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Saudi Arabia's Troubling Educational Curriculum

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Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you on behalf of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies for the opportunity to testify before you today about incitement in Saudi Arabia's government-published textbooks for school children. It is an honor to be back, particularly because I first engaged with Saudi Arabia on this issue as a staff member for this body's full committee.

Half a decade after 9/11, Nina Shea wrote in an outstanding Freedom House report that Saudi officials accepted their textbooks had problems but "have repeatedly pledged that reform is underway or completed."¹ That is still the case today.²

Yet as the author of the most recent published study on incitement remaining in Saudi textbooks today,³ I can vouch that over a decade later Riyadh *still* has not persuasively shown that this problem has been resolved.

Unfortunately, U.S. policy has not been up to the task of convincing our Saudi allies to remove this incitement with greater urgency.

For example, I exposed in a 2014 monograph that the State Department appeared to have allocated half a million dollars in taxpayer funds to commission a two-part study on Saudi textbooks that was intended for public release but was instead withheld to avoid embarrassing the Saudis or the U.S. administration.⁴ Its detailed findings were hidden from public scrutiny for years⁵ and only raised with the Saudis at a senior level after the textbooks it had evaluated were already out of date.⁶

In the testimony that follows, I will argue that this is particularly disturbing because incitement of this sort is not just a moral issue or a human rights issue, it is a national security issue. While Saudi

¹ Nina Shea, "Saudi Arabia's Curriculum of Intolerance: With Excerpts from Saudi Ministry of Education Textbooks for Islamic Studies," *Freedom House*, 2006, page 11.

(<https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/CurriculumOfIntolerance.pdf>)

² Margherita Stancati and Ahmed Al Omran, "Saudis Ready Digital Push to Get Islamic Extremism out of Schools: Textbooks were Criticized after 9/11 for Tendentious Content Pitting Muslims against Other Religions," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 15, 2017. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudis-ready-digital-push-to-get-islamic-extremism-out-of-schools-1487154603>)

³ David Andrew Weinberg, "Trump's Counter-Extremism Effort Should Address Saudi Textbooks: The President Will Have to Address Incitement in Riyadh's Government-Published Textbooks," *The Huffington Post*, May 20, 2017. (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/turning-the-page-on-hate-trumps-counter-extremism_us_5920a45de4b0e8f558bb2719)

⁴ David Andrew Weinberg, "Textbook Diplomacy: Why the State Department Shelved a Study on Incitement in Saudi Education Materials," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, March 2014. (http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/Textbook_Diplomacy.pdf)

⁵ "The State of Tolerance in the Curriculum of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," *International Center for Religion and Diplomacy*, 2012, page 104. (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/08/17/international-home/document-state-dept-study-on-saudi-textbooks.html>); "The Global Spread of Saudi Textbooks," *International Center for Religion and Diplomacy*, 2013. (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/08/17/international-home/document-state-dept-study-on-saudi-textbooks.html>)

⁶ David Andrew Weinberg, "Textbook Diplomacy: Why the State Department Shelved a Study on Incitement in Saudi Education Materials," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, March 2014, pages 4 and 8. (http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/Textbook_Diplomacy.pdf)

textbooks are not the only significant source of incitement from the Gulf – or even in Saudi Arabia – they are an important bellwether and concern for U.S. policy.

I will then endeavor to present everything we know about incitement in the latest edition of Saudi Arabia’s official textbooks. Examples of such incitement include: (1) directives to kill people in response to their non-violent personal life choices, (2) messages that are undoubtedly anti-Semitic or anti-Christian, (3) lessons that are intolerant toward adherents of non-monotheistic religions as well as implicitly toward Shiite and Sufi Muslims, and (4) several other passages encouraging violence.

I will explain how Riyadh regularly oversells the success of its textbook reforms. I will then argue for why U.S. policy in this regard needs to change urgently. Next, I will refute some common counterarguments by those who claim that U.S. pressure cannot have a positive impact on the Saudi curriculum. Finally, I will conclude by offering a list of policy recommendations for Congress which could help encourage the Saudi government to address this issue in a more effective and timely manner.

I. The Books are a National Security Issue

Addressing incitement in Saudi Arabia’s government-published textbooks is important for several different reasons. First of all, speaking out when hatred is being spread is simply the right thing to do. It is a barometer of how seriously any U.S. administration takes the fight against anti-Semitism and protecting Christians and vulnerable Muslim minorities abroad.⁷ It is an important avenue for toning down sectarian hatred in the Middle East without taking the side of Iran’s terror-sponsoring regime. And it is a basic human rights issue.

But most importantly, addressing incitement in Saudi Arabia, including in textbooks, is a serious national security issue. Saudi society has been a top source of foreign terrorist fighters – and, at times, terrorist leaders – in places like Iraq and Syria.⁸ Saudi Arabia was the original home of Osama bin Laden, and fifteen of the nineteen hijackers on 9/11 were Saudi nationals. While Saudi authorities have reportedly convicted hundreds of defendants on terror finance charges,⁹ they still grapple with the enormous challenge of radicalized private individuals seeking to fund terrorist groups.¹⁰

⁷ See, for example, “AJC Urges U.S. to Press Saudis on Textbooks,” *American Jewish Committee*, March 26, 2014. (<http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=7oJILSPwFfJSG&b=8479733&ct=13805419>)

⁸ Ned Parker, “Iraqi Insurgency Said to Include Many Saudis: They Outnumber other Foreigners, and Half Join as Suicide Bombers, a Senior U.S. Officer Says,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 2007. (<http://articles.latimes.com/2007/jul/15/world/fg-saudi15>); Mohanad Hashim, “Iraq and Syria: Who are the Foreign Fighters?” *BBC News* (UK), September 3, 2014. (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29043331>); “The Other Beheaders: Crime and Punishment in Saudi Arabia,” *The Economist*, September 20, 2014. (<https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21618918-possible-reasons-mysterious-surge-executions-other-beheaders>)

⁹ Financial Action Task Force, “Terrorist Financing FATF Report to G20 Leaders: Actions Being Taken by the FATF,” November 2015, page 4. (<http://www.fatf-gafi.org/media/fatf/documents/reports/Terrorist-financing-actions-taken-by-FATF.pdf>)

¹⁰ Declan Walsh, “Wikileaks Cables Portray Saudi Arabia as a Cash Machine for Terrorists,” *The Guardian* (UK), December 5, 2010. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/05/wikileaks-cables-saudi-terrorist-funding>); David Andrew Weinberg, “Analysis: State Department Identifies Gulf Shortcomings on Counterterrorism Efforts,”

The kingdom's books have emerged in well over a dozen countries over the years, including Algeria, Austria, Burkina Faso, China, Comoros, Djibouti, France, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Tanzania, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and previously the United States.¹¹ The valedictorian of a school in Virginia that had used the textbooks was convicted in 2005 of plotting with al-Qaeda to assassinate President George W. Bush.¹²

Until 2015, Saudi textbooks were even the curriculum of choice in territory held by the Islamic State, according to the *New York Times*.¹³ Much like those books recommended, the Islamic State executed numerous individuals on suspicion of homosexuality, insulting Allah or the Prophet Muhammad, adultery, or purported sorcery.¹⁴

Saudi textbooks are the most pivotal ones from a national security perspective, due to what author Robert Lacey explains is an accident of history regarding how the kingdom was established. The Saudi kingdom, founded in 1932, brought together disparate elements from three different regions: (1) the austere religious traditions of central Saudi Arabia, (2) the oil wealth of Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, and (3) the mantle of religious legitimacy from controlling the two holiest sites in Islam, in Saudi Arabia's west. This fusion allowed Saudi rulers to lavishly and persuasively promote their brand of Islam, first within the kingdom and then beyond.¹⁵

When Stuart Levey was the U.S. Treasury Department's under secretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, he wrote that fighting indoctrination such as intolerant textbooks is "even more important" than cutting off terrorist finance. He explained that unless we stop the indoctrination of future generations, America "will forever be faced with the challenge of disrupting the next group of terrorist facilitators and supporters."¹⁶

FDD's Long War Journal, June 3, 2016. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/06/analysis-state-department-identifies-gulf-shortcomings-on-counterterrorism-efforts.php>)

¹¹ International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, "The Global Spread of Saudi Textbooks," 2013. (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/08/17/international-home/document-state-dept-study-on-saudi-textbooks.html>); Graham Paton, "Muslim Pupils Learn to Cut Off Hands of Thieves," *The Telegraph* (UK), November 21, 2010. (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/8150247/Muslim-pupils-learn-to-cut-off-hands-of-thieves.html>); "Saudi School 'Teaching Anti-Semitism'," *The Local* (Austria), November 14, 2014. (<https://www.thelocal.at/20141114/saudi-school-teaching-anti-semitism>); Jamie Tarabay, "Virginia Islamic School's Expansion Met Protests," *NPR*, January 30, 2010. (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=122987391>)

¹² Jerry Markon, "Va. Man's Sentence Increased to Life in Terror Plot," *The Washington Post*, July 28, 2009. (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/27/AR2009072701384.html>)

¹³ David D. Kirkpatrick, "ISIS' Harsh Brand of Islam is Rooted in Austere Saudi Creed," *The New York Times*, September 24, 2014. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/world/middleeast/isis-abu-bakr-baghdadi-caliph-wahhabi.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&smid=tw-nytimes&r=1>); Scott Shane, "Saudis and Extremism: 'Both the Arsonists and the Firefighters,'" *The New York Times*, August 25, 2016. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/26/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-islam.html>)

¹⁴ See, for example, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "103 People Executed in 7 Provinces over 50 Days," *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, February 20, 2015. (<http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=13059>); David Andrew Weinberg, "Saudi Textbooks Propagate Intolerance," *The Hill*, October 30, 2015. (<http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/education/258583-saudi-textbooks-propagate-intolerance>)

¹⁵ Robert Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists, and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia* (Penguin, 2009), pages xx-xxi.

¹⁶ Stuart A. Levey, "Loss of Moneyman a Big Blow for al-Qaeda," *The Washington Post*, June 6, 2010. (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/04/AR2010060404271.html>)

Tom Farr, a former director of the State Department’s International Religious Freedom, was even more explicit. In 2008, he argued that the U.S. government’s lack of urgency and failure to hold Riyadh to its own deadlines for fixing the textbooks and other promised religious freedom reforms meant that “the primary ‘lesson’ of 9/11 [was] shunted to the side.”¹⁷ Indeed, without urgently addressing the religious incitement that provides fertile intellectual ground for such violent extremism, we may unfortunately be fated to keep repeating the past.

Saudi Arabia today is not the worst country in the Gulf when it comes to state-backed incitement. That title goes to the government of Iran, which regularly calls for the annihilation of Israel and viciously dehumanizes its enemies.¹⁸ Qatar’s record is also as bad or worse than Saudi Arabia’s when it comes to the extremist messages that are propagated by its state-backed media and by state-backed preachers.¹⁹ But because Saudi Arabia is so much bigger than Qatar, the impact of what it teaches to school children at home is felt around the world.

Textbooks are also not the only challenge involving incitement in Saudi Arabia, but they are the most obvious bellwether for assessing issues of this sort. When the Education Ministry itself adopts certain extremist messages, puts them in writing, and teaches them to children, the link that runs from the state to such incitement is particularly meaningful. While the U.S. should seek to address other areas of incitement as well – such as by Saudi government officials²⁰ and by state-backed preachers²¹ – the kingdom’s textbooks are a very important indicator of its conduct and intentions.

II. Accessing the Latest Books

Oren Adaki and I worked together at FDD on the issue of Saudi textbooks during the 2013-2014 school year. He did path-breaking work on those books at the time,²² and I am thrilled to see him serving as the staff director for this subcommittee today. For the subsequent two school years, however, two of the main online venues for accessing the books were made password protected, effectively blocking foreigners.²³ The senior Saudi officials whom I contacted in this regard declined to grant me access.

¹⁷ Thomas F. Farr, *World of Faith and Freedom: Why International Religious Liberty is Vital to American National Security* (Oxford, 2008), page 241.

¹⁸ Michael Gerson, “Iran’s Hate Speech is an Incitement to Genocide,” *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2013. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/michael-gerson-irans-hate-speech-is-an-incitement-to-genocide/2013/04/04/2686e7a8-9ca1-11e2-9a79-eb5280c81c63_story.html?utm_term=.d4b95d66e89e)

¹⁹ David Andrew Weinberg, “Congress Must Press Qatar for Highlighting Hate Preacher,” *The Hill*, April 30, 2017. (<http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/foreign-policy/331264-congress-must-press-qatar-for-highlighting-hate-preacher>)

²⁰ David Daoud and David Andrew Weinberg, “Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: Saudi Arabia Still Hostile to Jews,” *The Forward*, May 15, 2017. (<http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/david-daoud-two-steps-forward-one-step-back-saudi-arabia-still-hostile-to-israel/>)

²¹ David Daoud and David Andrew Weinberg, “Saudi Clerics’ Rhetoric – and Implications for Global Security,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 20, 2016. (<https://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2016/04/20/saudi-clerics-rhetoric-and-implications-for-global-security/>)

²² Oren Adaki, “Highlighting Hatred in Saudi Textbooks,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies website*, March 27, 2014. (<http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/oren-adaki-highlighting-hatred-in-saudi-textbooks/>)

²³ iTunes app “المناهج الدراسية” accessed July 14, 2017. (<https://goo.gl/qk4SBk>); “بوابة المحتوى الرقمي للمناهج” accessed July 14, 2017; archived April 10, 2016. (<https://goo.gl/wo2kyU>); “بوابة المحتوى الرقمي للمناهج” accessed July 14, 2017; archived July 8, 2016. (<https://goo.gl/2MZs8A>)

Accessing Saudi Arabia’s government-published textbooks has been a recurring challenge not just for American researchers, but also for U.S. government officials. When the State Department undertook a 2006 in-house study of several textbooks at the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh, it “borrowed” books from school children because the host government did not answer repeated requests for the books.²⁴ When the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD) was conducting a review of Saudi textbooks on behalf of the U.S. government, it said religious studies textbooks for grades three and six “were regrettably unobtainable.”²⁵ On several occasions, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was promised textbooks by Saudi officials, wrote letters to follow up, and received no reply.²⁶ Other times, the websites recommended by Riyadh to U.S. officials for accessing the books were out of service or incomplete.²⁷

But in early 2017, I received an invaluable tip that many, if not all, of the Education Ministry-published books for the 2016-2017 school year were now available at a different location that was not password protected – a website maintained by the state-chartered corporation for curriculum modernization.²⁸ To the best of my knowledge, books for the 2017-2018 school year have not yet been released, so these are still the most up-to-date books for use in Saudi public schools.

I conducted a study of key selections from those 2016-2017 books, looking primarily at those textbooks in which religious incitement had previously been a major problem (especially high school books on religious matters).²⁹ I published the results of that study as an article for the *Huffington Post*, from which I have drawn extensively here.³⁰ For each passage from those textbooks that I reference here, I have included at the end of this testimony a copy of that book’s cover page, copyright page, and the page(s) on which that passage occurred. At two other points in this section, I cite textbook studies by other authors; in those instances, I reference and footnote their studies explicitly.

²⁴ David Andrew Weinberg, “Textbook Diplomacy: Why the State Department Shelved a Study on Incitement in Saudi Education Materials,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, March 2014, page 7. (http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/Textbook_Diplomacy.pdf)

²⁵ “The State of Tolerance in the Curriculum of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, 2012, page 104. (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/08/17/international-home/document-state-dept-study-on-saudi-textbooks.html>)

²⁶ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, “Policy Focus: Saudi Arabia,” Fall 2007, pages 2, 6, 13-14, and 22. (http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/resources/stories/PDFs/PolicyFocus_SaudiArabia_Fall2007.pdf); U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, “Annual Report for 2010,” May 2010, page 130. (<http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/resources/ar2010/saudiarabia2010.pdf>); U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, “Annual Report for 2011,” May 2011, page 150. (<http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/resources/book%20with%20cover%20for%20web.pdf>)

²⁷ Nina Shea, *Ten Years On: Saudi Arabia’s Textbooks Still Promote Religious Violence* (Hudson Institute, 2011), page 6. (<https://www.hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/931/sauditextbooks2011final.pdf>);

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, “Annual Report 2013,” April 2013, page 142. ([http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/resources/2013%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/resources/2013%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%20(2).pdf))

²⁸ iEn National Education Portal, “التعليم العام,” accessed July 14, 2017. (<https://ien.edu.sa/#/home/5142>)

²⁹ I received invaluable advice in this regard from David Daoud, who was serving as an Arabic-language research analyst at FDD and now works for United Against a Nuclear Iran.

³⁰ David Andrew Weinberg, “Trump’s Counter-Extremism Effort Should Address Saudi Textbooks: The President Will Have to Address Incitement in Riyadh’s Government-Published Textbooks,” *The Huffington Post*, May 20, 2017. (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/turning-the-page-on-hate-trumps-counter-extremism_us_5920a45de4b0e8f558bb2719)

(A) Recommending the Death Penalty for Personal Life Choices

The latest editions of several Saudi textbooks call for the killing of any individual who engages in certain acts that we in the United States would treat as personal life choices. The lessons in these books are even harsher than how the Saudi state tends to approach such issues: Whereas judges often apply a strict evidentiary standard to reduce the likelihood of executing a defendant for such acts, no such mitigating context is provided in these lessons.

A 2016-2017 high school textbook on Islamic jurisprudence teaches that the punishment for adultery is being stoned to death. It adds that the penalty for premarital sex is one hundred lashes and a year of exile.

That same book defines anal sex as a “crime” and says that the majority of jurists have determined that the penalty for it is “like the penalty for adultery,” meaning death. The book dehumanizes anybody who engages in such an act, teaching that it “creates depravity and lowliness in the soul of whoever commits it, since it extinguishes life.” The book adds that societies in which anal sex spreads are swiftly punished by God, incurring disasters, plagues, iniquity, and corruption.

Additionally, the book teaches that adultery, premarital, and anal sex each bring shame upon one’s family and tribe. This is a key element of the belief system that can lead to tragic honor killings in some communities.

This introductory book on religious law also mandates the death penalty for what is called “apostasy,” meaning abandoning or renouncing Islam. The book teaches that anybody who does not “return to his religion” after three days must be killed and will then spend an “eternity in fire.” The lesson teaches that there are three main kinds of apostasy: (1) “mocking Allah or his prophet or his religion” and praying to an entity other than Allah, (2) drawing closer to an entity other than Allah in ritual acts, or (3) belief in something known to be forbidden in Islam, such as permitting the consumption of alcohol.

Lastly, the 2016-2017 Saudi curriculum teaches that the death penalty should be applied for certain perceived acts of sorcery, according to an introductory high school book on monotheism. For those involved in what it calls devil magic, the penalty given is execution by the state. For acts of magical sleight of hand, the instructed penalty is a rebuke that it says can also go up to the level of execution.

It is also worth noting that this is the only one of the four directives listed here that specifies that the killing of such people must be carried out by an authority appointed by the ruler. In all other instances, that assessment is left up to interpretation by the reader, which could leave open the possibility of vigilante violence by non-state groups.

(B) Anti-Semitic and Anti-Christian Messages

A 2016-2017 Saudi textbook for high school students on *Hadith* – the traditional corpus of actions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad – teaches some rather problematic messages about present-

day Christianity. The book alleges that “Christianity in its current state is an invalid, perverted religion” whose promoters seek to dominate Muslim nations using the “weapon” of “intellectual invasion.” The book falsely alleges that the American Universities in Cairo and Beirut are two of “the institutions leading Christianization all over the world” today.

That same textbook also teaches some misleading lessons about Zionism, the movement to establish a national home for the Jewish people. It baselessly alleges that Zionism aspires to world domination and a “global Jewish government.” It falsely argues that – as a prelude to world domination – the aim of present-day Zionism and the Israeli government is to establish a Greater Israel that stretches from the Nile to the Euphrates.

Similarly, a 2016-2017 high school social studies book from Saudi Arabia calls Zionism an “octopus” that it falsely accuses of seeking to destroy the al-Aqsa Mosque and the entire “Islamic creed.” It should be noted that imagery of global Jewry as an octopus is a common trope used in other anti-Semitic hoaxes, including some editions of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*,³¹ Henry Ford’s *The International Jew*,³² and Nazi propaganda.³³

These books single out Zionism among all other self-determination movements as inherently racist and expansionist, inexplicably accusing it of spreading drugs and sexually-transmitted diseases in Islamic countries. The books also present Zionism as inherently “hostile” and a “threat” to the Arab and Muslim world.

In a lesson entitled “the Intifada and the Zionist threat,” one of them also falsely asserts that the first Palestinian intifada caused roughly a million Jews to emigrate from Israel. It praises the intifada as “a war sapping the wave of the Zionists” and as “a preparation for liberation, Allah permitting.”

A twelfth-grade textbook on monotheism from 2016-2017 teaches that God “forbade befriending the infidels,” in part based on a Quranic verse it includes that says not to take Jews or Christians as allies. The book alleges three reasons for this prohibition, asserting that such infidels are “enemies of God,” “enemies of Islam” and its adherents, and that befriending them would show support for disbelief.

That lesson also teaches that a key part of Islam and Muslim relations with non-believers is a requirement to “abhor the enemies of Allah and their hostilities.”

(C) Messages against Sufi and Shiite Rituals and Non-Monotheistic Religions

³¹ “Egyptian Television Re-Airs Anti-Semitic Miniseries ‘Horseman without a Horse,’” *Anti-Defamation League*, April 5, 2012. (<https://www.adl.org/blog/egyptian-television-re-air-anti-semitic-miniseries-horseman-without-a-horse>)

³² “File:2001 ed The International Jew by Henry Ford.jpg,” *Wikipedia*, accessed July 14, 2017. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:2001_ed_The_International_Jew_by_Henry_Ford.jpg)

³³ “‘Seppla’ [Josef Plank], Churchill as an Octopus, between 1935 and 1943,” in *Churchill and the Great Republic*, accessed July 14, 2017 via Library of Congress. (<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/churchill/interactive/html/wc0213.html>)

Saudi Arabia's strict brand of Salafist Sunni Islam, commonly referred to in the West as Wahhabism, maintains a strong emphasis on eschewing any religious practices that could be perceived as deviations from monotheism. As a result, the kingdom's curriculum includes numerous books on monotheism that admonish against acts of polytheism (*"shirk"*) and its practitioners (*"mushrikeen"*). As such, these lessons are inherently critical toward adherents of non-monotheistic religions. They also single out for criticism many of the rituals that are commonly associated in the local context with Shiite or Sufi Islam.

For example, an eighth-grade Saudi textbook on monotheism from 2016-2017 that I found defines such rituals – such as praying while walking around a grave or shrine – as an act of polytheism. Alongside that passage in the text, the book presents a picture with a big "X" of what appears to be a mock-up of a shrine with names of several Shiite imams behind it.

In this regard, I would like to recommend to you an important forthcoming study by Human Rights Watch on systematic discrimination against Shiite citizens of Saudi Arabia.³⁴ In it, the organization examines how Saudi primary school textbooks on monotheism from 2016-2017 present relations with non-Sunni Muslims. Generally speaking, it finds that while the curriculum does not address Shiite Islam explicitly or employ a common local slur for its practitioners as "rejectionists," the books are still deeply problematic.

They discovered that the 2016-2017 books clearly endorsed Sunni Islam over other religions and repeatedly referred to well-known stereotypes of Shiite or Sufi rituals as horrendous examples of polytheism. Key examples of such rituals included swearing by or showing reverence for early figures in Shiite Islam, praying for these or other saintly figures to "intercede" with Allah on one's behalf, wailing over the dead as some Shiite Muslims do during the holy day of Ashura, and making pilgrimages to religious sites in addition to those in Mecca and Medina.

(D) Other Encouragement of Violence

The language in 2016-2017 Saudi textbooks that calls for killing people who engage in adultery, anal sex, apostasy, or certain supposed acts of sorcery are not the only passages that encourage violence against those who act in a manner inconsistent with the state's vision of Islam.

A 2016-2017 Saudi textbook on monotheism for the twelfth grade teaches that there are four kinds of infidels. The first three of them include envoys who have diplomatic immunity, peoples who have a non-aggression pact with the Muslim world, and *dhimmis*, a term for non-Muslims forced to pay a special tax that is commonly associated with second-class status. According to this book, the remainder of infidels, who comprise the fourth class, are defined as "combatants," whom it says Allah has commanded must be fought until they submit to Islam or agree to become *dhimmis*.

That book also calls for "fighting the infidels and the polytheists" except under a handful of extenuating circumstances. Those include: (1) if such non-Muslims have not been given a chance yet to convert to Islam or become *dhimmis*, (2) if Muslims are not strong enough to win such a fight, (3) if the ruler does not support it, or (4) if such non-Muslims have a non-aggression pact with the Muslim world.

³⁴ Human Rights Watch, *They Are Not Our Brothers: Hate Speech by Saudi Officials*, (forthcoming).

According to a February 2017 *Wall Street Journal* article, a current eighth-grade Saudi textbook on Islamic law instructed readers to support people who are waging *jihad*, including by arming them. The passage was translated by the *Journal* as follows: “the *mujahideen* who are doing good deeds for the sake of Allah ... should be given transportation, weapons, food and anything else they may need to continue their *jihad*.”³⁵

III. Full Reform is Never Around the Corner

I recently was told by a credible source that Saudi officials now privately claim to have completed the wholesale removal of religious incitement from their curriculum for the upcoming (2017-2018) school year. Such claims would have to be viewed with great skepticism due to the kingdom’s past track record.

In addition to missing several stated deadlines for textbook reform, Saudi authorities have routinely oversold the extent of these initiatives to date. As State Department officials have reportedly conceded in private, the real pace of Saudi textbook reform has been “glacial.”³⁶ Three times in the last decade, newly-appointed Saudi education ministers were hailed by the West as reformers only to leave office without making meaningful strides toward resolving this issue.³⁷

In 2003, Adel al-Jubeir – then an advisor to Saudi Arabia’s crown prince and now the kingdom’s foreign minister – told Tim Russert that the textbooks issue was “overblown,” since the kingdom’s books had already been “changed.”³⁸

In 2005, Saudi Arabia’s then-foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, inaccurately assured an audience at the Council on Foreign Relations that “we have gone through a whole program of going into the educational system from top to bottom, from schools, teachers, books, and we have taken everything out of them that does not call for cooperation [and] coexistence.”³⁹

³⁵ Margherita Stancati and Ahmed Al Omran, “Saudis Ready Digital Push to Get Islamic Extremism out of Schools: Textbooks were Criticized after 9/11 for Tendentious Content Pitting Muslims against Other Religions,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 15, 2017. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudis-ready-digital-push-to-get-islamic-extremism-out-of-schools-1487154603>); This newspaper article also included several other worrisome passages from Saudi textbooks, but there is some inconsistency in the piece as to whether those other passages were from the most recent school year or from previous editions.

³⁶ Cited in Nina Shea, *Ten Years On: Saudi Arabia’s Textbooks Still Promote Religious Violence* (Hudson Institute, 2011), page 12. (<https://www.hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/931/sauditextbooks2011final.pdf>)

³⁷ “Editorial: A Promise of Reform in Saudi Arabia,” *The New York Times*, February 25, 2009. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/26/opinion/26thu2.html>); Ellen Knickmeyer and Ahmed Omran, “Some Saudis See New Appointments as Challenge to Kingdom’s Fundamentalists,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 23, 2013. (<https://blogs.wsj.com/middleeast/2013/12/23/some-saudis-see-new-appointments-as-challenge-to-kingdoms-fundamentalists/>); “A New King’s Duty to Young Saudis,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 4, 2015. (<https://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/the-monitors-view/2015/0204/A-new-king-s-duty-to-young-Saudis>)

³⁸ Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Press Release, “Adel al-Jubeir, Foreign Policy Advisor to Crown Prince Abdullah on NBC’s ‘Meet the Press,’” May 18, 2003, archived June 12, 2015. (<http://web.archive.org/web/20150612094516/https://saudiembassy.net/archive/2003/transcript/page21.aspx>)

³⁹ “The Fight against Extremism and the Search for Peace,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 20, 2005, archived April 19, 2017. (<http://web.archive.org/web/20170419011341/https://www.cfr.org/radicalization-and-extremism/fight-against-extremism-search-peace-rush-transcript-federal-news-service-inc/p8908>)

He was echoed by King Abdullah, who told Barbara Walters that fall that the kingdom had “toned ... down” its textbooks to limit their possible contribution to extremism.⁴⁰

In the spring of 2006, Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to the United States, Prince Turki al-Faisal, told a town hall in Los Angeles that “we eliminated what might be perceived as intolerance from old text books that were in our system,” and he made similar remarks to an audience in Chicago as well.⁴¹

In July 2006, Saudi Arabia pledged to the U.S. government to “remove remaining intolerant references that disparage Muslims or non-Muslims or that promote hatred toward other religions or religious groups,” and that it “expect[ed] to complete this process in one to two years.”⁴² Of course, that deadline was missed entirely, and the U.S. did little to chastise the Saudis for falling short.

In March 2008, Saudi Arabia’s deputy minister of education in charge of textbook updates is reported to have incorrectly claimed to the U.S. Embassy that “most intolerant language had been removed” already from the kingdom’s school books.⁴³

This reported assertion is particularly surprising because the State Department later reported that his Education Ministry had just embarked in 2007 on a multi-year process of revising its textbooks, starting with some of the lower grades and planning to work their way up.⁴⁴ In effect, this involved focusing on what Douglas Johnston of ICRD once characterized as “low-hanging fruit,”⁴⁵ revising less controversial textbooks for the lower grades while saving the books with the most problematic materials, which were always at the high school level, for some point down the road.

According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Saudi officials claimed several years into this process that they had “thoroughly revised” the textbooks for these lower grades.⁴⁶ According to the State Department, Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Education said that

⁴⁰ “Transcript: Saudi King Abdullah Talks to Barbara Walters,” *ABC News*, October 14, 2015.

(<http://abcnews.go.com/2020/International/story?id=1214706&page=1>)

⁴¹ Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Press Release, “Saudi Ambassador Addresses Town Hall Los Angeles, March 21, 2006, archived September 9, 2015.

(<http://web.archive.org/web/20150909222625/https://saudiembassy.net/archive/2006/speeches/page52.aspx>);

Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Press Release, “Prince Turki’s Address to the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations,” April 20, 2006, archived September 10, 2015.

(<http://web.archive.org/web/20150910090029/https://saudiembassy.net/archive/2006/speeches/page43.aspx>)

⁴² Nina Shea, “Saudi Reform Pledge Publicly Distributed in July 2006 by U.S. State Department Officials,” *Ten Years On: Saudi Arabia’s Textbooks Still Promote Religious Violence* (Hudson Institute, 2011), page 47.

(<https://www.hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/931/sauditextbooks2011final.pdf>)

⁴³ Cited in David Andrew Weinberg, “Textbook Diplomacy: Why the State Department Shelved a Study on Incitement in Saudi Education Materials,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, March 2014, page 7.

(http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/Textbook_Diplomacy.pdf)

⁴⁴ U.S. Department of State, “Saudi Arabia,” *2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, March 11, 2010.

(<https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/nea/136079.htm>)

⁴⁵ Quoted in David Andrew Weinberg, “Textbook Diplomacy: Why the State Department Shelved a Study on Incitement in Saudi Education Materials,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, March 2014, page 8.

(http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/Textbook_Diplomacy.pdf)

⁴⁶ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, “Annual Report 2012,” March 2012, page 167.

([http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/resources/Annual%20Report%20of%20USCIRF%202012\(2\).pdf](http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/resources/Annual%20Report%20of%20USCIRF%202012(2).pdf))

reforming the textbooks for grades one through nine had been fully completed by the end of 2012.⁴⁷ However, ICRD reported that even these textbooks still contained some deeply problematic passages. For example, an eighth-grade textbook that has supposedly been already fixed still *literally* taught hatred, admonishing students to hate non-believers, as well as calling for the execution of sorcerers.⁴⁸

Other problematic passages noted by ICRD in these elementary and middle school books that were supposedly fixed included: passages that promoted or glorified “aggressive jihad,” encouraged “extreme bias toward non-Muslims” and were “very harmful” for Saudi religious minorities, “gratuitous negative references to Jews and Christians,” and “sweeping indictments” of them as polytheists.⁴⁹ According to Hannah Rosenthal, when she was serving as the State Department’s Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, a Saudi official asserted to her in 2011 that a passage calling Jews the spawn of monkeys or pigs was no longer in use,⁵⁰ even though it actually continued to be taught for at least several more years.⁵¹

If this is what qualifies as a thoroughly revised textbook in Saudi Arabia, then claims that this process may have finally been extended up through the twelfth grade require renewed scrutiny, not the termination of it.

The Saudis also missed several deadlines after that. In 2011, the kingdom’s deputy education minister reportedly told the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom that the books would be completely revised by 2013.⁵² The Commission then reported in 2013 that Saudi officials told them that the process of revising these books, including for grades 10 through 12, would be completed by 2014.⁵³

⁴⁷ U.S. Department of State, “Saudi Arabia,” *2012 International Religious Freedom Report*, May 20, 2013, page 14. (<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/208622.pdf>)

⁴⁸ “The State of Tolerance in the Curriculum of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” *International Center for Religion and Diplomacy*, 2012, page 21. (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/08/17/international-home/document-state-dept-study-on-saudi-textbooks.html>)

⁴⁹ “The State of Tolerance in the Curriculum of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” *International Center for Religion and Diplomacy*, 2012, pages 21-25. (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/08/17/international-home/document-state-dept-study-on-saudi-textbooks.html>)

⁵⁰ Ron Kampeas, “U.S. State Dept. to Study Saudi Texts,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, July 7, 2011. (<http://www.jta.org/2011/07/07/news-opinion/united-states/u-s-state-dept-to-study-saudi-texts>)

⁵¹ Nina Shea, *Ten Years On: Saudi Arabia’s Textbooks Still Promote Religious Violence* (Hudson Institute, 2011), page 15. (<https://www.hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/931/sauditextbooks2011final.pdf>); “The State of Tolerance in the Curriculum of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” *International Center for Religion and Diplomacy*, 2012, page 40. (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/08/17/international-home/document-state-dept-study-on-saudi-textbooks.html>); Margherita Stancati and Ahmed Al Omran, “Saudis Ready Digital Push to Get Islamic Extremism out of Schools: Textbooks were Criticized after 9/11 for Tendentious Content Pitting Muslims against Other Religions,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 15, 2017. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudis-ready-digital-push-to-get-islamic-extremism-out-of-schools-1487154603>)

⁵² U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, “Annual Report 2012,” March 2012, page 167. ([http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/resources/Annual%20Report%20of%20USCIRF%202012\(2\).pdf](http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/resources/Annual%20Report%20of%20USCIRF%202012(2).pdf)); Nina Shea, *Ten Years On: Saudi Arabia’s Textbooks Still Promote Religious Violence* (Hudson Institute, 2011), page 12. (<https://www.hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/931/sauditextbooks2011final.pdf>);

⁵³ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, “Annual Report 2013,” April 2013, page 136. ([http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/resources/2013%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/resources/2013%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%20(2).pdf))

In February 2017, Saudi Arabia’s education minister said that the kingdom had made strides in reforming its education system to meet the nation’s needs and “get rid of extremism,” but that “I think we still have to do a lot in that direction.”⁵⁴ According to the *Wall Street Journal*, he anticipated a “broader curriculum overhaul” after completing a project to shift Saudi classrooms from using printed materials to electronic tablets, which was expected to take up to three years.⁵⁵

IV. Have the Books Improved at All?

Absolutely, and this is important to recognize while at the same time not treating it as an excuse to avoid raising the issue urgently with Riyadh.

Some particularly egregious passages evident in past editions have not been spotted in the textbooks of late. For example, I found the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a notorious anti-Semitic hoax,⁵⁶ being taught in Saudi textbooks as recently as 2015-2016 but have not yet seen it in those books I have been able to examine for 2016-2017. Whereas previous Saudi books frequently instructed students to “hate” non-believers,⁵⁷ I have seen less of this language in the latest edition. More often, such language is instead framed somewhat less harshly, as a directive not to befriend non-believers because it says they are enemies of Muslims and Allah. As noted above, encouragements of violence are still in the curriculum as well, but they are also less common.

Simultaneously, some passages recommending tolerance have been added to the curriculum over the last sixteen years. Examples noted this year by the *Wall Street Journal* included: “terrorism is a form of corruption that God has forbidden” and terrorism “cannot be considered a form of Islamic jihad,” “the prayer of the oppressed, whether from a Muslim or a non-Muslim, is answered,” and “Islam is eager to strengthen bonds of love and brotherhood.”⁵⁸

The ICRD’s 2012 report on Saudi textbooks also found a number of positive passages that had been added to the curriculum, even though extensive incitement still remained. Positive examples cited by ICRD included: two passages describing some or all “people of the book” (meaning Christians, Jews, and Muslims) as “believers,” a passage about human rights under Islam that declares “an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab,” a passage that says the Quran “commands us to treat parents well and with respect, regardless of whether they are Muslims or non-Muslims,”

⁵⁴ Margherita Stancati and Ahmed Al Omran, “Saudis Ready Digital Push to Get Islamic Extremism out of Schools: Textbooks were Criticized after 9/11 for Tendentious Content Pitting Muslims against Other Religions,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 15, 2017. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudis-ready-digital-push-to-get-islamic-extremism-out-of-schools-1487154603>)

⁵⁵ Margherita Stancati and Ahmed Al Omran, “Saudis Ready Digital Push to Get Islamic Extremism out of Schools: Textbooks were Criticized after 9/11 for Tendentious Content Pitting Muslims against Other Religions,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 15, 2017. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudis-ready-digital-push-to-get-islamic-extremism-out-of-schools-1487154603>)

⁵⁶ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, accessed July 16, 2017. (<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007058>)

⁵⁷ U.S. Department of State, “Saudi Arabia,” *2011 International Religious Freedom Report*, July 30, 2012, p. 13. (<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/193117.pdf>)

⁵⁸ Slides associated with Margherita Stancati and Ahmed Al Omran, “Saudis Ready Digital Push to Get Islamic Extremism out of Schools: Textbooks were Criticized after 9/11 for Tendentious Content Pitting Muslims against Other Religions,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 15, 2017. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudis-ready-digital-push-to-get-islamic-extremism-out-of-schools-1487154603>)

and a passage specifying that “treating a peaceful *kafer* [infidel or non-believer] kindly ... is not considered to be forbidden loyalty.”⁵⁹

Saudi Arabia has also spent lavishly on teacher training and expanded the teaching of STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and math), for which it receives frequent U.S. praise.⁶⁰ But critics rightly point out that these projects often are used as a distraction from the main problem for U.S. interests: the continued re-publication of incitement year after year by a U.S. ally in its public school curriculum.⁶¹

V. Why U.S. Policy Needs to Change

The default American approach to this issue is basically to wait and see, what former State Department official Thomas Farr decried as “no particular sense of urgency” back in 2008. And although working-level bureaucrats sporadically try to look at this issue, they lack the resources, authorization, and mandate to do so in-depth and regularly enough to have enough impact. They also lack the support necessary from American leaders, who almost never raise the books in a serious, detailed, and sustained manner with their Saudi counterparts.

This approach is a formula for failure.

Over a decade-and-a-half has passed since 9/11, and yet millions of Saudi school children have continued to be subjected to these inhumane lessons. Undoubtedly, such incitement has made America and our allies less secure, making it easier for the terrorist groups that we are fighting – and that target the kingdom itself – to attract potential new recruits.

Saudi Arabia has not been given a sufficient incentive to undertake the necessary changes to its textbooks in an urgent enough timeframe. Failing to launch a concerted effort to address Saudi textbooks now would also mean missing a moment of unusual U.S. leverage with Riyadh.

The Saudi leadership is so eager to see the Trump team follow through on its tough rhetoric regarding Iran that they are willing to go to great lengths to stay in America’s good graces. Furthermore, the kingdom’s campaign to mobilize international pressure against Qatar’s reckless policies means that Saudi Arabia now has extra motivation to respond to public or private concerns about its own record.

VI. Common Counterarguments

I have encountered several main counterarguments to the perspective that America should be pressing Riyadh more actively to eliminate incitement from its textbooks.

⁵⁹ “The State of Tolerance in the Curriculum of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” *International Center for Religion and Diplomacy*, 2012, pages 93-96. (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/08/17/international-home/document-state-dept-study-on-saudi-textbooks.html>)

⁶⁰ Royal Saudi Embassy in Washington, DC, “Saudi Arabia and Counterterrorism,” April 2017, page 49. (https://www.saudiembassy.net/sites/default/files/White%20Paper_Counterterrorism_April2017_0_0.pdf)

⁶¹ David Andrew Weinberg, “Textbook Diplomacy: Why the State Department Shelved a Study on Incitement in Saudi Education Materials,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, March 2014, pages 7-8. (http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/Textbook_Diplomacy.pdf)

The most reasonable one – with which I still do not agree – is that making a priority out of the textbooks issue cannot be done without sacrificing other important American interests that pertain to the Saudis. Policy-makers can and should debate how best to raise this issue without jettisoning other critical priorities with Riyadh.

But more often, the counterarguments that I encounter assert something else: that America bringing up the books would either be unfair or hurt reformers more that it would help. I find these arguments unpersuasive for the following reasons.

First, some argue that it would be hypocritical for the United States, which was founded on religious liberty, to tell another nation what to believe. But raising this issue is not the same thing as dictating to Saudi citizens what private beliefs they should hold. It is beseeching a U.S.-allied government to stop publishing passages in state documents that threaten the religious liberties and right to life of others, especially when Saudi officials themselves have acknowledged that some passages in their curriculum do encourage extremism or sow discord.⁶²

Others argue that outside pressure makes it harder for Saudi Arabia to reform its textbooks because it encourages hardliners to dig in their heels. Conservatives and preachers undoubtedly care about this issue; but sadly, addressing the incitement in textbooks has never been a top priority for the kingdom's rulers. Otherwise, they should have been able to resolve the problem by now without external engagement, as they repeatedly assured us would happen.

Instead, the most explicit Saudi government commitment to address this issue occurred in 2006, just two weeks after Nina Shea's report on Saudi textbooks revealed that kingdom's claims to have already resolved the issue of incitement in its textbooks were inaccurate.⁶³ Whereas Saudi Shiites I encounter – the victims of such incitement – tend to argue for U.S. pressure over the textbooks issue,⁶⁴ it is usually Sunnis close to the regime or Americans focused on eliciting Saudi cooperation on other issues – who argue that pressuring the Saudis would hurt rather than help Saudi textbook reform.

Another frequent counterargument is the claim that observant Muslim rulers like the Saudis are simply religiously unable to remove holy directives from state texts. But there are many Muslim-majority nations with Muslim rulers that choose not to write such egregious forms of incitement in their state curriculum. There is no religious stricture unambiguously mandating that the textbook of a Muslim state must emphasize particular lines or lessons from scripture. And there are plenty of lines from which to draw in the Quran and its commentaries that favor coexistence, compassion,

⁶² Abdallah Yahya al-Mouallimi, “الدولة .. رمز الوحدة الوطنية,” *al-Madina* (Saudi Arabia), November 10, 2014. (<http://www.al-madina.com/article/341901/>); Margherita Stancati and Ahmed Al Omran, “Saudis Ready Digital Push to Get Islamic Extremism out of Schools: Textbooks were Criticized after 9/11 for Tendentious Content Pitting Muslims against Other Religions,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 15, 2017. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudis-ready-digital-push-to-get-islamic-extremism-out-of-schools-1487154603>)

⁶³ David Andrew Weinberg, “Textbook Diplomacy: Why the State Department Shelved a Study on Incitement in Saudi Education Materials,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, March 2014, pages 6 and 9. (http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/Textbook_Diplomacy.pdf)

⁶⁴ See also Thomas F. Farr, *World of Faith and Freedom: Why International Religious Liberty is Vital to American National Security* (Oxford, 2008), page 238.

tolerance, and peace. For example, King Salman and his predecessor Abdullah have both admirably emphasized the Quranic dictum that “there is no compulsion in religion.”⁶⁵ It has also been persuasively argued by ICRD that on balance, the Quran is considerably less negative toward Christians and Jews than the Saudi curriculum.⁶⁶ Further, some of the lessons in these books – such as those calling for killing people for acts considered immoral – are even more extreme than Saudi policy, since they fail to make clear that such killing must only be conducted by the state and that the bar for such executions should be prohibitively high.

Finally, some argue that Saudi rulers are simply incapable of moving textbook reform forward more quickly because they are abjectly dependent upon the kingdom’s conservative clerical establishment. And while Saudi rulers do look to senior clerics for regime support, they are also capable of making textbook reform a greater relative priority among other culturally contentious topics that the Saudi government is seeking to advance – over, say, hosting the first Saudi “Comic Con” convention last year and working to open a new Six Flags amusement park.⁶⁷ The clerical establishment was wary of these moves, but the government pushed forward successfully nonetheless. Indeed, Saudi rulers have historically been able to implement important reforms despite reluctance from the clergy when it suits the needs of the state, such as with the abolition of slavery, the introduction of television, the hosting American troops during the first Gulf War, and passing limitations on the austere religious police last year.

VII. Policy Recommendations

More than fifteen years after 9/11, it is unfortunate that we still need to be here today to discuss continued religious incitement in the government-published textbooks of a pivotal American ally. But the good news is there is plenty that members of Congress can do to make a difference if they choose to act.

1. Require Timely, Detailed, and Annual U.S. Public Reviews

In its most recent annual report, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom called for the executive branch to “undertake and make public an annual assessment of the relevant Ministry of Education religious textbooks to determine if passages that teach religious intolerance have been removed.”⁶⁸ Congress should pass legislation requiring the executive branch to do exactly that, and should allocate appropriate funding to do so. Legislation of this sort should require such a public reporting to be as detailed as possible, including full quotations of all passages that could be seen as encouraging violence or being derogatory toward adherents of other religions. It should require that the U.S. government complete its review within 90 days from the start of the new Saudi school year each September to ensure its results are valid long enough that

⁶⁵ U.S. Department of State, *Saudi Arabia 2013 Report on International Religious Freedom*, July 28, 2014, page 16. (<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/222523.pdf>)

⁶⁶ “The State of Tolerance in the Curriculum of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” *International Center for Religion and Diplomacy*, 2012, pages 83-91. (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/08/17/international-home/document-state-dept-study-on-saudi-textbooks.html>)

⁶⁷ Katie Paul and William Maclean, “Saudi Entertainment Chief Sees Cinemas Returning, Eventually,” *Reuters*, April 27, 2017. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-entertainment-idUSKBN17T2WP>)

⁶⁸ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, “2017 Annual Report,” April 2017, page 76. (<http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2017.USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>)

U.S. officials can engage extensively with Riyadh while books are still current and before drafting of the next edition is finalized. If Saudi officials do not make the books available in time for such an assessment, the U.S. should revisit Saudi Arabia's longstanding waiver under the International Religious Freedom Act, first granted in 2006 in part based on assurances that its textbooks would be fully revised long ago.⁶⁹ Legislation should also require that copies of these books be made available in the Library of Congress for private researchers and Congressional staff.

2. Require an Assessment of Saudi Exportation of Incitement

Direct the U.S. intelligence community to monitor for instances in which Saudi Arabia's government-backed exportation of religious messages involves propagating incitement, and allocate appropriate resources for it to do so. Mandate one-time or ongoing governmental reporting to Congress on the matter, primarily in an unclassified format and with a classified annex if appropriate, but only to the extent necessary to protect sources and methods.

3. Insist on the Nomination of Relevant U.S. Envoys

Roughly half a year has passed, and yet at the time of writing this, the new U.S. administration still has not picked a nominee for ambassador to Saudi Arabia. It also has not nominated an ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, a special representative to Muslim communities, a special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism, or a special envoy to promote religious freedom of religious minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia with the rank of ambassador, even though three of these four positions are mandated by act of Congress.⁷⁰ Members of Congress should raise this with the administration in public and in private until nominees for all five positions have been named.

4. Call on Saudi Arabia to Replace Old Textbooks Overseas

In its most recent annual report, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom called on the U.S. to "press the Saudi government to denounce publicly the continued use around the world of older versions of Saudi textbooks and other materials that promote hatred and intolerance, and to make every attempt to retrieve, or buy back, previously distributed materials that contain intolerance."⁷¹ Members of Congress should add their voice to this call, both in public and in private, and use letters or legislation to urge the administration to do so as well.

5. Encourage Rebooting the U.S.-Saudi Strategic Dialogue

The George W. Bush administration launched an annual strategic dialogue with Saudi Arabia in 2005 to ensure that issues of concern to either side would get a full hearing even when top leaders

⁶⁹ U.S. Department of State, Press Release, "Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Briefs Congress on U.S.-Saudi Discussions on Religious Practice and Tolerance," July 19, 2006. (<https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/69197.htm>)

⁷⁰ "Tracking How Many Key Positions Trump Has Filled So Far," *The Washington Post*, updated July 14, 2017, accessed July 16, 2017. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-administration-appointee-tracker/database/>)

⁷¹ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, "2017 Annual Report," April 2017, page 76. (<http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2017.USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>)

are preoccupied with other matters. That dialogue lapsed during the Obama administration, but it should be restarted. The new crown prince of Saudi Arabia is said to support such an idea as well.⁷² One of the working groups should be expressly designed to address the U.S. concerns about incitement (in textbooks and other venues) as well as human rights, while also giving Saudi Arabia an opportunity to advocate for the rights and dignity of Muslims in America.

6. Raise Saudi Textbooks, Publicly and Privately, as a Priority Issue

Members of Congress should raise the issue of incitement in Saudi textbooks both privately and publicly. They should encourage the president and secretary of state to address it as well, and urge President Trump to issue a formal directive to cabinet members and U.S. agencies to make the issue a priority in U.S.-Saudi relations.

While in Saudi Arabia this May, President Trump participated in the inauguration of a Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology, which he predicted “will make history.”⁷³ Reflecting on his visit to the kingdom several weeks later, he urged all nations to “stop teaching people to kill other people. Stop filling their minds with hate and intolerance.”⁷⁴ Trump said he would not “name other countries” besides Qatar,⁷⁵ but without addressing the issue of Saudi textbooks more directly, our Saudi allies will simply continue doing what they have been doing: reprinting incitement year after year while whittling away at the edges. In the meantime, these deeply problematic books will be delivered to another generation of school children.

⁷² Bilal Y. Saab, “Can Mohamed bin Salman Reshape Saudi Arabia? The Treacherous Path to Reform,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 5, 2017. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2017-01-05/can-mohamed-bin-salman-reshape-saudi-arabia>)

⁷³ White House, Press Release, “President Trump’s Speech to the Arab Islamic American Summit,” May 21, 2017. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/05/21/president-trumps-speech-arab-islamic-american-summit>)

⁷⁴ White House, Press Release, “Remarks by President Trump and President Iohannis of Romania in a Joint Press Conference,” June 9, 2017. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/06/09/remarks-president-trump-and-president-iohannis-romania-joint-press>)

⁷⁵ White House, Press Release, “Remarks by President Trump and President Iohannis of Romania in a Joint Press Conference,” June 9, 2017. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/06/09/remarks-president-trump-and-president-iohannis-romania-joint-press>)