

Written Testimony
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before the
HFAC Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade
Hearing on
“Saudi Arabia’s Troubling Educational Curriculum”
July 19, 2017

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to share with your Subcommittee the work that the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) has been doing in support of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s efforts to facilitate educational reform. Before doing so, though, I would like to express my personal gratitude to the other witnesses who are testifying today for their highly effective efforts in identifying and calling to public attention the discriminatory content in the Kingdom’s public school text books, which at its worst, can lead to extremist behavior or, short of that, to violations of religious freedom and other human rights. Our Center’s mandate, which I consider complementary to their own, is to take corrective action to address the problem. Although we are by no means apologists for the Saudis, my purpose here today, as I understand it, is to report on the progress that is being made to address this issue.

Background

First, a bit of background. Following the attacks of 9-11 (in which 15 of the 19 hijackers were identified as Saudi nationals), the Kingdom faced strong external pressure to curb the spread of Wahhabism, especially through its public school textbooks, which had made their way across the globe and were inspiring terrorist groups like al-Qaeda. Two years later, after the Kingdom itself was rocked by a wave of al-Qaeda-led attacks, the first meaningful steps were taken toward educational reform (in concert with a strong de-radicalization program). However, it wasn’t until 2007, soon after King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al Saud ascended to the throne, that the Tatweer Education Reform project was launched to promote curriculum reform that would graduate “capable and open-minded” young Saudis.

ICRD Study

To support the Kingdom’s educational reform efforts, the State Department awarded our Center a grant (Cooperative Agreement) in 2011 to develop recommendations for promoting educational reform in the Kingdom. Toward that end, we were to examine the discriminatory content in Saudi Arabia’s public school textbooks, and to provide a basic overview of their global dispersion. In undertaking this assignment, we opted to take a balanced approach, giving

full credit for any reforms that had already taken place (including those associated with the Kingdom's de-radicalization program), while being unsparing in our detail of what yet remained to be done.

This was consistent with a similar approach we had taken over an eight-year period in reforming the curriculums and pedagogy of more than 1,500 madrasas (religious schools) in the radical areas of Pakistan. Our success there was attributable to three factors: (1) sharing ownership in the change process (by conducting the project in such a way that the madrasa leaders felt it to be their reform effort and not something imposed from the outside); (2) appealing to their own heritage, not only of their schools, which in the Middle Ages were unrivaled as institutions of higher learning, but of Islam itself, which in its early years was responsible for a number of breakthroughs in the arts and sciences, including religious tolerance (at a time when Christianity was woefully intolerant); and (3) grounding all suggested change in Islamic principles (so they could feel they were becoming better Muslims in the process). We call this approach "organic suasion", i.e. promoting peace from within through respectful engagement.

As we began to understand the scope and seeming commitment of the Kingdom's educational reform effort, we concluded that the study should not be made public, lest Western critics use offensive passages that yet remained to chastise the Saudis and risk provoking a defensive backlash that could jeopardize the reform process. We felt that it would make more sense to help move things in a positive direction through quiet diplomacy rather than attempting to force change through further criticism.

In a similar vein, it is important to recognize certain sensitivities unique to the Saudi government, i.e. the need to maintain credibility with (1) its own religious establishment (under which "education" rightfully resides, according to the Kingdom's historic compact between the monarchy and the Salafist *Ulema*) and (2) Islam more generally (as Custodian of its two holiest sites).

Our review of the texts, which was the most comprehensive conducted to date, revealed that the Kingdom was making credible progress toward reform, but that much more was needed to complete the process. In short, the report provided an analysis of:

- The textbook changes that had taken place over the previous decade.
- The remaining areas of bias and intolerance that still existed in the textbooks, especially at the high school level.
- How the Wahhabist content of the textbooks compared to Quranic admonitions on the same topics (unfavorably, in almost every instance) and to the provisions of the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (again almost universally unfavorable).

More specifically, the textbooks were examined for instances of religious intolerance, including misrepresentation of religious beliefs or identity, collective blame, pejorative historical narratives, and content that promoted or excused violence and aggression on the basis on religion.

As shown in the table below, the scope of the curriculum review covered a total of 99 textbooks from the national curriculum, of which the majority were from religious studies subjects, followed by history and social sciences, and finally, the language arts. We were also able to obtain textbooks on science, math, and technology, but they were not found to contain any objectionable content.

Level (Grade)	Total Books	Publication Year		Subject		
		2011-2012	1996-2010	Religious Studies	Social Science	Language Arts
Primary (1-6)	17	13	4	13	3	1
Intermediate (7-9)	27	11	16	22	5	0
High School (10-12)	55	35	20	34	15	6
	99	59	40	69	23	7

According to official statements from the Saudi Ministry of Education, the textbooks we examined included six grade levels from the primary and intermediate levels that had already undergone “thorough revisions.” Of the primary and intermediate levels (grades 1-9), only three had not been revised, including grades three, six, and nine. It was reported that all of the secondary grade levels were undergoing revision, a process that was to be completed by 2013.

With notable exceptions, few examples of pejorative content were found in the revised textbooks from the primary grade levels. Although encouraging, these grades were not expected to contain much in the way of egregious content. Regarding the intermediate levels, the results of the revision process were inconsistent. Some intermediate level textbooks, such as the 8th grade text on *Hadith*, were almost completely free of intolerant content and even included positive messages such as the following:

“The prayer of the oppressed, be he Muslim or non-Muslim is answered and not rejected.”
Hadith, Grade Eight (Term II), p.57

This progress, however, was not reflected in other eighth grade textbooks. For example, the *Monotheism* textbook contained a direct call for violence against “sorcerers”, the *Jurisprudence* textbook advocated donating *zakat* (charitable) contributions to the *Mujahideen*, and the *Tafsir* textbook promoted violent jihad and contained anti-Semitic narratives.

Textbooks in the secondary grade levels, of which none had been revised, contained intolerant content as documented in earlier studies conducted by Nina Shea and others. Problematic material in these grade levels included direct and gratuitous criticism of the beliefs

and practices of non-Muslims and non-Salafi Muslims, lessons that glorified an aggressive and violent concept of jihad; and inaccurate and pejorative historical narratives that cast Jews and Christians as eternal threats to Islam and Muslims everywhere.

Beyond the details, the study provided a comprehensive baseline for future analysis and offered helpful recommendations for immediate improvement.

In 2013, we began working to implement some of the study's key recommendations. Our first step during this phase was to brief a contingent of Saudi educational experts in Riyadh on the findings of the 2012 study. It was a highly successful encounter, and we proposed a follow-up meeting between American and Saudi scholars and education experts in the United States. With the approval of the Minister of Education and the King, the proposed meeting of American and Saudi educators took place at Georgetown University in November 2015.

The purpose of this meeting was to facilitate an atmosphere of shared problem-solving, while avoiding any specter of paternalism by bringing the two sides together as equals to address a problem they shared in common (i.e. the problem of bias and intolerance in national education systems). As backdrop for the discussion, we shared the results of a study that we (ICRD) had conducted on how a dozen other countries had dealt with similar problems. The meeting, which included officials from the Saudi Ministry of Education and from the U.S. Departments of State and Education, also addressed a number of key principles for advancing educational reform in the Muslim world.

After extensive discussion on various aspects of our respective educational systems, the head of the Saudi delegation gave a detailed presentation on his country's new National Strategy for Educational Reform, which was promulgated a year after ICRD's study first made its way to the Kingdom through diplomatic channels. This new strategy, funded at a level of \$22 billion over four years, focuses on (1) curriculum development, (2) teacher training, (3) institutional capacity-building, and (4) development of 21st century skills, including those relating to cross-cultural communications. The ultimate goal is to enable Saudi youth to compete effectively in the globalized market place. Happily, this coincides with our own goals of instilling (1) a keen appreciation for diversity, (2) tolerance for other faiths and sects, (3) increased respect for human rights, and (4) a strong, ongoing commitment to critical thinking. Although the National Plan was undoubtedly driven more by national self-interest than by Western criticism, with continued effort, it seems likely that the inflammatory content in the public school textbooks will soon become a thing of the past.

The November meeting concluded with the Saudi and American delegations agreeing on a range of topics to be researched prior to a second meeting of the delegates in Riyadh, in May of 2016. Based on a later discussion of these topics at the Riyadh meeting, recommendations were developed for the consideration of both governments. In August of 2016, ICRD presented the recommendations for the Saudi government to Dr. Ahmed Aleisa, the Saudi Minister of Education, at a round-table discussion on educational reform, which he chaired in our

Washington office. Others in attendance included senior representatives from the U.S. Departments of State and Education.

Global Impact

To determine the degree to which Saudi texts have been dispersed throughout the Muslim and developing worlds, we based our findings on (1) extensive interviews and correspondence with experts from Africa, Eastern Europe, and Central and South Asia; (2) comprehensive desk research based on written reports, journal articles, and transcripts; and (3) field research in three countries. From what we could ascertain, the principal conduits through which most of these books have been distributed are Saudi Arabian humanitarian charities like the Muslim World League (MWL), the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), the World Assembly (or Association) of Muslim Youth, the UK-based Al-Muqtada Organization, and the now-defunct Al-Haramain Fund (AHF). Most of the activity related to this distribution has taken the form of constructing new mosques, madrasas, and libraries throughout the developing world. Based on this research, we developed brief profiles of 35 countries where Saudi sources have been actively funding the construction and operation of religious schools.

The presence of Saudi textbooks and educational materials appeared to be most prevalent in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the Kingdom has been heavily involved in the construction and financing of mosques and madrasas since the 1960s. In countries like Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria, Somalia, and Tanzania, it was reported that Saudi funders maintained close oversight of the teacher training and educational materials used in the religious schools they had built. As might be expected, in countries like Kenya, with its more sophisticated restrictions on foreign financing of religious institutions, the Kingdom had noticeably less influence over education.

In Southeast Asia, Indonesia stood apart as a country where Saudi textbooks were widely distributed and used in Salafi madrasas in different parts of the country. However, as best we could determine, in those schools operated by Indonesia's (indeed, the world's) two largest Muslim organizations, Nahdlatul Ulema and Muhammadiyah (50 million and 40 million members respectively), Saudi textbooks were apparently not in use. In Central Asia and Eastern Europe, there was a significant effort by the Kingdom to gain influence following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the former Republic of Yugoslavia. With few exceptions, this effort has largely failed, owing to the tight control that most countries in these regions hold over educational curriculum.

Although direct observation by ICRD and its partnering organizations in Pakistan did not uncover the use of Saudi textbooks in the Ahle Hadith (Wahhabi) madrasas funded by Saudi Arabia, these schools were found to be using textbooks that contained similarly pejorative content, albeit of local origin.

While this study focused on the spread of Saudi textbooks, which clearly play a role in the advance of Wahhabist Salafism around the world, evidence suggests that the textbooks actually play a relatively minor role in comparison to the influence of the imams and teachers and, by direct extension, the training they receive.

The Road Ahead

Next month, we will take another look at the textbooks, this time assessing the content of the high school grades, which had not yet been revised at the time of our earlier look in 2012. We will also conduct an in-depth examination of the religious and social impact of Saudi educational materials in three countries of strategic consequence. The viability of conducting these studies in selected countries from the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Western Europe is currently being assessed.

Although we have not examined Saudi textbook content in the last five years, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom examined an incomplete set of textbooks several years ago and determined that the reform process was continuing. However, we have no reason to doubt the validity of any of the more recent examples of intolerant content cited by other scholars.

The pace of change in reforming the Kingdom's public school textbooks has been glacial at best. A process that was to have been completed in 2008, took until now to complete. Even with the additional time, though, significant problems remain. The Saudis are aware of these problems and are planning to address them on two levels. First, and consistent with the Crown Prince's 2030 Vision, a set of curriculum standards will be developed that will precipitate a wholesale revision of all textbook content. Toward this end, the first draft of a Curriculum Framework has been developed to provide a basis for crafting the standards. This process is scheduled to be completed in 2020, and it will represent the first time in the Kingdom's history that such standards have existed. Without curriculum standards that specify what students should learn and be able to do, it becomes exceedingly difficult to hold teachers and textbook authors accountable.

On a more urgent basis, the Ministry of Education will be assessing the revised textbooks for oppressive content and begin making changes on a real-time, priority basis, allegedly within the next three months. The Ministry's timetable calls for having this process completed in time for the 2018-2019 academic year.

As for the global impact of existing textbooks, in response to ICRD's earlier study on this subject, a request went out in May 2016 to all Saudi embassies around the world, urging them to retrieve any older textbooks that might be in use within their respective geographic areas and to replace them with the newer, revised editions. Extensive follow-up is taking place, and there has

apparently been an encouraging response. An important caveat here is that the Saudi government doesn't know all of the locations in which its textbooks are being used, since it has not had total control of their distribution.

A Sobering Challenge

With a perfect storm descending on Saudi Arabia in the form of low oil prices, two costly wars in Yemen and Syria, and a demographic tidal wave (youth bulge), the Kingdom finds itself at a crossroads. Fundamental to its future success will be effective implementation of the 2030 Vision and an education system to support it that provides the necessary professional and cross-cultural skills to succeed in an increasingly integrated and competitive world.