

December 21, 2007: USCIRF Responds to Parents of Islamic Saudi Academy Students

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WASHINGTON-The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom sent the following letter Friday to a group of parents of students at the Islamic Saudi Academy in northern Virginia. December 21, 2007 Dear Parents of Islamic Saudi Academy, Thank you for your letter. We at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom understand your concern that your children get the best education possible. Accordingly, in light of extensive published reports outlining the objectionable content of past textbooks published by the government of Saudi Arabia, we are puzzled by the refusal of your children's school to make copies of current textbooks publicly available. We would like to make clear once again that our concern is not with Islamic private education. Rather, our concern is ensuring that the Saudi government has ended its past use of objectionable educational materials and is not abusing its diplomatic status to propagate such materials. The Islamic Saudi Academy is unique in its relationship with the Saudi government and embassy. It is, in fact, a branch of the embassy, being chaired by the Saudi ambassador and occupying property owned or leased by the embassy. Internal Revenue Service records show that the school's tax federal employer number belongs to the Saudi embassy. The US Government has a right to stop foreign governments from engaging in activities on US soil if those activities violate the Foreign Missions Act. Based on past documentation, significant concerns remain about whether the Saudi textbooks used at the ISA explicitly promote hate, intolerance and human rights violations, and in some cases violence, which may adversely affect the interests of the United States. As you may know, a delegation from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom visited Saudi Arabia last summer. In each of our meetings with officials in Saudi Arabia, we requested copies of the textbooks on Islamic studies (hadith, fiqh, and tawhid), Arabic language, and Saudi history used in the Ministry of Education curriculum, but were rebuffed. When we returned to the United States, we requested copies of the textbooks used in the Arabic portion of the ISA curriculum from the school's chairman, Ambassador Adel Al Jubeir. We received no reply to that letter. We also wrote to Mr. Turki bin Khalid Al-Sudairy, chairman of the Saudi Human Rights Commission, who replied that we would receive copies of the textbooks only when current revisions are finalized. Let's contrast this to the ISA's sister school in Great Britain, the King Fahad Academy. In response to concerns about the textbooks used there, the academy's director, Dr. Sumaya Alyusuf, reported last month that all books published by the Saudi Ministry of Education had been removed from the school by March 2007. The ISA's response to the Commission's well-founded concerns about the failure even to make available its textbooks, however, has been to wrongly accuse us of bias. Allow us to respond specifically to a few points in your letter: You say that we simply assumed that the ISA shares the curriculum used in Saudi Arabia. As noted, in light of the substantial published bases for our concerns, we sought to receive specific information about the curriculum and copies of the textbooks used at the ISA earlier this year, but did not receive the courtesy of a response. We understand that the curriculum for some subjects such as social studies would differ but not the Arabic-language curriculum. Again, we want to emphasize that the Arabic-language curriculum is the focus of our concern, particularly because up until November, after the publication of our report, the ISA's own Web site advertised that the ISA's Arabic program follows the "curriculum, syllabus and materials established by the Saudi Ministry of Education." You also write, "To the best of our knowledge, neither faculty nor any of the parents have ever reported any textbooks or curriculum that espouses violence or intolerance to the kids." That glosses over press reports including an article that appeared in The Washington Post in February 2002, "Where Two Worlds Collide," which quoted inciting and intolerant language from textbooks used at the academy. It also ignores the findings of independent studies cited in our report on Saudi Arabia, which you can find on our Web site (http://www.uscirf.gov/countries/publications/policyfocus/SaudiArabia_PolicyFocus.pdf) Our recommendation on the ISA was part of a much broader report on conditions of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief in Saudi Arabia, based on the Commission delegation visit there. The purpose of the trip was to see how far Saudi Arabia has come in meeting the commitments its government freely made in summer 2006 to improve the climate for religious freedom. One of the key commitments was revising the Ministry of Education textbooks to remove passages that support religious intolerance and, in some cases, violence toward non-Muslims and disfavored Muslims. We look forward to having the opportunity to examine the textbooks used at the ISA, especially in light of its unique relationship with the government of Saudi Arabia and its status under the United States Foreign Missions Act, and hope that they are released for public analysis soon. Sincerely, Michael Cromartie

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