

**Committee on Foreign Affairs**  
**Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade**  
**“Saudi Arabia's Troubling Educational Curriculum”**  
**Hon. Frank Wolf- Written Testimony**  
**July 19, 2017**

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, thank you for having this hearing regarding concerns about Saudi Arabia’s educational curriculum and the rise of radicalization. I have shared these same concerns for many years when I served in the House and since joining the Wilberforce Initiative in 2015, and it is my hope that the U.S. government will continue to monitor and assess the educational materials that the government of Saudi Arabia publishes in order to ensure that they do not incite further violence, hatred and radicalism in the United States as well as abroad. We should also consider solutions that ensure other countries that may produce similar intolerant and extreme content is addressed.

The issue of Saudi Arabia’s educational curriculum as a means of promoting intolerance and inspiring terrorism is not a new one. This topic hit close to home in 2003, when Ahmed Omar Abu Ali was arrested while in class at the Islamic University of Medina, for an attempted plot to assassinate President Bush. Before attending university in Medina, Mr. Abu Ali attended and was the valedictorian at a high school which was located here in northern Virginia, the Islamic Saudi Academy. Mr. Abu Ali was ultimately sentenced to life in prison and is currently serving out his sentence in the supermax in Colorado.

The reason I would like to highlight this particular case in particular is due to the fact that concerns were then raised regarding the educational material being used by the Islamic Saudi Academy. Not only was the school funded by the Saudi Arabian Embassy, which meant it fell under the Saudi ministry of education, but the Saudi Ambassador to Washington led the Board of Directors for the school.

In 2007, when asked by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom to make the textbooks publicly available, the school refused to comply. One letter from USCIRF on the issue stated, “Based on past documentation, significant concerns remain about whether the Saudi textbooks used at the ISA explicitly promote hate, intolerance and human rights violations, and in some cases violence, which may adversely affect the interests of the United States.”

In 2008, I wrote then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on five separate occasions regarding the concerns held by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom regarding the content of the textbooks being used by the Islamic Saudi Academy. At that time I requested that a meeting be convened between relevant State Department officials, USCIRF representatives and expert analysts commissioned by USCIRF to translate the textbooks in order to determine what was being taught by the ISA. Such a meeting never took place.

During this time, USCIRF was finally able to obtain copies of some of the textbooks being used

by the Islamic Saudi Academy. After a thorough analysis, the Commission concluded that the textbooks contained some very troubling passages that did not conform to international human rights standards- including the vilification of those who adhere to Christianity, Judaism, Baha'ism, Ahmadism, Shia Islam and others. I have submitted for the record a letter that the Commission released on June 11, 2008 which contains examples of some of the statements made in the textbooks.

Again, in 2009, I sent a letter to then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, urging that the State Department monitor and report on the textbooks published by the Saudi government. In that letter, I acknowledged that, "To date, we have only had vague assurances on the part of the State Department and the school that the curriculum has been reformed. But these assurances are insufficient, particularly when they are utterly at odds with USCIRF's findings, and may be indicative of a wider problem- namely the status of Saudi commitments made in 2006 to conduct 'a comprehensive revision of textbooks and educational curricula to weed out disparaging remarks.'"

While it is impossible to say whether Mr. Abu Ali was directly radicalized by the textbooks used at the Islamic Saudi Academy, the use of books that promote religious discrimination and the justification of violence toward non-believers cannot be tolerated. Consider that if this is the Academy's curriculum in the United States, just imagine how prolific this problem has been across Saudi-affiliated academies and funded programs in other countries around the world, especially in countries in the Middle East, that are struggling with radicalization and terrorism.

While the Ahmed Omar Abu Ali case is now almost a decade old, Saudi Arabia has continued to promote and export radical Wahhabism. In the wake of the Orlando shooting just last year, Democratic Presidential nominee, Hillary Clinton, stated, "It is long past time for the Saudis, the Qataris and the Kuwaitis and others to stop their citizens from funding extremist organization. And they should stop supporting radical schools and mosques around the world that have set too many young people on a path towards extremism."

By funding top American university research centers, the Saudi government has been able to minimize the voices of those in academia who would otherwise have the best means of researching the effects of radical Wahhabism. In other countries, such as Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo and Indonesia they have continued to promote radicalism. In an op-ed by Nicholas Kristoff entitled, "The Terrorists the Saudis Cultivate in Peaceful Countries," he states, "Kosovo and Albania have been models of religious moderation and tolerance... Yet Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries poured money into the new nation over the last 17 years and nurtured religious extremism in a land where originally there was little." In an article that appeared in the New York Times last year, entitled, "Saudis and Extremism: 'Both the Arsonists and the Firefighters,'" the author details that since the mid-60's, "in non-Muslim-majority countries alone, Saudi Arabia would build 1,359 mosques, 210 Islamic centers, 202 colleges and 2,000 schools. Saudi money helped finance 16 American mosques; four in Canada; and others in London, Madrid, Brussels and Geneva, according to a report in an official Saudi weekly, *Ain al-Yaqeen*. The total spending including supplying or training imams and teachers, was 'many billions' of Saudi riyals."

While there are many concerns regarding the influence of Saudi Arabia, and more specifically radical Wahhabism, on countries around the world, it would be remiss to not acknowledge that very recently, some improvements have been made to their educational material. In the latest report by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom it states, “In February 2017, Saudi officials stated that the final stage of revisions to high school textbooks was underway...During its visit, USCIRF obtained some textbooks currently in use and found some intolerant content remained in high school texts, though at a much-reduced level.” They go on to explain that while there has been progress in terms of the textbooks, there is still a concern that some of the teachers may be promoting a more radicalized version of Islam. However, the Ministry of Education has undertaken an initiative through which teachers are encouraged to participate in teacher training in both Europe and the U.S.

There are certainly many improvements that must be made, but in closing I would like to echo the recommendations set forward by USCIRF that the United States government 1) Undertake and make public an annual assessment of the relevant Ministry of Education religious textbooks to determine if passages that teach religious intolerance have been removed and 2) Press the Saudi government to denounce publicly the continued use around the world of older versions of Saudi textbooks and other materials that promote hatred and intolerance, and to make every attempt to retrieve, or buy back, previously distributed materials that contain intolerance.

Thank you.