



Textbook Diplomacy:

Why the State Department Shelved a Study on Incitement in Saudi Education Materials

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FDD PRESS

A division of the
FOUNDATION FOR DEFENSE OF DEMOCRACIES
Washington, DC

With President Obama poised to visit Saudi Arabia at the end of this month,¹ America's relations are strained with the Kingdom. The Saudis do not trust America's nuclear deal with Iran,² and Washington worries that the Kingdom's jihadist clients in Syria could exacerbate terrorism worldwide.³

But underneath the immediate security challenges receiving top billing on the President's trip, there is another looming counterterrorism problem: Saudi Arabia's ongoing sponsorship of religious hatred in its public education system. And in what might be seen as a disservice to American national interests, the State Department appears to be withholding a government-commissioned textbooks study on the subject.

In 2011, Foggy Bottom signed a contract with a local non-profit called the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD) to conduct a comprehensive study on Saudi Arabia's government-published textbooks, which are widely distributed both inside the country and abroad. However, when the results of this study were ready for release in 2012, U.S. government officials decided not to publish its findings. Nor did the Department release this study in 2013, despite issuing a similar but controversial study equating the narratives found in textbooks used by Israelis and Palestinians.

¹ The White House, Press Release, "Statement by the Press Secretary on the President's Travel to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in March 2014," February 3, 2014. (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/02/03/statement-press-secretary-presidents-travel-kingdom-saudi-arabia-march-2>)

² F. Gregory Gause, "Why the Iran Deal Scares Saudi Arabia," *The New Yorker*, November 26, 2013. (<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2013/11/why-the-iran-deal-scares-saudi-arabia.html>)

³ Jamie Dettmer, "Syria's Saudi Jihadist Problem," *The Daily Beast*, December 16, 2013. (<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/12/16/syria-s-saudi-jihadist-problem.html>)

ICRD's leadership insists that their study was withheld from the public because it showed the Saudis are making progress on textbook revisions. Thus, the State Department did not want to upset further progress by highlighting a few remaining areas of disagreement.

However, current and former officials contest this characterization, asserting that ICRD's study was withheld because of how bad it makes the Saudis look. Passages continue to dehumanize Jews and Christians, promote the murder of perceived deviants such as homosexuals, and sanction violence against Muslims who do not follow the Wahhabi brand of Islam that is sponsored by the Saudi state.

One State Department official confirmed that ICRD was paid half a million dollars for this particular contract. The official asserted that ICRD's project constituted a "technical assistance program" to help Saudi Arabia generate reforms and was not itself a "study." Subsequently, the official stated, ICRD's work was not intended for publication.

Yet ICRD's website describes the focus of its Saudi work for the State Department as a "study,"⁴ and the Center's president indicated that his group's analysis was originally intended for publication. Semantics aside, the State Department is in possession of a uniquely exhaustive set of recent findings about incitement in Saudi Arabia's education system – findings that it has declined to release for public consumption.⁵

⁴ "Religious Tolerance in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," *International Center for Religion and Diplomacy*, accessed March 14, 2014. (<http://icrd.org/saudi-arabia/>)

⁵ Because it is in fitting with ICRD's own terminology – and the terminology of all the individuals but one with knowledge of this episode who were contacted by the author – the Center's findings on Saudi textbooks are still referred to in this monograph as a "study."

The textbooks issue sits at the frontier between Saudi extremism and potential reform. Meanwhile, the State Department continues to go easy on Saudi Arabia because of structural incentives that undermine U.S. diplomacy no matter which party holds power at the White House. American officials can sometimes be so focused on Saudi Arabia's massive oil production and pivotal role in regional security that long-term concerns such as indoctrination get swept under the rug.

This monograph explains why President Obama should raise the textbooks issue in his public and private remarks while in Saudi Arabia, and why Secretary Kerry's State Department should release the Saudi textbooks study without delay.

A National Security Problem

Administration officials have often pledged their support for international religious freedom. As secretary of state, Hillary Clinton called it "a foreign policy priority,"⁶ and John Kerry insists that, "the promotion of international religious freedom is a priority for President Obama, and it is a priority for me."⁷ President Obama made it the theme of his speech at the National Prayer Breakfast last month.⁸

⁶ U.S. Department of State, Press Release, "Remarks at the Release of the 2011 International Religious Freedom Report," July 30, 2012. (<http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/07/195782.htm>)

⁷ U.S. Department of State, Press Release, "Remarks on the Release of the International Religious Freedom Report," May 20, 2013. (<http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/05/209678.htm>)

⁸ The White House, Press Release, "Remarks by the President at National Prayer Breakfast," February 6, 2014. (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2014/02/06/president-obama-speaks-2014-national-prayer-breakfast#transcript>)

Some experts point out that the incitement in Saudi textbooks is problematic not just for American values but for American interests, as well. Michael Posner, who directed the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) when it commissioned the Saudi textbooks study, feels, "the broader issue to me is a security interest... when you have schools or texts or the combination that are essentially reinforcing the worst stereotypes and promoting this vitriolic approach, you're actually radicalizing young people for the next generation."

“The promotion of international religious freedom is a priority for President Obama, and it is a priority for me.”

--Sec. John Kerry

Stuart Levey, former Undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence from the Treasury Department, has suggested that fighting sources of indoctrination such as intolerant textbooks is "even more important" than combating terrorist finance because, "unless the next generation of children is taught to reject violent extremism, we will forever be faced with the challenge of disrupting the next group of terrorist facilitators and supporters."⁹

Saudi Arabia has undeniably been a key exporter of jihadist indoctrination. In explaining the roots of al Qaeda's 2001 attacks, the 9/11 Commission Report noted that Wahhabism gained a foothold in South Asia "nurtured by Saudi funded institutions," supporting religious schools that,

⁹ Stuart A. Levey, "Loss of Moneyman a Big Blow for al-Qaeda," *The Washington Post*, June 6, 2010. (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/04/AR2010060404271.html>)

“produced large numbers of half-educated young men with no marketable skills but with deeply held Islamic views.”¹⁰

Saudi textbooks are a key component of this education environment. They are sent free of charge to a network of Saudi-sponsored academies abroad and to independent religious schools around the globe, including in the United States. It is worth noting that the 1999 valedictorian of a Saudi academy in northern Virginia that used the Kingdom’s textbooks is currently serving a life sentence for conspiring with al Qaeda to assassinate President George W. Bush.¹¹

Even some Saudis have worried that what gets taught in government-published textbooks could pose a danger to their nation in the long term. A study presented in 2003 at a national dialogue forum in Mecca warned that official curricula mislead students into believing that safeguarding Islam requires them to “physically eliminate the ‘other’.”¹²

A Full Evaluation

The content of Saudi textbooks came under particular scrutiny in the U.S. after 9/11, as part of a broader inquiry into Saudi charities and terror financiers. Eventually, Riyadh gave

Washington what many saw as a commitment to remove all intolerant material from textbooks before the 2008 school year.

However, Washington never held the Saudis accountable when they missed this deadline. For instance, Secretary of State Clinton was briefed on this in 2009, yet the Department’s reporting that year on human rights¹³ and religious freedom¹⁴ made no mention of this lapsed commitment in its sections on the Saudi education system.

Following a briefing on intolerant textbooks from a Saudi dissident, the State Department’s anti-Semitism envoy, Hannah Rosenthal, said that a full evaluation of all the textbooks would be among her top priorities in 2011.¹⁵ That September, the Department signed a contract assigning the task to the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy.¹⁶

The first half of ICRD’s assignment was to submit an exhaustive report documenting whether intolerant material still remained in Saudi textbooks, after which it was to produce a follow-

¹⁰ “The 9/11 Commission Report,” *National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, July 22, 2004, page 63. (<http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>)

¹¹ Jerry Markon, “Va. Man’s Sentence Increased to Life in Terror Plot,” *The Washington Post*, July 28, 2009.

(<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/27/AR2009072701384.html>)

¹² A. Dankowitz, “Saudi Study Offers Critical Analysis of the Kingdom’s Religious Curricula,” *Middle East Media Research Institute*, Inquiry & Analysis Series Report No. 195, November 9, 2004. (<http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/1255.htm>)

¹³ “2008 Human Rights Report: Saudi Arabia,” U.S. Department of State, February 25, 2009.

(<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/nea/119126.htm>);

See also: “2009 Human Rights Report: Saudi Arabia,” U.S. Department of State, March 11, 2010.

(<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/nea/136079.htm>)

¹⁴ “Saudi Arabia – 2009 International Religious Freedom Report,” U.S. Department of State, October 26, 2009.

(<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2009/127357.htm>)

¹⁵ Jennifer Rubin, “Hannah Rosenthal and U.S. Efforts to Combat Anti-Semitism,” *The Washington Post*, January 16, 2011. (http://voices.washingtonpost.com/right-turn/2011/01/hannah_rosenthal_and_combat.htm)

¹⁶ “Religious Tolerance in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” *International Center for Religion and Diplomacy*, accessed March 14, 2014. (<http://icrd.org/saudi-arabia/>)

up report examining the impact of these books worldwide.

“The study began with the intent of publishing its results.”

--Douglas Johnston

Although ICRD’s website only discusses “the first quarter of the project,”¹⁷ its president Douglas Johnston stated in an interview that both studies were submitted on schedule, in June of 2012 and March of 2013 respectively. He also stated that, “the study began with the intent of publishing its results.”

However, Johnston says, “that changed over time when it was realized that significant progress is being made” and that, “the bottom line of all this is that a meaningful reform process is underway.” Because Saudi reform “is still a work in progress,” he explained, “it would be unfair to make our study public before that process is completed.”

Government officials in Saudi Arabia were reportedly briefed on the results of ICRD’s study in May of 2013 during a trip by Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Suzan Johnson Cook, who has since retired.¹⁸ In preparation for her trip, the ambassador was purportedly instructed that this report was a rare case of “good news” she could finally deliver to the Saudis.

¹⁷ “Religious Tolerance in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” *International Center for Religion and Diplomacy*, accessed March 14, 2014. (<http://icrd.org/saudi-arabia/>)

¹⁸ Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Press Release, “Undersecretary of Islamic Affairs Ministry Receives U.S. Official,” May 14, 2013, accessed May 14, 2014. (http://www.saudiembassy.net/latest_news/news05141302.aspx)

The Content of the Books

There is ample reason to challenge this characterization of ICRD’s study. The Saudi dissident who briefed Special Envoy Rosenthal in 2011, Ali al-Ahmed, runs the Institute for Gulf Affairs and has been reporting on the Kingdom’s textbooks for over a decade. He says he has read official textbooks in use for the current school year and that the books are still highly inflammatory.

A similar perspective emerges from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), a watchdog group created as a result of the same 1998 legislation that established the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom (IRF) and its ambassador-at-large position. USCIRF’s latest annual report found that, “Saudi high school textbooks in use during the 2011-2012 school year continue to teach hatred toward other religions and, in some cases, promote violence... some high school texts justified violence against apostates, sorcerers, and homosexuals and labeled Jews and Christians ‘enemies of the believers’.”¹⁹

But perhaps the most immediate contradictions come from ICRD’s own study. A number of individuals familiar with its content rejected the upbeat characterization promoted by Johnston and some at DRL, and one such individual provided specific passages from ICRD’s study, which are highlighted below.

¹⁹ “Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom,” *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*, April 2013, page 142. ([http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/resources/2013%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/resources/2013%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%20(2).pdf))

According to its own language, ICRD's report apparently concluded that, "despite the clear progress to date in reforming the Saudi education system... it continues to create a climate that fosters exclusivity, intolerance, and calls to violence that put religious and ethnic minorities at risk." Although books for grades one through six had allegedly been revised, the report described this step as "an important but unambitious undertaking," since the most hateful material is usually taught during high school.

For example, a tenth grade Islamic law book instructed students to "kill the person who changes his religion... for there is no benefit in keeping them alive." This language refers to a contentiously debated comment attributed to Muhammad that is emphasized by hardline modern-day jurists. Similarly, the text taught that, "it is permissible to kill a sorcerer," no idle claim given that Saudi Arabia's religious police said it arrested 215 (alleged) sorcerers in 2012 alone.²⁰

Along with pagans, Christians and Jews were described in a twelfth grade monotheism textbook as "the worst of creatures" who "will dwell in hellfire." In a tenth grade book, Christians were compared to idol worshippers, and a passage on Jews says God "made them of swine and apes," a particular interpretation of the Quran favored by Islamic radicals. Christians, Jews, and Muslims who don't follow the path of Wahhabism (be they Shia or Sunnis) were described as unbelievers, with other passages telling students to treat unbelievers through "hatred and disowning." Indeed, this textbook was *literally* calling for hatred.

²⁰ "Calls for Reforms in Hai'a Functioning," *Saudi Gazette* (Saudi Arabia), May 8, 2013.
(<http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.rgecon&contentid=20130508164754>)

Reportedly, ICRD's study listed passages from upper-level textbooks as "intolerant of Islamic minorities," "extremely anti-Semitic," "describ[ing] Christianity as heresy," "portray[ing] multinational organizations as enemies of Islam," "present[ing] conspiracy theories as facts," giving "elevated praise for violence against non-Muslims," and making "direct calls to violence."

“Kill the person who changes his religion... for there is no benefit in keeping them alive.”

-- Language from a 10th grade Islamic law textbook

Some new language had apparently been added to the books describing religious minorities in a less negative light. However, in other places non-Muslims "were portrayed as having no qualities or characteristics that Muslims can learn from" and "destined to fight" against true Muslims. The reader was instructed that in such contexts, "any peacemaking is futile."

Selective Criticism

To its credit, the State Department's latest report on religious freedom included a somewhat longer discussion than in prior years about problematic elements in Saudi Arabia's textbooks.²¹ However, releasing only several paragraphs on this issue downplays the pervasive intolerance in Saudi Arabia's textbooks in a way that only a comprehensive report can provide.

Reflecting on ICRD's finished product, Rosenthal indicates that, "we're talking about something like

²¹ "Saudi Arabia – 2012 International Religious Freedom Report," *U.S. Department of State*, May 20, 2013.
(<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2012/nea/208410.htm>)

three inches thick. The study was an extremely detailed report.” She believes that as a matter of principle it should be released.

When Rosenthal announced the Department’s plan for this study in 2011, the National Jewish Democratic Council (NJDC) observed that the government had also commissioned a study on Israeli and Palestinian textbooks, presumably to highlight anti-Semitism in the Palestinian education system.²² The NJDC proclaimed that, “both of these studies are reflections of just how seriously the Obama Administration views global anti-Semitism.” The Council’s former executive director of nearly 15 years, Ira Forman, has since replaced Rosenthal at DRL as the Department’s anti-Semitism envoy.

When the Israeli-Palestinian study came out over a year ago, both sides’ education systems came under considerable fire.²³ Yet, the Saudi education system, arguably far worse than these two, received no such scrutiny.

Questions on Cooperation

Shortly after his coronation in 2005, King Abdullah was asked by Barbara Walters if his country had “changed your textbooks” to stop “radical extremism.” He insisted, “yes, we have.

We have toned them down.”²⁴ The Kingdom’s foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, claimed, “we have gone through a whole program of going into the educational system from top to bottom, from schools, teachers, books, and we have taken everything out of them that does not call for cooperation [and] coexistence.”²⁵



King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia

When he was Saudi Arabia’s Ambassador to Washington, Prince Turki al-Faisal went on a U.S. speaking tour in which he claimed that, “we eliminated what might be perceived as intolerance from old text books that were in our system.”²⁶ His replacement, Adel al-Jubeir, made similar

²² David Streeter, “State’s Rosenthal Confronting Anti-Semitism in Saudi and Palestinian Textbooks,” *National Jewish Democratic Council*, July 8, 2011.

(<http://www.njdc.org/blog/post/rosenthal070811>)

²³ Joel Greenberg, “Israelis Unhappy With Study of Their Textbooks and Palestinians,” *The Washington Post*, February 4, 2013. (http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/israelis-unhappy-with-study-of-their-textbooks-and-palestinians/2013/02/03/f471e042-6e3d-11e2-ac36-3d8d9dcaa2e2_story.html)

²⁴ “Nightline King Abdullah,” *ABC News Transcripts*, October 14, 2005, accessed via Nexis.

²⁵ “The Fight Against Extremism and the Search for Peace,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 20, 2005. (<http://www.cfr.org/radicalization-and-extremism/fight-against-extremism-search-peace-rush-transcript-federal-news-service-inc/p8908>)

²⁶ Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Press Release, “Saudi Ambassador Addresses Town Hall Los Angeles,” March 21, 2006, accessed March 14, 2014. (<http://www.saudiembassy.net/archive/2006/speeches/page52.aspx>); Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Press Release, “Prince Turki’s Address to the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations,” April 20, 2006, accessed March 14, 2014. (<http://www.saudiembassy.net/archive/2006/speeches/page43.aspx>)

claims in the past as well.²⁷ In 2008²⁸ and 2011,²⁹ Saudi officials continued to tell their U.S. counterparts behind closed doors that the books had been generally fixed.

“We eliminated what might be perceived as intolerance from old text books that were in our system.”

--Prince Turki al-Faisal

Additionally, the Saudis have frequently withheld their full cooperation from outside reviews. ICRD was reportedly not able to acquire a single religious studies textbook for its study from the sixth grade. When the State Department wanted to conduct its own study on Saudi textbooks in 2006, it “borrowed” books from children because the government ignored repeated requests from the American Embassy in Riyadh.³⁰

²⁷ Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Press Release, “Adel Al-Jubeir, Foreign Policy Advisor to Crown Prince Abdullah on NBC’s ‘Meet the Press,’” May 18, 2003, accessed March 14, 2014. (<http://www.saudiembassy.net/archive/2003/transcript/Page21.aspx>); Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Press Release, “Adel Al-Jubeir on CNN: Oil, Terrorism, Mideast,” May 1, 2005, accessed March 14, 2014. (<http://www.saudiembassy.net/archive/2005/transcript/Page14.aspx>); Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Press Release, “Press Conference on Campaign Against Extremism,” March 7, 2005, accessed March 14, 2014. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20050424094642/http://saudiembassy.net/2005News/Statements/TransDetail.asp?cIndex=512>)

²⁸ “Saudi Arabia: Education Ministry Pledges to Continue Removing Intolerant Language from Textbooks,” *Wikileaks*, June 16, 2008. (https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08RIYADH942_a.html)

²⁹ Ron Kampeas, “U.S. State Dept. to Study Saudi Texts,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, July 7, 2011. (<http://www.jta.org/2011/07/07/news-opinion/united-states/u-s-state-dept-to-study-saudi-texts>)

³⁰ “Saudi Textbooks Display Reduced Intolerance; Problems Remain,” *Wikileaks*, March 27, 2007. (https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07RIYADH628_a.html)

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom claimed it was promised copies of the books on delegations visiting the Kingdom in 2007³¹ and 2011.³² USCIRF wrote letters to follow up, but the books never came. Several years ago, Riyadh announced it was putting the textbooks online, but its material is often inaccessible.³³

Protecting the Saudis

The State Department has praised Riyadh for other changes to the education system that leave extremist religious instruction during the high school grades intact.³⁴ Focusing on measures such as teacher training or boosting instruction in STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and math) gives Saudi Arabia breathing room from Washington while forestalling real reform.

³¹ “Saudi Arabia,” *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*, Fall 2007, page 14.

(http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/resources/stories/PDFs/PolicyFocus_SaudiArabia_Fall2007.pdf)

³² “Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom,” *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*, May 2011, page 150.

(<http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/resources/book%20with%20cover%20for%20web.pdf>)

³³ “Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom,” *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*, April 2013, page 142.

([http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/resources/2013%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/resources/2013%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%20(2).pdf))

³⁴ See, for example: U.S. Department of State, Press Release, “Saudi National Day,” September 23, 2009.

(<http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2009a/09/129536.htm>); U.S. Department of State, Press Release, “Meeting With Mission Saudi Arabia Staff,” November 4, 2013.

(<http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/11/216225.htm>)

U.S. Department of State, Press Release, “Remarks At Dar Al-Hekma College Town Hall,” February 16, 2010.

(<http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/02/136789.htm>)

Nina Shea, Director of the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom and the author of several reports on Saudi textbooks, points out that, "first grade was not the problem. The math texts are not the problem. The problem is with the religious and Arabic 'sciences' in senior high school grades, and they haven't reformed those." Al-Ahmed believes U.S. discussions of STEM education and teacher training are an "excuse" to distract attention from a prominent ally's bad behavior. Similarly, ICRD's president suspects that the Saudis have focused their revisions on the younger grade levels because they presented an opportunity for "low hanging fruit."

The State Department first noted problems with Saudi textbooks in its annual reporting on human rights or religious freedom in 2003. Since then, Shea comments, the Department has reported on this problem "in the same breath as saying that it's been fixed or is being fixed."

In 2005, the Department's human rights report adopted the Saudi government's claim that, "authorities have taken measures to address these concerns, including in 2003 the *wholesale revision* of textbooks to remove content disparaging religions other than Islam" (emphases added).³⁵ Yet that same year, the Government Accountability Office concluded that U.S. officials "did not know if the government of Saudi Arabia has taken steps to ensure that Saudi-funded curricula or religious activities in other countries do not propagate extremism."³⁶ In 2006, the State Department dropped longstanding language from

its reporting that freedom of religion does not exist in Saudi Arabia, even though DRL's knowledge of hatred in Saudi textbooks had actually increased.³⁷

The State Department conducted separate in-house studies on selections from Saudi textbooks in 2002, 2003, 2006/2007, and 2008.³⁸ None of these have seen the light of day, except in indirect discussions via Wikileaks.

Similarly, after ICRD submitted its comprehensive study on Saudi textbooks to the Department in June of 2012, the Department failed to brief government officials in Saudi Arabia on its findings until nearly a year later, allowing Riyadh to assert that ICRD's findings were out of date.

Referring to his last months in charge of DRL, Michael Posner says, "we made an effort to sit down with the Saudi government, but they did not meet with us. The meeting never happened." The Department's IRF Ambassador Suzan Johnson Cook was supposed to travel to Riyadh at the end of 2012, but her visit was delayed until the following May.

³⁷ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Press Release, "USCIRF 'Simply Shocked' At State Department's Unwarranted Softening of Assessment of Saudi Arabia in Annual Report on International Religious Freedom," September 15, 2006. (<http://www.uscifr.gov/news-room/press-releases/uscifr-simply-shocked-state-departments-unwarranted-softening-assessment>)

³⁸ "A/DCM Discusses USG Review of Saudi Textbooks with MFA," *Wikileaks*, October 15, 2006. (https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06RIYADH8173_a.html); "Saudi Textbooks Display Reduced Intolerance; Problems Remain," *Wikileaks*, March 27, 2007. (https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07RIYADH628_a.html); "Saudi Arabia: Education Ministry Pledges to Continue Removing Intolerant Language from Textbooks," *Wikileaks*, June 16, 2008. (https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08RIYADH942_a.html)

³⁵ "Saudi Arabia - 2004 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices," *U.S. Department of State*, February 28, 2005. (<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2004/41731.htm>)

³⁶ "Information on U.S. Agencies' Efforts to Address Islamic Extremism," *Government Accountability Office*, September 22, 2005, page 5. (<http://www.gao.gov/assets/250/247783.pdf>)

The 2006 Saudi Commitment

But perhaps the greatest moment of American leverage over this issue came at the end of the Bush administration. The Saudis had committed to completely resolving the issue by the middle of 2008, but the White House failed to hold them to that deadline.

In May of 2006, Freedom House issued a report by Shea and al-Ahmed that suggested Saudi leaders were wrong to claim the offending passages had all been removed from official textbooks.³⁹ The report prompted Prince Turki to pen an op-ed for *USA Today* in which he admitted textbook reform might take longer than previously claimed and agreed to take a meeting with Freedom House.⁴⁰ Two weeks after the Freedom House report was published, Riyadh relayed its most specific commitment to date to the Bush administration's IRF Ambassador John Hanford, telling him that they needed another year or two to bring this issue to an end.⁴¹

Weeks later, Hanford briefed Congress on his understanding with the Saudis, and the Department issued a press release announcing his news. On the Hill, he distributed a non-paper listing human rights reforms that the Saudi

government “has confirmed that it is pursuing and will continue to pursue.” The only understanding bounded by a specific time frame was to “revise and update textbooks to remove remaining intolerant references that disparage Muslims or non-Muslims or that promote hatred toward other religions or religious groups, a process that the Saudi Government expects to complete in one to two years.”⁴²

The Department's press release described Hanford's breakthrough as part of the reason why Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice would decline to impose penalties on Saudi Arabia following its re-designation as a Country of Particular Concern for religious freedom.⁴³ Under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, this designation means violations are “systematic, ongoing, [and] egregious.”⁴⁴ Penalties were waived specifically “to further the purposes of the Act.” Rice's Assistant Secretary for Legislative Affairs subsequently explained in a letter to the Hill that this process would be “completed in time for the start of the 2008 school year.”⁴⁵

³⁹ Freedom House, Press Release, “Revised Saudi Government Textbooks Still Demonize Christians, Jews, Non-Wahhabi Muslims and Other,” May 23, 2006. (<http://www.freedomhouse.org/article/revised-saudi-government-textbooks-still-demonize-christians-jews-non-wahhabi-muslims-and#.UyMsvfldXT0>)

⁴⁰ Prince Turki al-Faisal, “We're Trying Hard to Change,” *USA Today*, June 4, 2006. (http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2006-06-04-opposing-view_x.htm)

⁴¹ “Saudi Textbooks Display Reduced Intolerance; Problems Remain,” *Wikileaks*, March 27, 2007. (https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07RIYADH628_a.html)

⁴² Nina Shea and Paul Marshall, “Ten Years On: Saudi Arabia's Textbooks Still Promote Religious Violence,” *Hudson Institute*, September 16, 2011, pages 47-49. (<http://www.hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/931/sauditextbooks2011final.pdf>)

⁴³ U.S. Department of State, Press Release, “Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Briefs Congress on U.S.-Saudi Discussions on Religious Practice and Tolerance,” July 19, 2006. (<http://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/69197.htm>)

⁴⁴ “International Religious Freedom Act of 1998,” *Government Press Office*, October 27, 1998. (<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-105publ292/pdf/PLAW-105publ292.pdf>)

⁴⁵ Nina Shea and Paul Marshall, “Ten Years On: Saudi Arabia's Textbooks Still Promote Religious Violence,” *Hudson Institute*, September 16, 2011, pages 45-46. (<http://www.hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/931/sauditextbooks2011final.pdf>)

Thomas Farr, who once directed the State Department's IRF office, has written that this 2006 understanding "did not constitute a binding contract... and was not officially published."⁴⁶ However, others insist the administration presented its understanding with the Saudis as a firm commitment.

Shea recalls that, "the State Department's media and legislative offices announced this 'confirmation' of Saudi reform policies from the White House, in a letter to Jon Kyl, then a Senate leader, and in a press release that described these policies as 'significant developments'. So it wasn't just portrayed as some sidebar conversation... it was treated as a serious diplomatic advance."



Ninth grade religious studies textbook on monotheism for 2011-2012
(Photo: Saudi Ministry of Education)

Felice Gaer, Director of the American Jewish Committee's human rights institute and former chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, recalls, "we were told it was a package of promises and that there had been back-and-forth confirmations" with the Saudis. Yet when USCIRF brought copies with them to the Kingdom in 2007, she said, "no one had seen it."

⁴⁶ Thomas F. Farr, *World of Faith and Freedom: Why International Religious Liberty is Vital to American National Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 206.

Gaer concludes, "this was apparently something that was produced for the U.S. only, given selectively on the Hill and to a few media people."

Soon afterwards, USCIRF approached the Department for help collecting copies of Saudi Arabia's textbooks for an independent analysis.⁴⁷ But two different sources say Hanford's team froze out the State Department's congressionally-appointed watchdog, leaving extra textbooks from the Saudi Embassy in storage crates rather than share them with the Commission.

If the Bush administration really did oversell its 2006 understanding with the Saudis – or grant them a waiver to advance U.S. interests besides religious freedom – then the executive branch's basis for waiving sanctions may have been legally flawed (or at least politically disingenuous). If, on the other hand, its representation of Saudi claims was accurate, then Riyadh has been in breach of an explicit assurance to the United States for over half a decade and could potentially have its waiver revoked.

A Structural Problem

The State Department's handling of this issue does not appear to be a matter of whether Democrats or Republicans are in control of the White House. Rather, the cause seems to be a structural one.

⁴⁷ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Press Release, "Saudi Arabia: USCIRF Confirms Material Inciting Violence, Intolerance Remains in Textbooks Used at Saudi Government's Islamic Saudi Academy," June 11, 2008. (<http://www.uscifr.gov/newsroom/press-releases/saudi-arabia-uscifr-confirms-material-inciting-violence-intolerance-remains>)

Posner, whom Rosenthal described as a “fierce” advocate of commissioning the Saudi textbook study, thinks that, “the anxiety about getting involved in these issues crosses party lines.” Another individual involved in the State Department’s deliberations on this issue commented, “there is so much protection of Saudi Arabia by the CIA and State that it’s stunning to me.”

Because of Saudi Arabia’s substantial leverage over Arab politics and global oil markets, the Secretary of State’s office faces enormous pressure to elicit Saudi cooperation on the most urgent regional crisis of the day. Often this comes at the expense of paying sufficient attention to long-term problems such as indoctrination.

“The anxiety about getting involved in these issues crosses party lines.”
-- Michael Posner

When David Keyes, the executive director of Advancing Human Rights, briefed DRL analysts on repression of dissidents and incitement in Saudi textbooks in 2012, he recalls that they agreed the books were appalling but concerns of security officials took precedence over pressuring the Saudis on human rights.

Today, the State Department’s IRF office is in disarray. Its ambassadorial post lies vacant without a nominee and has only been filled for seventeen months of President Obama’s two terms in office.⁴⁸ Staffers under its authority were shifted

away.⁴⁹ Farr points out that this position does not report to the Secretary unlike other ambassadors-at-large, controls few resources, and is excluded from key meetings.⁵⁰

The selection of Johnson Cook apparently did not help matters. A pastor and political appointee with no significant experience in diplomacy or international human rights, she “never escaped criticism that she was unqualified for the job” writes Judd Birdsall, an analyst who served on Secretary Hillary Clinton’s Policy Planning Staff.⁵¹ When invited to testify before Congress in 2011, the Department apparently refused to make Johnson Cook available without a handler to testify alongside her.⁵²

Foggy Bottom’s approach to these issues also seems to be influenced by the American political calendar. An individual involved in deliberations

⁴⁹ Eric Schulzke, “International Religious-Freedom Efforts Split on Policies and Structures,” *Deseret News*, March 25, 2012. (<http://www.deseretnews.com/article/765562973/US-religious-freedom-efforts-split-on-policies-and-structures.html>)

⁵⁰ Thomas F. Farr, “The State Department and International Religious Freedom,” *National Review Online*, July 31, 2012. (<http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/312792/state-department-and-international-religious-freedom-thomas-f-farr>)

⁵¹ Judd Birdsall, “Obama’s Religious Freedom Record is Strong,” *Religion News Service*, January 21, 2014. (http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/commentary-obamas-religious-freedom-record-is-strong/2014/01/21/7dd57e08-82dc-11e3-a273-6ffd9cf9f4ba_story.html)

⁵² Eric Schulzke, “International Religious-Freedom Efforts Split on Policies and Structures,” *Deseret News*, March 25, 2012. (<http://www.deseretnews.com/article/765562973/US-religious-freedom-efforts-split-on-policies-and-structures.html>); Congressman Christopher H. Smith, “Hearing on the 2011 International Religious Freedom Report,” *Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and Human Rights*, November 17, 2011. (http://chrissmith.house.gov/uploadedfiles/2011-11-17_religious_freedom_2011_report.pdf)

⁴⁸ Lauren Markoe, “Suzan Johnson Cook to Resign as Religious Freedom Ambassador,” *Religion News Service*, October 16, 2013. (<http://www.religionnews.com/2013/10/16/suzan-johnson-cooke-resign-today-religious-freedom-ambassador/>)

over whether to release ICRD's report says the Department considered issuing it in the fall of 2012, but, "there was a discussion about postponing results because of the worry of partisan politics. If there was a release prior to the election, it would be totally politicized." One might speculate that the Department feared a release during election season would enable the Romney campaign to accuse the President of turning a blind eye for four years to Saudi Arabia's curriculum of hate.

Similarly, Nina Shea believes that Hanford's commitment from the Saudis in 2006 was "structured in a way that was doomed to fail, because the deadline was fall of 2008." She says, "the entire U.S. administration was predictably scrambling in an election year. And every political appointee – including John Hanford, the Ambassador – knew they would have one foot out the door at that point. And everyone in Washington was distracted by the presidential election. There was not going to be any leadership from the administration at that late date to press any uncomfortable issues with a major ally in the Arab world."

Farr concurs that "as the second Bush term neared its end" there was "no sense of urgency" about stopping Saudi indoctrination. He believes a desire for Saudi cooperation in Iraq, the President's signature regional issue, "made the Bush administration even more hesitant to push the Saudis." Thus, "the primary 'lesson' of 9/11 [was] shunted to the side."⁵³

⁵³ Thomas F. Farr, *World of Faith and Freedom: Why International Religious Liberty is Vital to American National Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 241.

Quiet vs. Public Diplomacy

Some experts believe that going public on this issue – for instance, by releasing ICRD's report – might backfire by strengthening hardliners in the Kingdom. The Saudis certainly prefer a gentler U.S. approach. ICRD stated in its report that Saudi officials told them, "every time there is news of the United States conducting studies like this, the champions of modernization get sidelined as the ultra-conservatives dig in their heels."

Fahad Nazer, a former political analyst at the Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Washington, agrees that, "it could potentially do more harm than good" because outside criticisms "put advocates for reform on the defensive and cause hardline conservatives to go on the offensive."

However, even Ambassador Hanford, who preferred a quiet, behind-the-scenes approach with the Saudis, acknowledged that the Department valued transparency. When announcing his two-year deal with the Saudis in 2006, he proclaimed, "I appreciate the Saudi Government's interest in confirming them publicly so that all interested parties may follow progress made."⁵⁴

Tad Stahnke, Director of Policy and Programs at Human Rights First, and considered by some to be a candidate for the next IRF ambassador,⁵⁵

⁵⁴ U.S. Department of State, Press Release, "Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Briefs Congress on U.S.-Saudi Discussions on Religious Practice and Tolerance," July 19, 2006. (<http://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/69197.htm>)

⁵⁵ Lauren Markoe, "Wanted: A New Ambassador-At-Large for Religious Freedom," *The Washington Post*, January 15, 2014. (http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/wanted-a-new-ambassador-at-large-for-religious-freedom/2014/01/15/180ef580-7e32-11e3-97d3-b9925ce2c57b_story.html)

thinks, “the American people deserve to know what the U.S. government is doing about [the textbooks], including the fate of this study.” He also believes that, “more transparency regarding what’s in the textbooks would be helpful” for the human rights community’s efforts to encourage Saudi reform. Additionally, Farr recalls that representatives of the Kingdom’s most important religious minority, Saudi Shi’ites, “made a strong case to me for persistent and open U.S. intervention on their behalf.”⁵⁶

Leonard Leo, another former chair of USCIRF, believes, “there has been no real progress... but without pressure coming to bear on the Saudis from the State Department, you won’t see any.” Abe Foxman, the head of the Anti-Defamation League, agrees: “the problem is that there are no consequences for the failure to live up to their commitments.”⁵⁷

Given that Saudi Arabia has yet to significantly reform its most problematic textbooks, it seems the royal family is more wary of upsetting religious reactionaries than the dangers of indoctrinating another generation of young people. As such, it may take some consequences in Saudi Arabia’s relationship with Washington to convince the regime that textbook reform is worth seriously pursuing.

⁵⁶ Thomas F. Farr, *World of Faith and Freedom: Why International Religious Liberty is Vital to American National Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), page 238.

⁵⁷ Jennifer Rubin, “Doing Nothing About Saudi Promotion of Islamic Extremism,” *The Washington Post*, December 28, 2010. (http://voices.washingtonpost.com/right-turn/2010/12/on_july_9_2010_the.html)

What Can Be Done?

American officials have failed to convince the Saudis to tackle educational incitement for well over a decade. A great deal of damage has already been done. But it’s not too late to change course; there are a range of positive steps that the Obama administration could take to encourage textbook reform in the Kingdom.

The most tempting approach would be a formula for failure: waiting to see what the textbooks look like after the start of the 2014 school year, when Saudi Arabia claims it will have tackled revisions for the upper grade levels.⁵⁸

The Saudis are already in breach of their prior commitments. Less than a year ago, the State Department reported that high school books were “slated for review and reform in 2013,” yet the Saudi edits are supposedly still ongoing.⁵⁹ This is only the most recent example from more than a decade of misleading claims and unfulfilled promises.

Nor would it be wise to pin hopes on Riyadh’s new education minister, Khalid al-Faisal. He is considered by some to be a reformist,⁶⁰ but so were

⁵⁸ “Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom,” *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*, April 2013, page 136. ([http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/resources/2013%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/resources/2013%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%20(2).pdf))

⁵⁹ “Saudi Arabia – 2012 International Religious Freedom Report,” *U.S. Department of State*, May 20, 2013. (<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2012/nea/208410.htm>)

⁶⁰ Ellen Knickmeyer and Ahmed al Omran, “Some Saudis See New Appointments as Challenge to Kingdom’s Fundamentalists,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 23, 2013. (<http://blogs.wsj.com/middleeast/2013/12/23/some-saudis-see-new-appointments-as-challenge-to-kingdoms-fundamentalists/>)

several of his predecessors.⁶¹ When the minister he replaced was appointed in 2009, the *New York Times* wrote in an editorial that, “he also is the king’s son-in-law, so there can be no more excuses if Saudi textbooks continue to spew hateful views of non-Muslims.”⁶²



Saudi Minister of Education, Prince Khalid al-Faisal

Al-Ahmed believes travel sanctions against Saudi officials are the only real way to motivate the regime. Such penalties would be feasible under the International Religious Freedom Act given Saudi Arabia’s decade-long designation as a Country of Particular Concern for religious freedom. However, there will be little appetite for this approach in Washington.

Another approach would be for Secretary Kerry to roll back Riyadh’s indefinite waiver under this Act, especially given that the Saudis’ unfulfilled 2006

promise has been cited as part of the Department’s justification for this waiver in the past.⁶³ Secretary Kerry could also empower the IRF Office under a committed and capable new ambassador. And given that the Department’s current anti-Semitism envoy, Ira Forman, spent almost fifteen years at the helm of an organization which described the Saudi textbook study as a benchmark of the Obama team’s record on anti-Semitism,⁶⁴ he should have a particularly strong stake in promoting its release.

More broadly, faith organizations and social action groups could encourage the administration to include textbook reform as one of its priorities in bilateral diplomacy with Riyadh. American companies that promote corporate social responsibility as one of their core values should make progress on respecting religious diversity a requirement for doing business with the Kingdom.

Meanwhile, Congress should weigh in. Farr credits Congressional pressure with helping John Hanford achieve Saudi Arabia’s designation as a Country of Particular Concern for religious freedom in 2004.⁶⁵ Although Farr does not belabor it, members of Congress had been particularly concerned by the gap between State Department policy and what they had been hearing from independent actors such as USCIRF. Posner

⁶¹ Caryle Murphy, “A Kingdom’s Future: Saudi Arabia Through the Eyes of Its Twentysomethings,” *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*, 2013. (http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/kingdoms_future_saudi_arabia_through_the_eyes_twentysomethings_0.pdf); Karen Elliot House, “The Saudi Cabinet Shake-Up Portends Real Reform,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 23, 2009. (<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB123535163037745007>)

⁶² “A Promise of Reform in Saudi Arabia,” *The New York Times*, February 25, 2009. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/26/opinion/26thu2.html>)

⁶³ U.S. Department of State, Press Release, “Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Briefs Congress on U.S.-Saudi Discussions on Religious Practice and Tolerance,” July 19, 2006. (<http://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/69197.htm>)

⁶⁴ David Streeter, “State’s Rosenthal Confronting Anti-Semitism in Saudi and Palestinian Textbooks,” *National Jewish Democratic Council*, July 8, 2011. (<http://www.njdc.org/blog/post/rosenthal070811>)

⁶⁵ Thomas F. Farr, *World of Faith and Freedom: Why International Religious Liberty is Vital to American National Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 206.

thinks there is room for Congress to be more active on this issue.

If any country stands a chance of persuading Saudi Arabia to remove religiously-rooted hatred and incitement from its government-published textbooks, it would probably be the Kingdom's security guarantor, the United States.

Fundamentally, whether America succeeds at this objective will come down to leadership. It is understandable that the administration may have been reluctant to see a critical study on Saudi textbooks released during the President's campaign for reelection, but it is difficult to justify the withholding of ICRD's study now. The White House can easily demonstrate its seriousness by instructing the State Department to release ICRD's study for publication in full.

And when he flies to the Desert Kingdom to visit King Abdullah at the end of March, President Obama should consider raising the textbooks issue in both his public and private remarks. The Saudis have given us plenty of evidence that, unless we hold them accountable on this critical counterterrorism issue, they certainly have no intention of delivering on such reform.

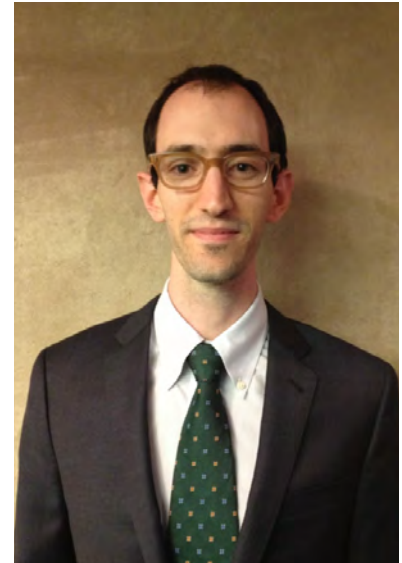
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