

Powell adds Saudis to freedom watchlist: Iraq removed from list

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The U.S. State Department has for the first time included Saudi Arabia on a list of “countries of particular concern” for not allowing religious freedom—a potential stumbling block for relations between the U.S. and its Persian Gulf ally.

The department’s sixth annual report on international religious freedom also added Eritrea and Vietnam to the roster of countries guilty or tolerant of “systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom.” Nations that remained on the list were Burma, China, Iran, North Korea and Sudan. Iraq, which had been on the list, was removed.

“Defending the sacred ground of human conscience is a natural commandment to all mankind, and America will always heed this call,” Secretary of State Colin Powell said.

Designation on the “CPC” list does not carry immediate sanctions, and countries cited repeatedly face little more than diplomatic pressure. Still, human rights advocates say being listed among “the worst of the worst” is a significant signal.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent watchdog group chartered by Congress in 1998, had urged Powell to also add Pakistan and Turkmenistan to the CPC list in its May report.

Pressure had been mounting on Powell to add the Saudis to the list, despite their key role in the war on terrorism. Critics accuse the kingdom of exporting a militant form of extremist Islam known as Wahhabism and suppressing all non-Muslim religions.

John Hanford, the U.S. ambassador at large for religious freedom, noted some “sincere improvements” among the Saudis, such as efforts to reign in extremists, to open dialogues with Shi’ite Muslims and to revise textbooks containing “inflammatory statements” against non-Muslims. Still, Hanford said such steps were not enough. “We just feel the improvements aren’t adequate at this point to put

them in a position where they do not deserve designation.”

The report was more blunt than Hanford’s public comments, declaring that “freedom of religion does not exist” in Saudi Arabia, a distinction shared only with North Korea. *-Religion News Service*