

Media Note
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Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Briefs Congress on U.S.-Saudi Discussions on Religious Practice and Tolerance

Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford briefed Congress today on religious practice and tolerance issues in Saudi Arabia. Ambassador Hanford's briefing focused on the results of bilateral discussions on these topics, as well the problem of intolerant language in textbooks and educational curricula.

Ambassador Hanford explained that this process has made it possible to identify and confirm a number of key policies that the Saudi Government is pursuing and will continue to pursue for the purpose of promoting greater freedom for religious practice and increased tolerance for religious groups. These include policies designed to halt the dissemination of intolerant literature and extremist ideology, both within Saudi Arabia and around the world, to protect the right to private worship, and to curb harassment of religious practice. For example, the Saudi Government is conducting a comprehensive revision of textbooks and educational curricula to weed out disparaging remarks toward religious groups, a process that will be completed in one to two years. The Saudi Government is also retraining teachers and the religious police to ensure that the rights of Muslims and non-Muslims are protected and to promote tolerance and combat extremism. The Saudi Government has also created a Human Rights Commission to address the full range of human rights complaints.

Saudi Arabia was first designated a Country of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act in 2004. In light of these ongoing developments, and in view of the policies that the Saudi government has put in place to promote greater tolerance for members of the various religious groups in Saudi Arabia, the Secretary has decided to leave in place a waiver "to further the purposes of the Act," as provided for under the legislation.

Ambassador Hanford commented, "I am pleased that the Government of Saudi Arabia has been willing to engage with us in a substantive manner on these critical issues. These policies are significant developments, and I appreciate the Saudi Government's interest in confirming them publicly so that all interested parties may follow progress made in these areas."

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