United States Commission *on*
International Religious Freedom

Saudi Arabia: USCIRF Confirms Material Inciting Violence, Intolerance Remains in Textbooks Used at Saudi Government's Islamic Saudi Academy

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 11, 2008

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WASHINGTON-Last fall, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom asked the U.S. Department of State to secure the release of all Arabic-language textbooks used at a Saudi government school in Northern Virginia, the Islamic Saudi Academy (ISA). The Commission took this action in order to ensure that the books be publicly examined to determine whether the texts used at the ISA promote violence, discrimination, or intolerance based on religion or belief. The ISA is unlike any conventional private or parochial school in the United States in that it is operated by a foreign government and uses that government"s official texts. It falls under the Commission"s mandate to monitor the actions of foreign governments in relation to religious freedom. The government of Saudi Arabia, as a member of the international community, is committed to upholding international standards, including the obligation not to promote violence, intolerance, or hate.

The Commission requested Saudi government textbooks repeatedly during and following its trip to Saudi Arabia in May-June 2007. Shortly after the Commission raised the issue publicly, the Saudi government turned over textbooks used at the ISA to the State Department, but as of this writing, the Department has not made them available either to the public or to the Commission, nor has it released any statement about the content of the books that it received. Nevertheless, although it was unable to obtain the entire collection, the Commission managed to acquire and review 17 ISA textbooks in use during this school year from other, independent sources, including a congressional office. While the texts represent just a small fraction of the books used in this Saudi government school, the Commission"s review confirmed that these texts do, in fact, include some extremely troubling passages that do not conform to international human rights norms. The Commission calls once again for the full public release of all the Arabic-language textbooks used at the ISA.

In July 2006, the Saudi government confirmed to the U.S. government that, among other policies to improve religious freedom and tolerance, it would, within one to two years, "revise and update textbooks to remove remaining references that disparage Muslims or non-Muslims or that promote hatred toward other religions or religious groups." The Commission is releasing this statement as the two-year timeframe is coming to an end, and with particular concern over the content of textbooks used at the ISA, in order to highlight reforms that should be made before the 2008-09 school year begins at the ISA.

Examples of Problematic Passages in Current ISA Textbooks

The most problematic texts involve passages that are not directly from the Koran but rather contain the Saudi government"s particular interpretation of Koranic and other Islamic texts. Some passages clearly exhort the readers to commit acts of violence, as can be seen in the following two examples:

- In a twelfth-grade *Tafsir* (Koranic interpretation) textbook, the authors state that it is permissible for a Muslim to kill an apostate (a convert from Islam), an adulterer, or someone who has murdered a believer intentionally: "He (praised is He) prohibits killing the soul that God has forbidden (to kill) unless for just cause..." Just cause is then defined in the text as "unbelief after belief, adultery, and killing an inviolable believer intentionally." (*Tafsir*, Arabic/Sharia, 123)
- A twelfth-grade *Tawhid* (monotheism) textbook states that "[m]ajor polytheism makes blood and wealth permissible," which in Islamic legal terms means that a Muslim can take the life and property of someone believed to be guilty of this alleged transgression with impunity. (*Tawhid*, Arabic/Sharia, 15) Under the Saudi interpretation of Islam, "major polytheists" include Shi"a and Sufi Muslims, who visit the shrines of their saints to ask for intercession with God on their behalf, as well as Christians, Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists.

The overt exhortations to violence found in these passages make other statements that promote intolerance troubling even though they do not explicitly call for violent action. These other statements vilify adherents of the Ahmadi, Baha"i, and Jewish religions, as well as of Shi"a Islam. This is despite the fact that the Saudi government is obligated as a member of the United Nations and a state party to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and other relevant treaties to guarantee the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. The statements include the following:

- "Today, Qadyanis [Ahmadis] are one of the greatest strongholds for spreading aberration, deviation, and heresy in the name of religion, even from within Islamic countries. Thus, the Qadyani [Ahmadi] movement has become a force of destruction and internal corruption today in the Islamic world..." ("Aspects of Muslim Political and Cultural History," Eleventh Grade, Administrative/Social Track, Sharia/Arabic Track, 99)
- "It [Baha"ism] is one of the destructive esoteric sects in the modern age... It has become clear that Babism [the precursor to Baha"ism], Baha"ism, and Qadyanism [Ahmadism] represent wayward forces inside the Islamic world that seek to strike it from within and weaken it.

They are colonial pillars in our Islamic countries and among the true obstacles to a renaissance." ("Aspects of Muslim Political and Cultural History," Eleventh Grade, 99-100)

- "The cause of the discord: The Jews conspired against Islam and its people. A sly, wicked person who sinfully and deceitfully professed Islam infiltrated (the Muslims). He was 'Abd Allah b. Saba" (from the Jews of Yemen). [_____]* began spewing his malice and venom against the third of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, 'Uthman (may God be pleased with him), and falsely accused him." (*Tawhid*, Administrative/Social Sciences Track, 67)
(*The word or words here were obscured by correction fluid.)

- Sunni Muslims are told to "shun those who are extreme regarding the People of the House (Muhammad"s family) and who claim infallibility for them." (*Tawhid*, Arabic/Sharia 82; *Tawhid*, Administrative/Social Sciences Track, 65) This would include all Shi"a Muslims, for whom the doctrine of infallibility is a cardinal principle.

Other problematic passages employ ambiguous language, and the textbook authors do nothing to clarify the meaning.

- A ninth-grade *Hadith* textbook states: "It is not permissible to violate the blood, property, or honor of the unbeliever who makes a compact with the Muslims. The blood of the mu"ahid is not permissible unless for a legitimate reason...the mu"ahid is an unbeliever who contracts a treaty with a Muslim providing for the safety of his life, property, and family." (*Hadith*, Ninth Grade, 142-3)

The passages about the *mu"ahid* are most troubling for what they leave out. They address the protected status of an unbeliever in a Muslim country, but are silent on whether unbelievers living in non-Muslim countries are afforded the same protections of "blood, property, or honor." Such an omission, taken together with the outright incitement to violence and vilifying language noted above, could be interpreted as tacitly condoning violence against non-Muslims living in non-Muslim countries.

The Commission would urge the textbook authors to put more context into some sections of the textbooks to avoid any perception that they could be encouraging violence. For example, one passage that requires clarification is the following explication of the Koranic phrase, "Respond to God and His Messenger when He calls you to that which will give you life." (Q 8:24)

Although this Koranic passage does not in itself invoke the term *jihad*, the Saudi textbook authors write:

- "In these verses is a call for jihad, which is the pinnacle of Islam. In (*jihad*) is life for the body; thus it is one of the most important causes of outward life. Only through force and victory over the enemies is there security and repose. Within martyrdom in the path of God (exalted and glorified is He) is a type of noble life-force that is not diminished by fear or poverty." (*Tafsir*, Arabic/Sharia, 68)

While there are various meanings of the term *jihad*, including an internal struggle of the soul, none are given in this brief discussion, which also includes an emphasis on the importance of power or force over one"s enemies and discusses "martyrdom" with approval. Such an ambiguous interpretation can be perceived as giving the verse a militant connotation, potentially justifying acts of violence, which should not be left without elucidation in a textbook that is aimed at children who are still learning the main tenets of religion.

More broadly, the analysis of the ills of the Muslim world that is offered in the ISA textbooks-that it was strong when united under a single caliph, a single language (Arabic), and a single creed (Sunnism), and that it has grown weak because of foreign influence and internal religious and ethnic divisions-is identical to some of the exclusionary ideological arguments used by extremists to justify acts of terror.

In the Commission"s view, these troubling passages should be modified, clarified, or removed altogether from the next edition of the textbooks in order to bring the books at this Saudi government school into conformity with international human rights standards.

Long-term Commission Concern over Content of Saudi Government Textbooks

The Commission has long called for Saudi Arabia to be designated a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for its egregious and systematic violations of religious freedom. In particular, the Commission has expressed concern about the promotion of religious intolerance and religion-based violence in official Saudi government textbooks used both within Saudi Arabia and at Saudi schools abroad, such as the ISA. The Commission has been urging the U.S. government to press the Saudi government to promote religious tolerance in the Saudi curriculum since 2001, and in 2003 it issued an in-depth report about religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia, including intolerance and incitement to violence found in Saudi textbooks and the country"s official educational curriculum. It was not until September 2004 that the State Department first publicly expressed concern over the Saudi government"s "export of religious extremism and intolerance to other countries" at a press conference announcing Saudi Arabia"s CPC designation.

In mid-2007, the Commission visited Saudi Arabia to assess the government"s progress in implementing textbook reform and other policies. However, based on that visit and subsequent research into Saudi government textbooks, including those used at the ISA, the Commission concluded that despite some improvements, these commitments, regrettably, remain largely unfulfilled.

In every official meeting during the visit to Saudi Arabia, the Commission delegation asked Saudi interlocutors for copies of textbooks. The Saudi government"s refusal to make them available during that visit or after the Commission"s return, despite repeated requests, left the Commission with continued concerns about their content and serious questions about whether they were in fact being reformed. The Commission also sought to obtain the textbooks used at the ISA. Until the Commission drew attention to the problem at a press conference in October 2007, the ISA publicly stated on its Web site that it adhered to the official Saudi government curriculum. The Commission called for the ISA to be closed under the terms of the Foreign Missions Act until the official Saudi textbooks used at the school were made available for comprehensive public examination. Soon after the Commission released its October 2007 report, the ISA dropped the language on its Web site stating that its Arabic-language and Islamic studies curriculum "is based on the Curriculum of the Saudi Ministry of Education." In the months following the Commission"s report, the Saudi government has also posted copies of the official 2007-2008 Saudi textbooks on the Internet.

Members of Congress, some of whom had also sought in vain to obtain official Saudi textbooks for review, have joined the Commission in expressing concern. In November 2007, Reps. Frank Wolf (R-VA), Steve Israel (D-NY), and Anthony Weiner (D-NY) introduced a resolution, H.Con.Res. 262, calling on the State Department to heed the Commission"s requests regarding the ISA and to create a mechanism to monitor implementation of the 2006 Saudi commitments to improving educational materials. Twelve U.S. Senators, led by Sens. John Kyl (R-AZ) and Charles Schumer (D-NY), wrote a bipartisan letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice the same month, echoing the Commission"s call for closing the ISA until the official Saudi textbooks used at the school were made available for comprehensive public examination in the United States.

While neither the ISA nor the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia complied with the Commission"s requests to release the school"s books publicly, the Commission did obtain some Arabic-language books currently used in the twelfth grade and a random selection of texts currently used in middle and high school classes. The Commission"s review of these textbooks found that they did contain passages justifying violence toward, and even the killing of, apostates and so-called polytheists. The texts also include highly intolerant passages about non-Sunni Muslims, such as Shi"a, Ismailis, and Ahmadis, and non-Muslims, such as Jews and Baha"is. A list of the books reviewed is appended to this statement.

The ISA and Claims of Revisions

The ISA operates as an arm of the Saudi government. The ISA"s board is chaired by the Saudi ambassador to Washington, it is located on two properties, one of which is owned, the other leased, by the Saudi Embassy, and it shares the Embassy"s Internal Revenue Service employer tax number under the name of the "Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia." It is part of a network of 19 international schools run by the government of Saudi Arabia. The ISA distributed some textbooks during a series of open houses held for selected reporters and congressional staffers after the Commission"s press conference, but it did not make available the texts with the most problematic passages-*Tawhid* (monotheism) and *Tafsir* (Koranic interpretation)-which the Commission obtained from other sources.

Last fall, after the Commission held a press conference, ISA personnel were quoted in the media as saying that they had already revised the Saudi Ministry of Education textbooks used at the school. However, the books reviewed by the Commission in the winter of 2007-2008 show evidence of truncation, omission, cutting and pasting, and the use of correction tape or fluid to cover over text-but not sufficient revision to remove all objectionable material, as evidenced by the passages cited above. They appear to be Saudi Ministry of Education textbooks, with some alterations but with identical wording in many sections of the texts.

Bilateral and International Commitments by the Saudi Government

The Saudi government is bound by more than just its 2006 confirmation of policies with the United States. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights not only guarantees religious freedom and bans discrimination and incitement to discrimination on a number of bases, including religion; it also provides specifically that education "shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups..." The UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion or Belief also bans such discrimination, which it calls "an affront to human dignity," a "disavowal of the principles of the [UN] Charter," a violation of international human rights law, and "an obstacle to friendly and peaceful relations between nations." That Declaration, moreover, specifically provides that "[t]he child shall be protected from any form of discrimination on the ground of religion or belief. He shall be brought up in a spirit of understanding, tolerance, friendship among peoples, peace and universal brotherhood, [and] respect for freedom of religion or belief of others. . . ." The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Saudi Arabia is a party, contains similar provisions mandating non-discrimination and the teaching of tolerance in education. The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination also calls on States Parties, which include Saudi Arabia, "to guarantee the right of everyone, without distinction as to race, color, or national or ethnic origin, to equality before the law" in the enjoyment of rights including "the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion."

Those provisions stand in stark contrast to the problematic passages that continue to appear in the ISA textbooks. It is deeply troubling that high school students at a foreign government-operated school in the United States are discussing when and under what circumstances killing an "unbeliever" would be acceptable. The U.S. government must ensure that the Saudi government thoroughly reviews and, as necessary, revises the books it has distributed globally. In both the UN Human Rights Council and UN General Assembly, Saudi Arabia has co-sponsored and supported repeated resolutions urging UN member states to "take resolute action to prohibit the dissemination . . . of racist and xenophobic ideas and material aimed at any religion or its followers that constitute incitement to racial and religious hatred, hostility or violence" and to "ensure that all public officials, including . . . educators, in the course of their official duties, respect different religions and beliefs and do not discriminate against persons on the grounds of their religion or belief." The U.S. government should insist that the Saudi government meet these commitments fully as a member in good standing of the international community.

Recommendations for the U.S. Department of State

The Commission reiterates its recommendations that the State Department should:

- make available all textbooks that it has received from the Saudi government, so that their content and compliance with international human rights standards can be assessed; and
- promptly create a formal mechanism to monitor and encourage implementation of the Saudi government"s 2006 policies as part of every meeting of the U.S.-Saudi Arabia Strategic Dialogue, and ensure that U.S. representatives to each relevant Working Group of the Strategic Dialogue, after each session, or at least every six months, report the group"s findings to Congress.

The Commission reaffirms that governments have a clear obligation to teach tolerance, not hatred. No government should be teaching children that it is justified to kill anyone on the basis of his or her religion or belief. The Commission is seriously concerned that the Saudi government is not abiding by the policies it confirmed in 2006 to promote greater religious freedom and tolerance, including by revising its school textbooks. The texts used at the ISA are only one example.

APPENDIXIslamic Saudi Academy Arabic-Language Textbooks Reviewed by the Commission

Monotheism (Tawhid), Twelfth Grade, Administrative, Social, Natural, and Technical Sciences Track

Monotheism (Tawhid), Twelfth Grade, Sharia and Arabic Sciences Track

Interpretation (Tafsir), Twelfth Grade, Sharia and Arabic Sciences Track

Interpretation (Tafsir), Twelfth Grade, Administrative, Social, Natural, and Technical Sciences Track

Hadith and Islamic Culture, Twelfth Grade, Administrative, Social, Natural, and Technical Sciences Track

Hadith and Islamic Culture, Twelfth Grade, Sharia and Arabic Sciences Track

Jurisprudence (Fiqh), Twelfth Grade, Natural Sciences Track

Jurisprudence (Fiqh), Twelfth Grade, Sharia and Arabic Sciences Track

The History of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Twelfth Grade, Natural Sciences Track

Sociology, Twelfth Grade, Sharia and Arabic Sciences Track

Studies from the Islamic World, Twelfth Grade, Administrative, Social, Natural, and Technical Sciences Track

Hadith, Seventh Grade

Hadith, Ninth Grade

Jurisprudence (Fiqh), Ninth Grade

Jurisprudence (Fiqh), Tenth Grade

Aspects of Muslim Political and Cultural History, Eleventh Grade, Administrative and Social Track, Sharia and Arabic Track

History of the Prophets, the Prophet"s Biography, and the Spread of Islam, Tenth Grade

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