

January 10, 2008: Critics of Saudi Academy Say Textbooks Promote Intolerance - Washington Post

By Valerie Strauss

Some textbooks used by an Islamic school in Fairfax County contain language intolerant of Jews and other groups as well as passages that could be construed as advocating violence, according to two reviews of the materials.

Abdalla

I. Al-Shabnan, director-general of the Islamic Saudi Academy, said he doubts that such language is in the textbooks but said he would remove offending material if found. He would not say whether he had read passages that might be considered offensive. The academy's books were revised over the summer, he said, and students have never been taught material advocating hate.

"We would never teach such things," he said. "If there is anything wrong in the books, just tell me, and we will fix them. No problem."

One

review of academy textbooks was undertaken for the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, which recommended in October that the State Department close the school until it proves that it is not teaching a type of religious intolerance potentially dangerous to the United States.

Commission

member Nina Shea said the panel is concerned that Saudi Arabia is using its educational system, and connections to schools worldwide, to export intolerant and militant religious teachings. The school's board of directors is headed by the Saudi ambassador, and Shea has called the school an extension of the Saudi Embassy.

"We are very concerned, on a partial review of the Saudi Academy textbooks, [about]

some passages that instruct that 'jihad' is 'the pinnacle of Islam,' that speak about impunity for murders of 'polytheists' or non-Wahhabis, that legitimize the murder of Muslim 'apostates' and that state the lives of only those non-Muslims living or working under Muslim rule are inviolable," Shea said.

"There are denunciations of specific religious groups as evil or enemies . . . and there is blatant anti-Semitism, blaming the Jews for even divisions within Islam," she said.

In addition to Jews, Bahais and Shiite and Sufi Muslims are among those denounced in some academy texts, according to reviews of the books.

Al-Shabnan said the school, which receives funding from the Saudi Embassy, operates independently of the embassy. He also said the school had given a set of textbooks to Fairfax County Supervisor Gerald W. Hyland (D-Mount Vernon), who has a county employee translating them.

"We decide what the students learn," Al-Shabnan said. "We are not trying to hide" anything.

Parents of academy students said that they do not think their children are learning intolerance and that many religious schools sometimes teach material intolerant of nonbelievers. Constitutional lawyers say there is no legal restraint against teaching intolerance in nongovernmental schools.

"They picked up on one issue [of intolerance of nonbelievers] that is not unique to Islamic schools," said Rizwan Ahmad, a parent.

The congressionally created commission's actions have caused some tension with the

State Department, according to sources who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the situation. State Department officials were said to be annoyed that the panel is pressing the issue during a delicate moment of diplomacy over Saudi education. They said Saudi education is undergoing reforms within the kingdom and at affiliated schools around the world.

State

Department officials said they have received a set of academy textbooks from the Saudi Embassy and are reviewing them.

Commission

members said the Saudi Embassy and the State Department have not responded to their requests for textbooks. Instead, commission members said, they received some academy textbooks from other sources, including Ali Al-Ahmed, head of the nonprofit Institute for Gulf Affairs in Washington and a critic of the Saudi government who has monitored the academy's curriculum.

Al-Ahmed

said he obtained about a dozen 12th-grade textbooks currently in use. He reviewed the books, as did a translator employed by the commission. The translator was described by panel spokeswoman Judith Ingram as "an expert in Islamic history who is highly proficient in Arabic."

Al-Ahmed

said passages that had been the source of earlier complaints had been removed -- sometimes by whitening them out -- but that some intolerant material remained.

In

a book of Koranic interpretation, called "Tafsir," some passages "are troubling," the commission translator wrote, including those that discuss the issue of the spirit of Islamic struggle, a common theme in Saudi education.

According

to a copy of the translator's report, which is to be submitted to the full commission today, a passage interpreting a Koranic verse says:

"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 . . . is a type of noble life-force that is not diminished by fear or poverty."

Al-Ahmed said academy statements that the curriculum did not originate in Saudi Arabia are false.

"It still has poison in it," he said. "Who are we kidding? It's the mind-set, the spirit of the texts."

Commission members have asked the State Department for a decision about closing the academy by Jan. 17. President Bush left Tuesday on an eight-day trip to the Middle East, which includes a stop in Saudi Arabia.

About a dozen students said in recent interviews that they are taught the value of diversity and cooperation and are perplexed about allegations leveled at their school, which educates about 1,000 students at two campuses in Fairfax.

"None of my classes, none of my teachers ever hinted, suggested or promoted hate," said Rami Ali, 17, a senior who has attended the academy since kindergarten. "I wonder: Where is this coming from? "