

TESTIMONY OF NINA SHEA, DIRECTOR
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BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
“Saudi Arabia's Troubling Educational Curriculum”
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Mr. Chairman, representing Hudson Institute’s Center for Religious Freedom, I thank you for holding this important hearing today. It comes at an important time in the strengthening of United States and Saudi Arabia relations and when a new vision for Saudi Arabia by its rulers is being presented. In confronting Islamist extremist terror, we have a new opportunity to make a difference by examining the ideology reflected in Saudi Arabia’s official textbooks.

After 9/11, when it became clear that 79 percent of the terrorists who waged the murderous attacks on American soil that day, not to mention the plot’s mastermind, Osama bin Laden, were sons of Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia’s education system was brought into question. The 9/11 Commission and other thoughtful voices suggested that the kingdom’s interpretation of Islam, Wahhabism, which is taught as the core of its schools’ standardized curriculum, could bear some responsibility for inciting violence against the West.

Soon after, with the help of Saudi-American journalist Ali Ahmed and several other American Muslims, who wish to remain anonymous, I began collecting, translating and analyzing Saudi textbooks for grades 1 through 12 of the Saudi religious curriculum. I published my findings in 2005, 2006, 2008 and 2011. In 2011, as a Commissioner on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, I visited Saudi Arabia and discussed its textbooks directly with the Minister of Education, the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Islamic Affairs. In subsequent years, I have studied and written about the global spread of Saudi Wahhabi education, including here in the academy operated by the Saudi embassy under the name Islamic Saudi Academy (for the academic year just concluded, its name was changed to King Abdullah Academy). My findings were generally validated by later reporting by the State Department and others.

The Saudi Textbooks

Fears that the Saudi government was indoctrinating its young people in violent and belligerent teachings toward us proved warranted. In 2003, a scholarly panel commissioned by Saudi King Abdullah reviewed the middle and high school religious curriculum for three subjects pertaining to Wahhabi Islam – Fiqh (law), Hadith (tradition), and Tawhid (beliefs regarding monotheism). Their conclusion was as shocking as it was blunt. At the 2003 National Dialogue in Saudi Arabia, these Saudi scholars presented their key finding that:

[The Saudi Kingdom's religious studies curriculum] encourages violence towards others, and misguides the pupils into believing that in order to safeguard their own religion, they must violently repress and even physically eliminate the 'other.'

Sixteen years after 9/11, Saudi Ministry of Education textbooks still teach an ideology of hatred and violence against Jews, Christians, Muslims, such as Shiites, Sufis and Ahmadis, Hindus, Bahais, Yizidis, animists, sorcerers, and "infidels" of all stripes, as well as other groups with different beliefs. The most objectionable passages are found in the upper grades' religious textbooks. While the Saudi government has heralded reform for the early grades, those religious texts, like those for math and English, have not been particularly problematic, though, overall, critical thinking and ideas that conflict with the government approved ones are banned. (A Wahhabi educational document I analyzed had denounced "freedom of thinking" since it "let[s] loose the ideas and pens to write of disbelief as one likes, and put[s] ornaments on sin as one likes.")

Each academic year, Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Education publishes new editions of grades 1 through 12 religious textbooks, which are mandatory in the Saudi public schools. Each edition reflects some changes in wording, content and placement. Nevertheless, over the past some ten years, the content has continued to retain violent passages and directives.

Christians, Hindus and those "practicing witchcraft" are to be fought and killed. The textbooks incite violence against "polytheists," a category that would of course include all non-monotheistic religions but, in Saudi Wahhabi teaching, can include monotheistic religions, too. While Christianity is considered one of the three great monotheistic religions by the rest of the world, the Saudi textbooks teach that Christians are polytheists for their belief in Jesus Christ. Christians are also considered "infidels" who must be fought unless they have a protection contract with Muslims. Conspiracy theories are taught as fact about the Free Masons, the Rotary Club, the Lions Club and the American University of Beirut.

Dogmatic lessons in Saudi middle and high school textbooks instruct that many Muslims should be killed for their beliefs, including blasphemers, Christian converts, and those who merely "doubt" the Prophet's truth, as well as Shiites and Sufis, who are condemned as "polytheists" for praying or even seen crying at gravesites.

No group, however, is more vilified than Jews. The problem is far deeper than that conveyed by the State Department characterization of it as simply "stereotypical" or "anti-Semitic" language. Repeatedly, Jews are demonized, dehumanized, and targeted for violence. The textbooks instruct that the Zionist aim is "Jewish domination of the world and controlling its destiny." Israel's existence is de-legitimized and students are mentally prepared for eventual war with the Jews. All of Israel is called "occupied Islamic territory" (as are Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, much of Spain and the Balkans.)

When I met in 2011 with the then-Saudi justice minister Muhammad al-Issa, I asked him why the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, an infamously anti-Semitic fabrication from the Russian revolution period, is included in the textbook on Hadiths (traditions of Islam's Prophet Mohammed) where it continues to be taught as historical fact. He responded that the *Protocols* is treated as part of Islamic culture because it is a book that has long been found in plentiful supply in Saudi Arabia, and was a book that his father had in his home.

A few examples I documented from the Saudi textbooks for the higher grades, follow:

1. "The Jews and the Christians are enemies of the believers, and they cannot approve of Muslims."
2. "The struggle of this [Muslim] nation with the Jews and Christians has endured, and it will continue as long as God wills."
3. "Do not kill what God has forbidden killing such as the Muslim or the infidel between whom and the Muslims there is a covenant or under protection, unless for just cause such as unbelief after belief, just punishment or adultery."
4. "The apostate has two punishments; worldly and in the hereafter. Punishment in this life: Death if he does not repent."
5. "Major polytheism is a reason to fight those that practice it."
6. "Major polytheism makes [the taking of] blood and wealth permissible."
7. "Fighting the Infidels and the Polytheists has certain conditions and controls, including: That they be invited to Islam and they refuse to enter it and refuse to pay Jizya [a special tax] That Muslims have the power and the capacity to combat, That this be with the permission of the guardian and under his banner, That there be no guarantee between them and the Muslims not to combat."
8. "The punishment of homosexuality is death. . . . Ibn Qudamah said: "The companions (of the Prophet) agreed unanimously on killing. Some of the Companions argued that he (a homosexual) is to be burned with fire. It has been said that he should be stoned, or thrown from a high place. Other things have also been said."
9. "In Islamic law, (jihad) has two uses: 1. specific usage: which means: Exerting effort in fighting unbelievers and tyrants."
10. "In the general usage, Jihad is divided into the following categories: . . . Wrestling with the unbelievers by calling them (to the faith) and fighting them."
11. "As was cited in Ibn Abbas, and was said: The Apes are the people of the Sabbath, the Jews; and the Swine are the infidels of the communion of Jesus, the Christians."
12. "You can hardly find an example of sedition in which the Jews have not played a role."
13. "For since the Jews were scattered sundries they never knew peace with a single nation because of their proclivity for deceit, lying and conspiracy. Nothing proves this more than the Muslims' experience with them in Medina as the Prophet (PBUH) deported them and recommended that they be driven out from the Arabian Peninsula and as happened with them in other countries such as Germany, Poland, Spain and others."
14. "It is part of God's wisdom that the struggle between the Muslims and the Jews should continue until the hour [of judgment] The good news for Muslims is that God will help them against the Jews in the end."
15. "The whole [Muslim] nation lives in a Jihad against international Zionism manifested by the State of Jewish gangs' called Israel established on the land of Palestine wrongfully and in transgression."

To be sure the textbook language varies from year to year, and some intolerant passages have been word smithed, moved to later grades, repeated less often in the curriculum, paired with contradictory tolerant teachings and otherwise toned down. For example, last year's textbooks only instruct one way, by stoning, to kill a homosexual, instead of three, as before. Students are instructed to "hate the polytheists and the infidels" but, incongruously and without explanation, not to treat the infidels "unjustly," and, in a higher grade, taught four "reasons for hostility toward the kuffar (unbeliever)." Holy war is still extolled but now a ruler must decide when to make the call for jihad. The ideology of hatred and violence toward the "other" continued to be reflected in the textbooks of the last academic year.

Posted on the Internet and shipped worldwide, these texts are linked to growing extremism. Top U.S. Treasury counterterrorism officials have called the Wahhabi teachings of these textbooks "kindling for Bin Laden's match," and warned that, without education reform, "we will forever be faced with the challenge of disrupting the next group of terrorist facilitators and supporters." Most damning is the *New York Times* report that Saudi texts were used by ISIS in Mosul's schools. Indeed, Saudi high school students were studying from a textbook teaching that Muslims have an obligation to kill sorcerers even as ISIS posted a video this spring showing its militants in Egypt carrying out this directive – by beheading two elderly "sorcerers," probably Sufi Muslims, since such terms are loosely defined.

Complete Reform Is Always Just Around the Corner

In Riyadh, the other Commissioners and I met with the then-Saudi minister of education, Prince Faisal Bin Abdullah Bin Muhammad al-Saud. Like virtually every Saudi official who is asked, he acknowledged that 1–12 textbook reform was needed. But, he indicated that higher education, not high school, reform was then the government's priority. As confirmed in the State's religious freedom report, his office asserted to us that the math, science and English textbooks in 1st, 4th and 7th grades were given priority for revision, but these texts have not posed the greatest threats. He told us that he had a five-year plan for complete textbook reform. That meant that the high school textbooks would have been cleaned up by 2016 but they were not. As the 2017 State Department's human rights report on Saudi Arabia notes:

The government's multi-year Tatweer project to revise textbooks, curricula, and teaching methods to promote tolerance and remove content disparaging religions other than Islam began in 2007. As of 2013, the program had received more than 11 billion riyals (\$2.9 billion) to revise the curriculum, and the government had developed new curricula and textbooks for at least grades four through 10. *Despite these efforts, some intolerant material remained in textbooks used in schools.*(emphasis added)

This is not the first time that the Saudi government has obfuscated and broken its textbook reform promises to the U.S. government. On July 19, 2006, I was personally briefed about a new promise of reform by the State Department's ambassador for religious freedom. As a State Department press release announced, in a diplomatic "confirmation of policy," the Saudi government promised the United States complete educational reform by 2008. It asserted:

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.

Over a decade later, the process has yet to be completed. Moreover, the education minister told our commission delegation in 2011 that he was not aware of any such commitment.

Saudi Arabia's baleful reassurances of textbook reform date back even further to when its ambassador to Washington, Prince Turki al Faisal, in addition to taking out full page ads in American publications touting reform, stated at a Town Hall meeting in Los Angeles that:

The Kingdom has reviewed all of its education practices and materials, and has removed any element that is inconsistent with the needs of a modern education. Not only have we eliminated what might be perceived as intolerance from old textbooks that were in our system, we have implemented a comprehensive internal revision and modernization plan.

When I later met with Ambassador Turki to show him my report findings on his government textbooks, he told me he had not personally read the textbooks and acknowledged that reform was still needed.

Periodically throughout these years, the Saudi government, with the help of a powerful public relations effort in Washington, has announced initiatives that were said to indicate resolve for textbook reform: the appointment of a woman director to the education department, the appointment of purported liberals as education ministers, a textbook pilot programs, the opening of a dialogue center in Vienna, Austria, teacher training programs, tolerance workshops and a "deradicalization" re-education program. It is difficult not to conclude that these efforts have been largely distractions that served to pull the wool over our eyes and failed to get at the heart of the problem—that is, eradicating the violent bigotry being actively promoted by the Saudi government in its textbooks. In March, Saudi Education Minister Issa announced plans to stop altogether the printing of textbooks within two or three years and to digitize them instead for wider accessibility. Whether or how this will impact the content of the religious texts is not clear.

Last year, the new Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman made new promises to improve education, outlined in "National Transformation Program 2020." It contains plans to strengthen basic reading, math and science skills but gives little indication as to whether the state's religious textbooks will be reformed.

U.S. Government's Failure to Verify

The State Department has long treated the subject of Saudi Arabia's textbooks with kid gloves. Each year, these textbooks directing religious hatred, violence and war indoctrinate six million Saudi students and reach untold millions of others as they are spread far and wide in the Muslim world by a state that claims moral authority as the custodian of Islam's holiest sites. Yet, their role in advancing Islamist extremist ideology has not be taken seriously as a U.S. national security concern. Since 9/11, the State Department has barely raised the issue and at times has even worked to cover up their toxic content. It has not held the Saudi government to its repeated promises to the United States to reform its textbooks.

Since 2003, the State Department's some 1,000-page reports on human rights and religious freedom have contained a mere few lines each year on the Saudi textbooks. While blandly stating in boilerplate fashion, "some intolerant material remained in textbooks," they have routinely given assurances that reform is progressing. (A notable exception has been the reporting of the special envoy against anti-Semitism, which provided specific examples pertaining it this topic.) Assertions that reform was

completed in a book authored by a former U.S. secretary of state also contributed to creating a false public perception that the Saudi textbooks no longer contain lessons that could be endangering American security and Middle Eastern stability.

The State Department once contracted the International Center on Religion & Diplomacy to evaluate the Saudi textbooks for the 2011-2012 academic year. The resulting report was promptly marked “classified” by the State Department and only became available to the public on June 29, 2016, by virtue of the Freedom of Information Act. By then, the Saudis could dismiss its findings on the basis it was out of date, four textbook editions having had replaced the one examined by the center. On another occasion, while I was a commissioner, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom sent a delegation to Saudi Arabia, where it initiated a request for a set of the textbooks (which at that time were difficult to obtain) but, when, the requested texts arrived at the State Department, the U.S. International Religious Freedom Ambassador refused to release them, either to the commission or publicly.

Recommendations

Two months ago in Saudi Arabia, President Trump delivered a major speech before a gathering of fifty Saudi and other government leaders, laying out a new foreign policy strategy addressing terror. In it, the United States officially recognized – for the first time – that there is an ideology of “Islamist extremism” behind the terror attacks proliferating worldwide. The President pleaded with Muslim leaders to begin “honestly confronting the crisis of Islamist extremism and the Islamist terror groups it inspires.” He declared that “Muslim nations must be willing to take on the burden, if we are going to defeat terrorism and send its wicked ideology into oblivion.” He urged that we unite against “the murder of innocent Muslims, the oppression of women, the persecution of Jews, and the slaughter of Christians.”

The president’s words require new policies to be given effect. Five recommendations aimed at Saudi textbook reform follow:

1. The State Department should be mandated to review and publicly report annually on contemporaneous editions of Saudi government’s textbooks, particularly the high school religious texts. These reports should point out intolerant passages that could negatively impact American citizens and interests.
2. American defense contracts with Saudi Arabia should be halted as long as the Saudi government publishes, posts, approves, finances or distributes textbooks that direct violence and hatred against any religion or group that may include American citizens.
3. The United States government should apply the range of diplomatic measures, including targeted visa denials to its government officials and their families, to press Saudi Arabia, at long last, to remove intolerant passages from school textbooks and other educational materials.
4. The State Department should report on the extent of the distribution of Saudi textbooks and education materials, including those distributed by the Saudi Department of Islamic Affairs, throughout the world.

5. Saudi Arabia should also be pressed to generally end its policies of religious persecution, as detailed in the State Department's religious freedom reports and the reports of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.