

November 10, 2003: Al Qaeda and Saudi Arabia - Wall Street Journal

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November 10, 2003 By Khaled Abou El Fadl

The religious extremists who form al Qaeda and similar terrorist groups are a threat not only to the U.S., but also other parts of the world -- including Saudi Arabia. Since Sept. 11, there have been numerous reports that funding coming from Saudi Arabia has been used to finance religious schools and other activities that are alleged to support the kind of intolerance practiced by Islamic militants world-wide. The Saudis have denied these allegations, and the U.S. has praised the Saudi government for its cooperation in the war on terror. Yet a recent Time magazine cover story rightly questioned whether the Saudi brand of Islam is compatible with that war. Saturday's attacks in Riyadh only make that question more urgent, and piquant. The Saudis fund mosques, university chairs, Islamic study centers, and religious schools known as madrassas, all over the world, from New York to Nigeria. During the Afghan war against the Soviets, madrassas emerged in Pakistan that were concerned less with scholarship than with war on infidels. They provided ideological training for those who went to fight in Kashmir, Chechnya, and Afghanistan -- and many still do. The peaceful propagation of religious beliefs, including Islam, is a human right. But the concern is that the Saudi government may be propagating an Islam that promotes violence against non-Muslims and disfavored Muslims. The line separating the brand of Islam allegedly preached by the Saudis from the violence of radicals is a fine one. Just how one moves across this line warrants investigation. After Sept. 11, Saudi leaders admitted that up to 10% of their curriculum contained objectionable material, including hatred of other religious groups, and vowed to address the issue. Yet there has been no examination of the extent to which these materials are found in Saudi-funded religious schools and mosques outside the Kingdom -- including Islamic religious literature available in U.S. prisons and the U.S. armed forces. In an effort to provide answers, the Commission on International Religious Freedom, a bipartisan, independent federal agency, has recommended that Congress fund a study to determine whether and how -- and the extent to which -- the Saudi government, members of the royal family, or Saudi-funded individuals or institutions, are propagating globally, including in America, a religious ideology that explicitly promotes hate and violence toward members of other religious groups. What we seek are facts -- whether they vindicate or implicate Saudi Arabia. In undertaking such a study, the U.S. should first request that the Saudis provide an account of the religious institutions they fund in America. The study should then commission experts to survey literature found in Saudi-funded religious schools; speak to Muslims who frequent Saudi-funded mosques; analyze Saudi-funded pamphlets, newsletters, radio, and TV; interview officials in countries where intolerant materials have been identified; and call on Saudi officials to account for the religious materials it exports. Findings should be reported to Congress. The Saudi foreign minister has acknowledged that it is possible individual Saudis have funded Wahhabi schools abroad, and has said that he would welcome information about this funding, now considered a crime in Saudi Arabia. The study we have proposed would not only help fulfill his request, but would also reveal whether or not his government is involved. In the age of global terrorism, the U.S. should be concerned when there are credible allegations that Saudi Arabia is propagating globally a brand of Islam that is not only incompatible with the war against terrorism, but may well be promoting it. Mr. El Fadl, a law professor at Yale, is on the Commission on International Religious Freedom. Copyright 2003 Wall Street Journal