

WRITTEN STATEMENT OF NINA SHEA¹

**DIRECTOR, HUDSON INSTITUTE'S
CENTER FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
BEFORE THE
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CAUCUS
OF THE
US HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

BRIEFING ON

“SAUDI ARABIA: FUELING RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION AND EXTREMISM”

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Last Sunday, a December 2009 cable that was cited by the *New York Times* but has not yet been posted by Wikileaks says that Saudi donors remain the chief financiers of Sunni militant groups such as Al Qaeda.

America's top financial-counterterrorism official, Treasury Undersecretary Stuart Levey, believes there's a strong link between education and support for terror. As he wrote in the *Washington Post* last June, to end support for such terror, among other steps,

“we must focus on educational reform in key locations to ensure that intolerance has no place in curricula and textbooks. . . . [U]nless 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.”

Saudi Arabia is one such “key location.” The kingdom is not just any country with problematic textbooks. As the controlling authority of the two holiest shrines of Islam, Saudi Arabia is able to disseminate its religious materials among the millions of Muslims making the hajj to Mecca each year. Such teachings can, in this context, make a great impression. In addition, Saudi textbooks are also posted on the Saudi Education Ministry's website and are shipped and distributed free by a vast Sunni infrastructure established with Saudi oil wealth to many Muslim schools, mosques and libraries throughout the world. In his book *The Looming Tower*, Lawrence Wright asserts that while Saudis constitute only 1 percent of the world's Muslims, they pay “90 per cent of

¹ 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. Since 2005, I 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 and currently a USCIRF Fellow. These reports can be found in their entirety on the Hudson Institute's website: www.hudson.org/religion.

the expenses of the entire faith, overriding other traditions of Islam." Others estimate that, on an annual basis, Saudi Arabia spends three times as much in exporting its Wahhabi ideology as did the Soviets in propagating Communism during the height of the Cold War. From the Netherlands and Bosnia, to Algeria and Tunisia, to Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to Somalia and Nigeria, nationals of these countries have reported that over the past twenty to thirty years local Islamic traditions are being transformed and radicalized under intensifying Saudi influence. The late President of Indonesia Abdurrahman Wahid wrote that Wahhabism was making inroads even in his famously tolerant nation of Indonesia.

To understand why Jim Woolsey and other terrorism experts call Wahhabism as it spreads through the Islamic diaspora "kindling for Usama Bin Laden's match," it is important to know the content of Saudi textbooks. They teach, along with many other noxious lessons, that Jews and Christians are "enemies," and they dogmatically instruct that it is permissible, even obligatory, to kill various groups of "unbelievers" — apostates (which includes Muslim moderates who reject Saudi Wahhabi doctrine), polytheists (which can include Shias and Sufis, as well as Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists.), Jews, and adulterers. The texts also teach that the "punishment for homosexuality is death" and discusses that this can be done by immolation by fire, stoning or throwing the accused from a high place.

Under the Saudi Education Ministry's method of rote learning, these teachings amount to indoctrination, starting in first grade and continuing through high school, where militant jihad on behalf of "truth" has for years been taught as a sacred duty.

The "lesson goals" of one of the text books is to have the children list the "reprehensible" qualities of Jewish people and another, that Jews are pigs and apes.

Reformist Muslims can also be labeled as "apostates," and thus they can be killed with impunity. In the opening fatwa of a Saudi government booklet distributed to educate Muslim immigrants in 2005 by the Saudi embassy in the United States, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia (a cabinet level government post) responded to a question about a Muslim preacher in a European mosque who said "declaring Jews and Christians infidels is not allowed." The Grand Mufti accused the unnamed European cleric of apostasy: "He who casts doubts about their infidelity leaves no doubt about his own infidelity."

As Saudi analyst Ali Ahmed recently wrote in the Guardian: "The current textbooks do not spare most Muslims from the accusations of polytheism, deviance, hypocrisy, and outright apostasy. For example, the 12th grade book on 'monotheism' claims that many in the Muslim world community have returned to polytheism. ...In the classical Takfiri (declaring others to be outside of religion's bounds) style, the text allows for the killing of apostates and polytheists, and it does not take much to qualify as one or the other."

The intellectual pioneer of *takfiri* doctrine is the medieval Islamic scholar Ibn Tamiyya. He is cited as a moral guide in the Saudi textbooks – including in the newly edited, heavily redacted texts used in the Islamic Saudi Academy, a school operated in Fairfax

County, VA, by the Saudi embassy. Students of Saudi high school textbooks are instructed to consult his writings when they face vexing moral questions. West Point's Center for Combating Terror found that Ibn Tamiyya's are "by far the most popular texts for modern jihadis."

Saudi foreign-affairs officials and ambassadors do not dispute the need for education reform. Their reactions, though, have alternated over the years between insisting that reforms had already been made and stalling for time by stating that the reforms would take several years more to complete, maybe banking on the hope that American attention would drift.

Four years ago, the Saudis gave a solemn and specific promise to the United States. Its terms were described in a letter from the U.S. assistant secretary of state for legislative affairs to Sen. Jon Kyl, then chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Terrorism and Homeland Security: "In July of 2006, the Saudi Government confirmed to us its policy to undertake a program of textbook reform to eliminate all passages that disparage or promote hatred toward any religion or religious groups." Furthermore, the State Department letter reported that this pledge would be fulfilled "in time for the start of the 2008 school year."

Saudi Arabia has failed to keep its promise to the United States. One Wikileaks cable from the US embassy reports that Saudi education reform seems "glacial." In its newly released 2010 annual report on religious freedom, the State Department itself asserted, albeit with diplomatic understatement, with respect to Saudi Ministry of Education textbooks: "Despite government revisions to elementary and secondary education textbooks, they retained language intolerant of other religious traditions, especially Jewish, Christian, and Shi'a beliefs, *including commands to hate infidels and kill apostates.*" (emphasis added.)

Saudi government misrepresentations on its failure to reform national textbooks was in full display last month in the BBC Panorama's expose of 40 Saudi part time schools in the UK, where it tried to deny that the schools were in any way connected to Riyadh. The television journalists investigated and found that in fact the Saudi Cultural Bureau, which is part of the embassy, did indeed have authority over the network. To be clear, these 40 Saudi schools in the UK teach from the Saudi national curriculum, which was revealed on the show to include the lessons on killing apostates, polytheists and homosexuals, as well as on violent anti-Semitism.

Meanwhile, Saudi royals have stepped up their philanthropy to higher education around the world, for which they have garnered many encomiums and awards. Hardly a month goes by without a news report that one of the princes is endowing a new center of Islamic and Arabic studies, or a business or scientific department, at a foreign university. The king himself recently founded a new university for advanced science and technology inside Saudi Arabia.

These efforts have bought the royal family much good will, but they should not distract

our political leaders from the central concern of the Saudi 1–12 religious curriculum. This is not the time for heaping unqualified praise on the aging monarch for promoting “knowledge-based education,” “extending the hand of friendship to people of other faiths,” promoting “principles of moderation, tolerance, and mutual respect,” and the like, (phrases with which our diplomatic statements on Saudi Arabia are replete).

The State Department needs to begin regular and detail reporting on the remaining objectionable and violent passages in Saudi government textbooks and to press in a sustained manner for the kingdom to keep its 2006 pledge to us regarding textbook reform. As USCIRF recommends, the administration should also lift the indefinite waiver of any action pursuant to the designation of Saudi Arabia as a “Country of Particular Concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act – the only “CPC” to receive an indefinite waiver.

In one of the Wikileaks cables written earlier this year on Saudi King Abdullah to Secretary Clinton, US Ambassador James Smith makes the following observation:

“Reflecting his Bedouin roots, he judges his counterparts on the basis of character, honesty, and trust. He expects commitments to be respected and sees actions, not words, as the true test of commitment....”

Bedouin or not, we should start demanding the same from him.