

**STATEMENT OF NINA SHEA\***  
**DIRECTOR, HUDSON INSTITUTE'S**  
**CENTER FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**  
**BEFORE THE**  
**FAIRFAX COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS**  
**ON THE**  
**COUNTY LEASE EXTENSION FOR THE**  
**ISLAMIC SAUDI ACADEMY**

**October 19, 2010**

Since 2005, I<sup>1</sup> have authored and/or edited three major studies on Saudi Arabia's religious educational materials, including the Islamic Studies textbooks used at the Islamic Saudi Academy in Fairfax, VA, the only school in America run by the Saudi government. I have prepared these reports with the assistance of Muslim Americans, including Mr. Ali Al Ahmed, president of the Washington-based Institute for Gulf Affairs. These reports can be found in their entirety on the Hudson Institute's website: [www.hudson.org/religion](http://www.hudson.org/religion).

I have come before you today to say that it would be irresponsible for any government authority to facilitate this Saudi government school and that the Fairfax County government should not extend its lease to the Islamic Saudi Academy. My recommendation is based on the facts that:

- 1) until two years ago, as is well-documented, ISA used extremist Saudi religious textbooks that called for the murder of members of certain groups for religious reasons and advocated militant jihad;
- 2) due to the school's lack of transparency, we do not know what it is currently teaching in its religion courses
- 3) for the above two reasons and others, the Academy's accreditation is currently up in the air and the accreditation agency has demanded that the Islamic studies curriculum be put in writing.

Until the 2008-09 academic year, ISA's religious textbooks used Saudi government textbooks that teach that it is permissible, or even required, to kill those who leave Islam (which includes the majority of Muslims who reject Saudi Wahhabi doctrine), polytheists (which includes Shiite Muslims), Jews, homosexuals and others, and that militant jihad to spread the faith is a sacred duty. The State Department, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, a top counter-terrorism official at the Treasury Department, Undersecretary Stuart Levey, and Congressman Frank Wolf have all recognized the link between such extremist education and violence and terror. Even a Saudi government panel concluded that the Saudi Ministry of Education's Islamic

---

<sup>1</sup> I am a lawyer and a full time senior fellow with the Hudson Institute, where I direct the Center for Religious Freedom. I have also been appointed by the US House of Representatives to serve as a Commissioner on the independent federal agency, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom. I appear today in my Hudson capacity and as a leading expert on Saudi religious textbooks.

curriculum promotes violence. In fact, one of the academy's valedictorians, American born Ahmed Abu Ali, was convicted of giving material support to al Qaeda and conspiring to assassinate Pres. George W. Bush and in 2009 was sentenced to life imprisonment.

For the school year beginning in fall 2008, after my reports and those of the Gulf Institute, USCIRF, the *Washington Post*, *Slate* magazine and others demonstrated the extremist content of its Islamic Studies textbooks, ISA began using Saudi textbooks in its Islamic studies curriculum that were heavily redacted, as well as other material that is not publicly known. (Regarding the textbooks used within Saudi Arabia itself, the State Department itself, in its 2010 annual report on human rights, concluded, with diplomatic understatement, that Saudi Ministry of Education textbooks continued to contain "some overtly intolerant statements" against various religious groups, that they "provided justification for violence against non-Muslims," and that reforms remained "incomplete.")

We wish we could celebrate the deletions in the texts at ISA that we helped catalyze, but we are not persuaded that the problem is solved. The books have simply removed the previous lessons, but they have put no other written content in their place. The texts do not offer an alternative, they are simply silent, they contain no significant discussion of jihad and make few references to the religious "other." The silence is deafening. It raises the question — a question ISA has yet to satisfactorily answer — of what supplemental material the academy is using.

Jihad is a central tenet of Islam and is raised multiple times in the Koran. Saudi textbooks describe jihad as "the summit of Islam" and "one of the most magnificent acts of obedience to God," and endorse its militant form for both defensive and aggressive purposes.

ISA's new texts, however, make no mention of militant jihad, not even as a defensive measure. And they make only a single passing reference to the alternative view of jihad. (Buried toward the end of a twelfth-grade text is a two-line reference to the "greater jihad" — the obligation "to do jihad against Satan, selfish desire and capriciousness.") At a time when many Muslim radicals proclaim the merits of militant jihad, students will not be oriented toward the peaceful interpretation by ignoring the issue. .

ISA's new texts continue to reject critical thinking. "The human mind is incapable of rendering appropriate judgments as a result of its inability to grasp truths, goals, and purposes," states one book.

This dogmatic approach makes it more than unusual that ISA's books omit all instruction on relating to non-Muslims. While the new texts raise the Koranic injunction against religious coercion, they are silent on how Muslims should treat Jews, "apostates," "polytheists," "adulterers," and "homosexuals" — all of whom ISA's old texts taught it was permissible to kill. Nor do the books indicate how one should view Shiites, non-Wahhabi Sunnis, Baha'is, and Ahmadiya, all of whom ISA's former curriculum cast as

enemies within; or Jews and Christians, who, it had taught, were to be hated; or Americans, who, it stated, were continuing the Crusades by promoting women's rights and sponsoring universities in Beirut and Cairo.

The question is not *whether* ISA supplements these new textbooks with other material, but *what* these other materials contain. There is evidence that the school, over the past school year, did in fact continue to use some extremist supplemental resources.

Even the new texts themselves reference several extreme Islamic authorities. For example, the new twelfth-grade book directs students to Ibn Taymiyyah for resolving moral questions. A 14th-century author, Ibn Taymiyyah extolled the militant jihad we call "terror." His fatwas were found in a recent study by West Point's Combating Terrorism Center to be "by far the most popular texts for modern Jihadis." Renowned religion scholar Philip Jenkins wrote that Osama bin Laden cites Ibn Taymiyyah as a "special hero."

In addition, it's important to note that on matters besides jihad, the books still largely reflect Wahhabi orthodoxy. For example, ISA's new texts endorse marriages between adults and pre-pubescent children, teach that women should not be judges or exercise "greater governorship," and starkly divide the world into believers and unbelievers.

My concern is that we do not know exactly what ISA is now teaching in its Islamic Studies Curriculum because ISA is not transparent about this. Since they are now silent on the central Islamic tenets jihad, which has a non-militant meaning as well as a militant one, the ISA texts are incomplete.

Moreover, ISA's accrediting agency, whose past accreditation of the academy from almost five years ago is prominently advertised on the ISA website, currently finds **the ISA "in violation" of five of its seven standards and did not make an accreditation status recommendation in its assessment earlier this year.**

AdvancED, the parent company of ISA's accrediting agency, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement, sent a Special Review team to the school last December. (AdvancED provides accreditation, research and professional services to 27,000 institutions.) On this occasion, unlike its prior visit, the review team included two fluent Arabic speakers, and one who has previously taught Islamic theology at the university level. This was critical since the religious textbooks in question are written in Arabic.

In its letter of February 9, 2010, AdvancED's general counsel wrote:

**"Upon review of material provided by the Islamic Saudi Academy and other agencies, SACS CASI, and its parent organization, AdvancEd, identified the following areas of concern about the school: course material, course curriculum in compliance with standards and non-discrimination policies, teacher qualifications, governance issues, and community and stakeholder involvement. Specifically, the**

**institution appeared to be in violation of the following AdvancED Accreditation Standards:**

**“Standard 1: Vision and Purpose**

**Standard 2: Governance and Leadership**

**Standard 3: Teaching and Learning**

**Standard 6: Stakeholder Communication and Relationships**

**Standard 7: Commitment to Continuous Improvement”**

Specifically regarding the Islamic Studies curriculum, the review team required the academy to take the following action: **“As with other program areas of the school, curriculum should be in a written format and placed on a regular schedule for review and revision.”** In other words, part of this curriculum was not provided, at least not in written, verifiable form, to the review team.

Other relevant problems encountered by the Special Review Team included:

\* “During the Special Review Team’s [three day] visit, the Director General of the school was not available for interview and was not on campus. The Director General did not contact the Special Review team or provide information to them through written or other media.”

\* “While the Special Review Team requested interviews with the Director General and the complete Board of Directors, only those members who were also part of the school leadership were made available for interview.”

\* Of the requested information for the Special Review Team, “much of the data and information was not readily available or current.”

\* “School leadership employed legal counsel to be on site during the teacher interviews.”

\* “The Special Review Team requested samples of student writing, which were submitted after screening by the principal and Director of Education.”

Not surprisingly in view of all this, the accrediting agency concluded that “they represent a lack of transparency in the operation and leadership of the school.”

AdvancED states: **“This lack of transparency does little to quell external stakeholder criticism or suspicion of the school’s curriculum.”**

Until an independent, professional, and thoroughly transparent process verifies reform, Fairfax County’s officials should have no role in facilitating the Saudi Academy.