

[Note: Audio quality is poor; background noise occasionally renders speakers inaudible.]

## **Transcript: Human Rights Abuses in Saudi Arabia**

**Presented by Nina Shea**

**July 9, 2004**

Nina Shea:

...Interior Minister Prince Nayef has ordered a full investigation and found that there was no one in the mutawwa who could [inaudible] at fault. That is just one example of the problems in the country from a human rights perspective. It's obvious what was the problem there. The human rights violations are really part of the fabric of the society. It's based on Wahhabi ideology, a religious totalitarianism. It's a basic law of the country – the very first article states that the Qur'an and the sunna are the constitution. It goes on to say that the shari'a is the basis of laws. It is a Hanbali school of Islam, as interpreted from a Wahhabi perspective. In some sense, it's more radical than traditional. The Wahhabis have sought to abolish all the pluralism of the Islamic legal schools, reject the Western models of law.

In most Muslim societies there is some kind of combination; when there is a shari'a, there's also the Islamic jurisprudence that [inaudible] stands alongside the criminal and commercial law based on Western models. But [inaudible] is the sole legal standard in Saudi Arabia.

The Islamic rulings are based on five categories of human behavior, everything from the forbidden to the obligatory. Then you [inaudible] the Wahhabi militia or mutawwa'in, the religious police, whose precise title is the League for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, that is charged with enforcing this behavior. It operates through local units. Therefore, you can see how all Saudis are deprived of their basic freedoms and rights.

There are no elections at any levels. There are partial municipal elections promised a year ago, or last October. It does not seem that there is a leaning in that direction. There is no separation of powers – the royal family is the state. Throughout sixty years of its history, the royal family has been without checks on authority. There is no bill of rights. The Wahhabis control the

media, the educational system, the courts and of course the religious institutions.

All Saudi subjects suffer from this lack of freedom, but there are really three categories that I believe suffer the most. I want to touch on those today.

The first is the religious minorities. All citizens of Saudi Arabia are presumed to be Muslim and Muslim means Wahhabi. In fact, there are 2 million Shi'a in the country who are native to the country. They live in an eastern oil-rich province. They are from time to time arrested for heresy. They are considered heretics. They are sometimes forced to accept non-Shi'a [inaudible]. They are barred from leaving the Kingdom. They have been arrested, forced to stand trial for heresy. There are examples that pop up from time to time of these kind of cases. They are often the subject of lashes [inaudible] execution [inaudible].

One case we had, a Shi'a who was [inaudible] clergy, was subject to 3,000 lashes. The incitement against the Shi'a population continues unabated. [inaudible] distribute pamphlets on the differences – one of them titled, "The Difference Between the Shi'ites and the [inaudible] Muslim Scholars." The text asserts that a fictional Yemeni Jew conspired with other Jews to create a division in Islam and disseminate Jewish ideas, which became Shi'a Islam. As late as 2001, as the Saudi Institute reported, a high-ranking Saudi cleric, who by the way was appointed by the king, issued a fatwa permitting jihad against the Saudi Shi'a [inaudible].

The Sufis, the spiritual order of the Sufis, which can be Sunni as well as Shi'a, are also another group that is [inaudible] apostates or heretics. They're another persecuted Muslim group within the Kingdom. The mere possession of Sufi literature is a capital offense. There was a Sufi group here that issued a press release last month appealing to UNESCO to stop the Saudi destruction of five historic shrines that the Sufis claim were built by Muhammad's daughter [inaudible] in Saudi Arabia, because there's an attempt to, again, impose this strict Wahhabi literalist interpretation on all Muslims inside the Kingdom, and also outside the Kingdom.

The Saudis also prohibit any practice of non-Muslim religion among the country's educated workforce. There are 7 million foreign workers, about a fourth of the population. Many of these

are Christians; many of them come from South Asia or from the Philippines, India, Ethiopia, and so forth. Visitors are required to declare their religion on a visa application and then they are given visas – their passports are taken from them by their employers when they enter the Kingdom. Muslims are given green visas and the infidels are given purple ones for easy spotting. It's against the law to bring non-Muslim religious literature or objects – Bibles, crosses, icons – into the country.

There's no religious clergy who are non-Muslim allowed in. There is theoretically [inaudible] said that there's a right to pray as Christians and [inaudible] but the religious police do not seem to respect that. When they are raided – foreign workers' prayer stations are raided – they are charged with [inaudible]. Defendants have been denied counsel and of course [inaudible] proceedings. We're following a case right now of an Indian Christian, Brian O'Connor. He has been tortured with electricity and lashings, according to his brothers, in an attempt to [inaudible] his faith. He has been charged with the capital offense of teaching Christianity.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has stated that underlying these repressive policies on religious freedom and other human rights [inaudible] primarily of a religious curriculum mandatory for all students that is [inaudible] hate-filled and discriminatory material. Anti-Semitic, anti-Christian and anti-Western sentiment also remains prevalent in the government-controlled media and in sermons delivered by clerics who are under the authority of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs.

So this kind of hate speech of course is directed against Jews. This came to international attention once again most recently this spring, when the Saudi Crown Prince Abdulaziz [transcription note: Abdullah], viewed as a moderate among the royal family, stated at a gathering of Saudi dignitaries, including top Muslim clerics, that the Zionists were to blame for terrorist shootings in eastern Saudi Arabia this spring. That's just one example. It's disturbing because it's from the highest level, from someone who's considered more liberal.

But of course there are these fiery speeches – so-called fiery speeches – from the mosque preachers, whose salaries are paid by the government and use violently anti-Jewish, anti-Semitic

language in their sermons. Jews are considered wicked, destined by God for perdition. All this is in their textbooks. The "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" are preached as fact. The American Jewish Committee just came out with an analysis of the textbooks of Saudi Arabia, which gives chapter by chapter, textbook by textbook, grade by grade examples of this kind of hate speech. The Basic Law offers no protections whatsoever for the rights of non-Muslims.

The second category of the persecuted – and again, I want to emphasize that this is a form of religious persecution – the second category are women. They are treated as basically children or as mentally ill. The way the religious law is interpreted and enforced in Saudi Arabia affects every aspect of the lives of both Saudi and foreign women and results in serious violations of their rights.

Force is used to threaten or compel women to act in ways described by the muttawwa'in, by the government's interpretation of shari'a. For example, women must adhere to a strict dress code when appearing in public. Women can only be admitted to a hospital for medical treatment on consent of a male relative. While women formally own 20 percent of Saudi businesses, they must deputize a male relative to represent them in financial transactions.

Women are excluded from studying certain professions, such as engineering, journalism and architecture. They have no freedom of movement within the country and need to receive permission from a male relative to travel inside or outside the country. Women cannot drive cars. They can only ride in cars or a vehicle driven by a close male relative or an employee, or they risk arrest by the muttawa. This is obviously different from every other country in the world, including other shari'a states.

The personal laws are biased against women, and the criminal laws as well. Testimony by a man is said to equal the testimony of two women in court. Women cannot [inaudible] non-Muslims. That same rule does not apply to men. Daughters receive only half the inheritance awarded to their brothers. It goes on and on.

There is polygamy. There are weekend marriages, which are legal, in which women relinquish

their legal rights to financial support in [inaudible] of cohabitation. In case of divorce, women can keep the children only until they're aged seven or nine, depending on whether they're a boy or girl. Domestic violence is not regarded as a crime under Saudi law and spousal abuse is prevalent.

There have been recent reports in the New York Times about the foreign workers, women who have special problems when their passports are taken away by their employers and they're really at the mercy of their Saudi employers. A number of them have reported being raped. It's illegal for a female foreign worker to become pregnant in Saudi Arabia, so there are actually cases of these women being imprisoned because they have been impregnated by their employers. Some are kept in this [inaudible] space.

One of the great ideological authors of some of these repressive practices or [inaudible] in Saudi Arabia is a Wahhabi imam named Bin Baz, who died in 1999 at age 85. He was responsible for the ban on women driving, [inaudible] hijab where women are supposed to cover their face as well as their whole body, and so forth.

This Bin Baz, who issued a fatwa in 1969 [inaudible] proof that the rotation of the sun [inaudible] the earth. He argued that the earth was a flat disc around which the sun revolved and that any other belief was heresy. He corrected himself after Saudi Prince Sultan took a ride on the American space shuttle and told him what he had witnessed, the roundness of the earth. But this is the man responsible for a number of these pronouncements on women's rights.

It really shows how this is a religious issue of women's rights, because there are group rights for [inaudible] rights of women. There are no individual rights.

There is an actual dialogue going on but the women were separated from the men, they weren't allowed to be in the same room during this dialogue to discuss women's rights last month. It [inaudible] only men were shown. But beyond that, the views of the participants were skewing far apart, with professors and teachers arguing that women had far too many rights in the Kingdom.

The third category – I realize I am running out of time, so I would summarize by saying that the third category of special victim class are dissidents and reformers. All expression is controlled by the royal family in the media. [inaudible] the broadcast media and has the ability to remove editors-in-chief of the newspapers. [inaudible] control Internet access [inaudible].

Those who dissent or try to reform, such as the current detainees [inaudible] human rights activists, they can be charged with destroying the [inaudible] of the nation, which is against the Basic Law, or they can be charged with blasphemy. So there's really very little ability to have a serious debate on far-reaching reform.