCIRF visit to the Kingdom earlier this month," recalled Bashir, "Saudi officials reiterated the government's



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long-standing policy that members of the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice, also known as the religious police, should not interfere in private worship.” Nonetheless, Bashir reported, “the past year has seen an uptick of reports that private religious gatherings have been raided, resulting in arrests, harassment, and deportations of foreign expatriate workers.”

Bashir recommended that “the U.S. government and international community should demand that any expatriate worker detained and held without charge for private religious activity in the Kingdom be released immediately.”

Nina Shea, director of the Hudson Institute’s Center for Religious Freedom, told [FoxNews.com](#) that the latest arrests are part of Saudi Arabia’s overall policy “to ban non-Muslim houses of worship and actually hunt down Christians in private homes.” Shea said that the nearly total silence on the part of the U.S. government over Saudi religious oppression has much to do with the strategic partnership between the two nations, charging that pressuring the Islamic government to change its behavior “has taken a backseat to oil and the war on terror. The Saudis are playing a double game — cooperating with the war on terror and working against the war on terror campaign.”

At least one U.S. lawmaker has sounded off on the behavior of the American ally. “Nations that wish to be a part of the responsible nations of the world must see the protection of religious freedom and the principles of reason as an essential part of the duty of the state,” said Representative Jeff Fortenberry (R-Neb.), who is a member of the the Caucus on Religious Minorities in the Middle East.

World Evangelism Alliance director Godfrey Yogarajah said his group is monitoring the situation in the Middle Eastern country closely, and called on Saudi officials to treat the latest detained Christians “with dignity and release them immediately as there is apparently no evidence for any offense against them. Arrest of believers for peacefully gathering for worship goes against the spirit of Saudi Arabia’s promotion of inter-religious dialogue in international fora.”



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