

## October 19, 2007: USCIRF Seriously Concerned About Saudi Academy

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Oct. 19, 2007

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WASHINGTON-The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent, bipartisan federal agency with a mandate to recommend policies that promote religious freedom in U.S. foreign policy, has recommended that the Secretary of State open diplomatic talks with the Saudi government in order to obtain official Saudi textbooks used at the government-run Islamic Saudi Academy outside Washington. The Academy should be closed until the official Saudi textbooks used at the school are made available for comprehensive public examination and are found to be consistent with Saudi government commitments to revise them to remove intolerant and violent references.

Very significant for the course of action recommended by the Commission is the fact that the Academy is not a private or charter school.

- It is the only school in the United States that is operated with the direct authority of the Saudi embassy. Twenty such academies are operated by the government of Saudi Arabia in foreign capital cities around the world.
- It operates on two northern Virginia properties owned or leased by the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, with the leased property being leased by "the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia d/b/a (doing business as) the Islamic Saudi Academy."
- The Saudi ambassador to the United States is the chairman of the school's board of directors, which, according to the Academy's web site, "oversees the educational and administrative operation" and "provides direction and guidance to every aspect of" the school's operations.
- The school is funded by the government of Saudi Arabia.
- On numerous occasions, Saudi Embassy officials have spoken to the press on the ISA's behalf-including in response to inquiries about its curriculum.
- According to the Academy's brochure, posted on its own web site, the ISA uses Saudi government "curriculum, syllabus, and materials." It is these ties to the Saudi government and embassy that bring the school within the Commission's mandate, which is to monitor foreign governments' compliance with international religious freedom guarantees.

The Saudi curriculum continues to be the subject of U.S. concern and the Saudi government and embassy, despite repeated U.S. government requests, have failed to disclose it. Several studies, including by Saudi experts themselves, have pointed to serious concerns that these texts encourage violence toward others, and misguide the pupils into believing that in order to safeguard their own religion, they must violently repress and even physically eliminate the "other."

The students and teachers at the Islamic Saudi Academy have many private avenues for the expression of viewpoints, none of which the Commission seeks to target. But the ISA itself is an arm of the Saudi Government, and the US Government has a right to stop foreign governments from engaging in activities on our soil in violation of the Foreign Missions Act, particularly because significant past documented concerns remain about whether what is being taught at the ISA explicitly promotes hate, intolerance and human rights violations, in some cases violence, and therefore may adversely affect the interests of the United States.

The Commission on International Religious Freedom sent a delegation to Saudi Arabia this summer to explore the implementation of Saudi promises to improve the status of freedom of religion and related human rights. Published in a policy statement of the Saudi government in a written text released to the Congress and press by the Department of State last summer, one of those promises was to revise official school textbooks to remove material that promote hatred and intolerance.

Despite our specific and repeated requests for meetings, the Commission delegation was not permitted to meet with any officials in the Education Ministry or others involved with the curriculum. When we returned to the United States, we wrote a letter requesting the Islamic Saudi Academy textbooks from its highest official, the chairman of its board of directors. Not only did we not receive the textbooks, we did not even receive a reply.

The Foreign Missions Act gives the Secretary of State the authority to regulate foreign missions in the United States and the broad discretion to decide how to treat such missions based on, among other things, "matters relating to the protection of the interests of the United States." The Secretary's authority includes the powers to require a foreign mission to divest itself of or forgo the use of property and to order it to close. The Commission on International Religious Freedom encourages the Secretary of State to open talks immediately to persuade the Saudi government voluntarily to close the Academy until the books are made available for scrutiny. Within 90 days, we recommend that the Secretary report to Congress on the results of those discussions.

- If by the end of the 90-day period, the books are obtained and are found to contain language encouraging violence, the U.S. government should take appropriate action under applicable U.S. laws, including the Foreign Missions Act.
- Alternatively, if the Secretary fails to secure the textbooks' release within the 90 days, or receives texts whose pages are missing or ripped out, she should begin action under the Foreign Missions Act to close the ISA on the ground that the non-diplomatic activities of the ISA cannot be conducted by and through an embassy, and because significant concerns remain about whether what is being taught at the ISA promotes religious intolerance and may adversely affect the interests of the United States. "Because Saudi Arabia is a friend and ally of this country, our sincere hope is that the Secretary of State will have a productive dialogue with the Saudi embassy, and that she will be able to secure the textbooks and curriculum that are used, and that those textbooks do not promote hatred and intolerance," Commission Chair Michael Cromartie said. "But if that doesn't work, our hope is that the secretary will invoke the power she has under the Foreign Missions Act to close the ISA."

"If the textbooks are found not to promote extreme intolerance, then the Academy should be allowed to operate," Cromartie said.

The section of the Commission's report and the recommendation on the Islamic Saudi Academy follows. The full text of the Commission's Policy Focus on Saudi Arabia is available on the Commission's web site.

### Exportation of Extremism: an American Case in Point?

The Commission has raised concerns for many years that the Saudi government and members of the royal family directly and indirectly fund the global propagation of an ideology which promotes hatred, intolerance, and other human rights abuses, including violence. The concern is not about the propagation of Islam per se, but about credible reports that the Saudi government's version of Islam promotes abuses of human rights, including violent acts, against non-Muslims and disfavored Muslims. One potential example that has gained attention in recent years is the Islamic Saudi Academy (ISA), located in northern Virginia. The operation of the school raises serious concerns about whether it is in violation of a U.S. law restricting the activities of foreign embassies. As outlined further below, the Commission accordingly recommends that the Secretary of State commence immediate diplomatic discussions and appropriate actions under the Foreign Missions Act.

### Potential Violations of Foreign Missions Act

The ISA purports to be a private school but:

- it operates on two northern Virginia properties owned or leased, according to Fairfax County records, by the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia. The leased property is formally leased to "the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia d/b/a [doing business as] the Islamic Saudi Academy;"
  - the Saudi Ambassador to the United States is the chairman of the school's board of directors which, according to the ISA website, "oversees the educational and administrative operation" and "provides direction and guidance to every aspect of" the school;
  - on numerous occasions, Saudi Embassy officials have spoken to the press on ISA's behalf. This is despite the fact that while foreign governments can engage in lawful non-diplomatic activity in the United States, they may not, according to the law, do so by and through their embassy;
  - the school appears to be substantially funded by the government of Saudi Arabia and, according to its own web site, uses Saudi government "curriculum, syllabus, and materials" in the portion of its program that is taught in Arabic.
- The Foreign Missions Act gives the Secretary of State the authority to regulate foreign missions in the United States and the broad discretion to decide how to treat such missions based on, among other things, "matters relating to the protection of the interests of the United States." The Secretary's authority includes the powers to require a foreign mission to divest itself of or forgo the use of property and to order it to close. Under the Act, a foreign mission is defined as "any mission to or agency or entity in the United States which is involved in the diplomatic, consular, or other activities of, or which is substantially controlled by, a foreign government...including any real property of such a mission and including the personnel of such a mission." The Saudi Embassy and Ambassador clearly fall within this definition, as do the two properties on which the Islamic Saudi Academy is operating since they are owned or leased by the Embassy. In addition, the definition of a foreign mission could also encompass ISA itself, given the evidence of Saudi government control.

### Background of Commission's Concerns

Significant concerns remain about whether what is being taught at the ISA promotes religious intolerance and may adversely affect the interests of the United States. In December 2003, a former Saudi judge and Saudi journalist presented a study on the state religious curricula in boy's schools in Saudi Arabia at the second National Dialogue forum on religious extremism and moderation. The study found that the approach used in the texts "encourages violence toward others, and misguides the pupils into believing that in order to safeguard their own religion, they must violently repress and even physically eliminate the 'other'." They cited examples found in the textbooks, such as "the blood

and property of the polytheists are permitted" and "there is no prohibition on spilling their [polytheists] blood." Furthermore, one scholar who examined "revised" state religious textbooks concluded that "there are passages in the various Tawhid editions stating that the blood and property of polytheists may be taken by Muslims, and these passages have been contextualized but not removed...What remains then, is a principle of behavior sanctioning the murder of those with whom one disagrees."

Moreover, a 2006 report analyzing some Saudi textbooks from the 2005-2006 school year found that "a ninth grade Saudi textbook on Hadith teaches teenagers in apocalyptic terms that violence towards Jews, Christians and other unbelievers is sanctioned by God." For example, the textbook reads, "the hour [of judgment] will not come until the Muslims fight the Jews and kill them." Another example taken from a twelfth grade textbook reads, "Jihad in the path of God - which consists of battling [Arabic, qital] against unbelief, oppression, injustice, and those who perpetrate it - is the summit of Islam." The study concludes that "while, as the text explains, one of the meanings of jihad is self-perfection or 'wrestling with the spirit', it acknowledges a more militant meaning as well." This state-driven disregard for freedom of religion not only violates international human rights standards, but also serves to embolden radical Islamists who seek to perpetuate acts of terrorism and other violence on Americans and others around the world.

These concerns are exacerbated by the Saudi Embassy officials' repeated refusals, despite the strong basis of concern and requests from the Commission and Members of Congress, to make textbooks available for outside scrutiny. The Saudi government has claimed that it has made changes to the textbooks, including in the July 2006 confirmation of policies, by stating that it thoroughly reviews and revises "educational materials and other literature sent abroad to ensure that all intolerant references are removed, and where possible, attempt to retrieve previously distributed materials that contain intolerance." Nevertheless, none of these textbooks have been made available by the Saudi government to the Commission or other U.S. official entities despite repeated requests over a period of several years by the State Department and the Commission to multiple Saudi representatives, including the Saudi Ambassador to the United States and other responsible officials. Following its visit to Saudi Arabia, the Commission again requested copies of the textbooks used at the ISA, but as of this writing, Saudi Embassy officials have not made them available.

#### RECOMMENDATION

Given that official Saudi school textbooks have in the past included language encouraging violence that adversely affects the interests of the United States and that the Saudi government, despite repeated requests over a period of several years, has failed to make its current textbooks available to support its claims that such language has been eliminated, and also given that the Saudi Embassy's relationship with the Islamic Saudi Academy (ISA) appears to violate the Foreign Missions Act, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommends that:

(1) the Secretary of State should immediately begin diplomatic discussions with the Saudi government with the goals of:

- (a) having the Saudi government close the ISA until such time as the official Saudi textbooks used at the ISA are made available for comprehensive public examination in the United States; and
- (b) ensuring a verifiable prohibition of any scheme(s) aimed at continuing Saudi government funding to the ISA through other indirect means;

(2) the Secretary of State should conclude these discussions within 90 days and, while the discussions are ongoing, the Secretary should also be preparing to take action under the Foreign Missions Act, should such action become necessary;

(3) at the conclusion of the 90 day period, the Secretary should report to Congress on the results of the discussions:

(a) if the Secretary has succeeded in securing the release of the textbooks used at the ISA, those textbooks should be thoroughly examined and, if they are determined to contain language encouraging violence, then the U.S. government should take appropriate action under applicable U.S. laws, including the Foreign Missions Act; and

(b) alternatively, if, at the conclusion of the 90 day period, the Secretary has failed to secure the release of the textbooks, then the Secretary should immediately commence action under the Foreign Missions Act to close the ISA on the ground that the non-diplomatic activities of the ISA cannot be conducted by and through an embassy, and because significant concerns remain about whether what is being taught at the ISA promotes religious intolerance and may adversely affect the interests of the United States.

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