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Testimony of
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Director
Freedom House

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TESTIMONY OF NINA SHEA, DIRECTOR
CENTER FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, FREEDOM HOUSE
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY
U.S. SENATE

“Saudi Arabia: Friend or Foe in the War on Terror”
November 8, 2005

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to testify before this distinguished Committee. On behalf of Freedom House’s Center for Religious Freedom, I wish to present the findings of the report, Saudi Publications on Hate Ideology Invade American Mosques, which Freedom House issued in January 2005, as well as some comments on the shortcomings of the Saudi government’s response.

Freedom House’s Center for Religious Freedom decided to undertake this project after a number of Muslims and other experts publicly raised concerns about Saudi state influence on American religious life. It complements a May 2003 recommendation of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent government agency, that the U.S. government conduct a study on Saudi involvement in propagating internationally a “religious ideology that explicitly promotes hate, intolerance, and other human rights violations, and in some cases violence, toward members of other religious groups, both Muslims and non-Muslims.”

The Center’s study addresses the question: Is Saudi Arabia, our purported ally in the War on Terror, responsible for having planted extremist propaganda within our borders?

In order to document Saudi influence, the material for this report was gathered from a selection of more than a dozen mosques and Islamic centers in American cities, including Los Angeles, Oakland, Dallas, Houston, Chicago, Washington, and New York. In most cases, these sources, while representing a small fraction of the total number of mosques in the United States, are among the most prominent and well-established mosques in their areas. This study did not attempt any general survey of American mosques. And, as the Center’s website states in the electronic version of the report, “We have made no determination that these mosques endorsed any of these materials cited in these reports, or were even aware of their presence.”

Many of the tracts in our study are in the voice of a senior authority.

One of them states: “Be dissociated from the infidels, hate them for their religion, leave them, never rely on them for support, do not admire them, and always oppose them in every way according to Islamic law.”

The advice of another is emphatic: “There is consensus on this matter, that whoever helps unbelievers against Muslims, regardless of what type of support he lends to them, he is an unbeliever himself.”

Another book states that, if relations between Muslims and non-Muslims were harmonious, there would be “no loyalty and enmity, no more jihad and fighting to raise Allah’s work on earth.”

The books give detailed instructions on how to build a “wall of resentment” between the Muslim and the infidel: Never greet the Christian or Jew first. Never congratulate the infidel on his holiday. Never befriend an infidel unless it is to convert him. Never imitate the infidel. Never work for an infidel. Do not wear a graduation gown because this imitates the infidel. The cover of the book giving this particular set of instructions states: “Greetings from the Cultural Department” of the Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Washington, D.C.

This book was published by the government of Saudi Arabia; it bears no publication date and was found in several locations. The other books are textbooks from the Saudi Education Ministry, and collections of fatwas, religious edicts, issued by the government’s religious office, or published by other organizations based in Riyadh and monitored or controlled by the government of Saudi Arabia.

Between late 2004 and December 2005, researchers who are themselves Muslim Americans, gathered samples of over 200 such texts -- all from within America and all spread, sponsored or otherwise generated by Saudi Arabia. They demonstrate the ongoing efforts by Saudi Arabia to indoctrinate Muslims in the United States in the hostility and belligerence of Saudi Arabia’s hardline Wahhabi sect of Islam.

The documents we analyzed all have some connection to the government of Saudi Arabia. While not all extremist works are Saudi, Saudi Arabia is overwhelmingly the state most responsible for the publications on the ideology of hate in America. Our findings are consistent with the assessment of the Treasury Department’s Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence. On July 13, 2005, Treasury Under Secretary Stuart Levey testified before the Senate Banking Committee: “Saudi Arabia-based and funded organizations remain a key source for the promotion of ideologies used by terrorists and violent extremists around the world to justify their hate-filled agenda.”

All Saudis must be Muslim, and the Saudi government, in collaboration with the country’s religious establishment, enforces and imposes Wahhabism as the official state doctrine. In 2004, the United States State Department designated Saudi Arabia as a “Country of Particular Concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act after finding for many years that “religious freedom did not exist” in the Kingdom. The Saudi policy of denying religious freedom is explained in one of the tracts in this study: “Freedom of thinking requires permitting the denial of faith and attacking what is sacred, glorifying falsehood and defending the heretics, finding fault in religion and letting loose the ideas and pens to write

of disbelief as one likes, and to put ornaments on sin as one likes.”

The Wahhabi ideology that the Saudi monarchy enforces, and on which it bases its legitimacy, is shown in these documents as a fanatically bigoted, xenophobic and sometimes violent ideology. These publications articulate its wrathful dogma, rejecting the coexistence of different religions and explicitly condemning Christians, Jews, all other non-Muslims, as well as non-Wahhabi Muslims.

The various Saudi publications gathered for this study state that it is a religious obligation for Muslims to hate Christians and Jews and warn against imitating, befriending, or helping such “infidels” in any way, or taking part in their festivities and celebrations. They instill contempt for America because the United States is ruled by legislated civil law rather than by totalitarian Wahhabi-style Islamic law. Some of the publications collected for this study direct Muslims not to take American citizenship as long as the country is ruled by infidels and tell them, while abroad, above all, to work for the creation of an Islamic state. The Saudi textbooks and documents our researchers collected preach a Nazi-like hatred for Jews, treat the forged Protocols of the Elders of Zion as historical fact, and avow that the Muslim’s duty is to eliminate the state of Israel. Regarding women, the Saudi state publications in America instruct that they should be veiled, segregated from men and barred from certain employment and roles.

In these documents, other Muslims, especially those who advocate tolerance, are condemned as infidels. The opening fatwa in one Saudi embassy-distributed booklet responds to a question about a Muslim preacher in a European mosque who taught that it is not right to condemn Jews and Christians as infidels. The Saudi state cleric’s reply rebukes the Muslim cleric: “He who casts doubts about their infidelity leaves no doubt about his.” Since, under Saudi law, “apostates” from Islam can be sentenced to death, this is an implied death threat against the tolerant Muslim imam, as well as an incitement to vigilante violence. Sufi and Shiite Muslims are also viciously condemned. Other Saudi fatwas in the collection declare that Muslims who engage in genuine interfaith dialogue are also “unbelievers.” As for a Muslim who fails to uphold Wahhabi sexual mores through homosexual activity or heterosexual activity outside of marriage, the edicts found in certain American mosques advise, “it would be lawful for Muslims to spill his blood and to take his money.” Regarding those who convert out of Islam, it is explicitly asserted, they “should be killed.”

Much of the commentary in the West on Wahhabi hate ideology is restricted to shallow statements that it is “strict” or “puritanical.” The Saudi publications in this study show that there is much more of concern to Americans in this ideology than rigid sexual codes. They show that it stresses a dualistic worldview in which there exist two antagonistic realms or abodes that can never be reconciled, and that when Muslims are in the land of the “infidel,” they must behave as if on a mission behind enemy lines. Either they are there to acquire new knowledge and make money to be later employed in the jihad against the infidels, or they are there to proselytize the infidels until at least some convert to Islam. Any other reason for lingering among the unbelievers in their lands is illegitimate, and unless a Muslim leaves as quickly as possible, he or she is not a true Muslim and so too must be condemned. The message of these Saudi government publications and rulings is designed to breed greater aloofness, instill suspicion, and ultimately engender hatred for America and its people.

One insidious aspect of this propaganda is its aim to replace traditional and moderate interpretations of Islam with Wahhabi extremism. Wahhabism began only 250 years ago with the movement created by fanatical preacher Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Once a fringe sect in a remote part of the Arabian peninsula, Wahhabi extremism has been given global reach through Saudi government sponsorship and money, particularly over the past quarter century as it has competed with Iran in spreading its version of the faith. With its vast oil wealth and its position as guardian of Islam's two holiest sites, Saudi Arabia now claims to be the leading power within Islam and the protector of the faith, a belief stated in the Saudi Basic Law. Saudi Foreign Policy Adviser Adel al-Jubeir publicly states that "the role of Saudi Arabia in the Muslim world is similar to the role of the Vatican." Even as the Saudi state asserts that it strives to keep the faith "pure" and free of innovation, it invents a new role for itself as the only legitimate authority on Islam.

One example of how Saudi Arabia asserts its self-appointed role as the authoritative interpreter of Islam within the Muslim world is provided in a collection of fatwas published by the Saudi Embassy's Cultural Department in Washington. Its one-page introduction laments the dearth of competent Islamic scholars among Muslim emigrant communities abroad, and the confusion this has caused about Islamic beliefs and worship. The opening line reads, "The emigrant Muslim communities suffer in these countries from a lack of religious scholars (ulema)." It states that this deplorable situation has led the highest committee of Islamic scholars in the Kingdom to offer authoritative replies to questions frequently asked by Muslims living in the non-Muslim world. These replies are given in authoritative pronouncements that the introduction urges should be official guides for preachers, mosque imams, and students living far from the Kingdom.

A prolific source of fatwas condemning "infidels" in this collection was Sheik 'Abd al-'Aziz Bin 'Abdillah Bin Baz (died 1999), who was appointed by King Fahd in 1993 to the official post of Grand Mufti. As Grand Mufti, he was upheld by the government of Saudi Arabia as its highest religious authority. Bin Baz was a government appointee who received a regular government salary, served at the pleasure of the King, and presided over the Saudi Permanent Committee for Scientific Research and the Issuing of Fatwas, an office of the Saudi government. His radically dichotomous mode of thinking, coupled with his persistent demonizing of non-Muslims and tolerant Muslims, runs through the fatwas in these publications. Bin Baz was responsible for the unique fatwa, enforced in no other Muslim country, barring Saudi women from driving. Though Bin Baz is now dead, his fanatical fatwas continue to be treated as authoritative by the Saudi government.

As I previously stated, the Center has not attempted to measure the extent and effect of Saudi publications here. However, as the website of King Fahd states, "the cost of King Fahd's efforts in this field has been astronomical." Some, such as Alex Alexiev of the Center for Security Policy who testified before this Committee in 2003, have estimated Saudi spending on the export of extremist ideology globally to measure three to four times what the Soviets spent on external propaganda during the height of the Cold War. As oil revenues rise for the Saudis, this might well increase.

Singapore's main newspaper recently published an interview with Sheik Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, the Lebanese-American chairman of the Islamic Supreme Council of America and a distinguished Islamic scholar: "Back in 1990, arriving for his first Friday prayers in an American mosque in Jersey City, he was shocked to hear Wahhabism being

preached. ‘What I heard there, I had never heard in my native Lebanon. I asked myself: Is Wahhabism active in America? So I started my research. Whichever mosque I went to, it was Wahhabi, Wahhabi, Wahhabi, Wahhabi.’”

In an interview on October 26, 2001, with PBS Frontline, Dr. Maher Hathout, identified by PBS as a senior adviser to the Muslim Public Affairs Council and the spokesperson for the Islamic Center of Southern California, this very question about Saudi influence in America is posed by the interviewer. Dr Hathout answered: “[T]hey send imams and books in Arabic. And these books are translated into English and the translation is not always very good. And they are talking about an environment that is obsolete, the world-view of the unbelievers fighting the believers. So it comes very irrelevant to the diversity and the pluralism in America. These books are all over the place, because they can afford to make very glossy magazines and distribute it for free” (emphasis added). MPAC has announced a policy of not accepting Saudi support.

Within worldwide Sunni Islam, followers of Wahhabism and other hardline or salafist (literally translated as venerable predecessors) movements remain a distinct minority. This is evident from the millions of Muslims who have chosen to make America their home and are upstanding, law-abiding citizens and neighbors. In fact it was just such concerned Muslims who first brought these publications to our attention. They decry the Wahhabi interpretation as being foreign to the toleration expressed in Islam and its injunction against coercion in religion. They believe they would be forbidden to practice the faith of their ancestors in today’s Saudi Arabia, and are grateful to the United States and other Western nations for granting them religious freedom. They also affirm the importance of respecting non-Muslims, pointing to verses in the Koran that speak with kindness about non-Muslims. They raise examples of Islam’s Prophet Mohammed visiting his sick Jewish neighbor, standing in deference at a Jew’s funeral procession, settling a dispute in favor of a truthful Jew over a dishonest person who was Muslim, and forming alliances with Jews and polytheists, among others. They criticize the Wahhabis for distorting and even altering the text of the Koran in support of their bigotry. They say that in their tradition jihad is applicable only in the defense of Islam and Muslims, and that it is commendable, not an act of “infidelity,” for Muslims, Jews, and Christians to engage in genuine dialogue.

Fifteen of the September 11 hijackers were Saudi subjects indoctrinated from young ages in just such Wahhabi ideology, possibly from some of the very same textbooks and fatwa collections in our study. Saudi state curriculum for many years has taught children to hate “the other” and support jihad, a malleable term that is used by terrorists to describe and justify their atrocities.

For example, a book for third-year high school students published by the Saudi Ministry of Education that was collected in Oakland, California, teaches students to prepare for jihad in the sense of war against Islam’s enemies, and to strive to attain military self-sufficiency: “To be true Muslims, we must prepare and be ready for jihad in Allah’s way. It is the duty of the citizen and the government. The military education is glued to faith and its meaning, and the duty to follow it.”

Saudi commentators, themselves, have drawn the link between, on one hand, the large number of Saudis involved on September 11, and among the al Qaeda prisoners in Guantanamo Bay and the insurgents in Iraq, and, on the other, the culture of religious rage and violence that is part of Saudi religious education. A study presented to a Saudi forum of 60 intellectuals, researchers, clerics and public figures, convened by Saudi then-Crown

Prince Abdullah in December 2003 as part of a “National Dialogue” series, found “grave defects” in the religious curricula of the state’s boys’ schools, particularly with regard to “others,” that is, non-Muslims and non-Wahhabi Muslims. The researchers concluded that this approach “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,’” according to a summary of the study by MEMRI. The Saudi forum concluded with recommendations for reforming the religious curriculum.

The Saudi government is currently waging a multi-million dollar public relations campaign in the United States, which among other activities advertised in American journals that the Kingdom’s textbooks are being “updated.” In an interview on October 14, 2005 with Barbara Walters, King Abdullah responded to a question about extremism and hatred in Saudi textbooks with the assurance, “We have toned them down.”

We have not attempted to investigate this claim but we remain skeptical based on our own interviews last December of Saudi official religious scholars who denied that reform was necessary and said that textbook reform would have to “evolve slowly over many years,” as well as other reports. We do not find it reassuring that, following the release of our study, the government of Saudi Arabia appointed as the new education minister a former director of the Muslim World League, Abdullah al Obeid. The Wall Street Journal reported (Feb. 9, 2005) that “Mr. Obeid was secretary general of MWL from 1995-2002, a period when the huge Saudi-government-funded organization fell under intense scrutiny from Asia to North America for spending tens of millions of dollars to finance the spread of Saudi Arabia’s austere brand of fundamentalist Islam.” It is one of the 25 Islamic organizations placed under investigation by the U.S. Senate Finance Committee for “financ[ing] terror and perpetuat[ing] violence.”

What we have confirmed is that, as of ten months ago, the retrograde, unreformed editions of Saudi textbooks and state-sponsored fatwa collections remained in circulation in some prominent American mosques.

The global spread of Islamic extremism, such as Wahhabism, is the most serious ideological challenge of our times. Senator Jon Kyl, chairman of the Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee on Terrorism, who held hearings on Wahhabism, asserted: “A growing body of accepted evidence and expert research demonstrates that the Wahhabi ideology that dominates, finances and animates many groups here in the United States, indeed is antithetical to the values of tolerance, individualism and freedom as we conceive these things.” The 9/11 Commission was even more emphatic that a threat is posed “even in affluent countries, [where] Saudi-funded Wahhabi schools are often the only Islamic schools,” (page 370) and that “education that teaches tolerance, the dignity and value of each individual, and respect for different beliefs is a key element in any global strategy to eliminate Islamist terrorism.”

Wahhabi extremism is more than hate speech; it is a totalitarian ideology of hatred that can incite to violence. The fact that a foreign government, namely Saudi Arabia, has been working to mainstream within our borders such hate ideology demands our urgent attention. This Committee and the press have previously examined the extremist infiltration of the prison and military chaplain programs in the United States. The Saudi textbooks and publications described in the Center’s report could also pose a serious threat to American security and to the traditional American culture of religious toleration and freedom.

I believe that, not only does the government of Saudi Arabia not have a right to spread educational materials based on an ideology of religious hatred against Jews, Christians, other Muslims such as Shiites and Sufis, and others within U.S. borders, by the fact that it is a government actor and member of the United Nations, it is committing a human rights violation in doing so. A government that advocates religious intolerance and hatred violates the religious freedom and tolerance provisions of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The September 2005 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, U.S. Agencies' Efforts to Address Islamic Extremism, indicates that recent Saudi claims to have made reforms cannot be taken at face value. They must be verified:

The GAO report concludes that while Saudi Arabia claims to have made reforms, and in some case has done so, "U.S. agencies do not know the extent of the Saudi government's efforts to limit the activities of Saudi sources that have allegedly propagated Islamic extremism outside of Saudi Arabia." (Emphasis added).

- Specifically, the GAO reports that, "as of July 2005, agency officials did not know if the government of Saudi Arabia had taken steps to ensure that Saudi-funded curricula or religious activities in other countries do not propagate extremism." (Emphasis added).
- The government of Saudi Arabia, and State and Treasury officials in the U.S. have publicly declared that Saudi Arabia is undertaking a number of charity reforms, including requiring all private Saudi donations marked for international distribution to flow through a new National Commission for Relief and Charity Work Abroad. However, the GAO report found: "[A]s of July 2005, this commission was not yet fully operational, according to Treasury." (Emphasis added).
- In 2004, Saudi Arabia and the United States announced they had jointly designated nine al Haramain Foundation offices as terrorist financiers, and Saudi Arabia announced its intentions to close down al Haramain Foundation. But the GAO report states that in May 2005 "a Treasury official told us it was unclear whether the Saudi government had implemented its plans." (Emphasis added).

These GAO assertions make clear that either the Saudis have failed to follow through on important reforms and/or the U.S. has failed to verify whether or not the reforms have been carried out. Either case is deeply troubling.

The GAO report concludes that, while U.S. government officials and other experts believe that the spread of Islamic extremism, rather than al Qaeda, is the "pre-eminent threat facing the United States," U.S. government agencies lack a common definition of Islamic extremism, as well as a coordinated approach to it. Furthermore, the GAO report concludes that "The agencies do not distinguish between efforts or programs intended to target Islamic extremism indigenous to a country and those intended to target outside influences, such as Saudi Arabia." (Emphasis added).

Recommendations

I urge this Committee to seriously consider the following recommendations, which are

drawn from those of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent government agency:

1. The State Department Annual Report on International Religious Freedom should include in its reporting on Saudi Arabia an analysis of the content of Saudi textbooks and other Saudi state publications promoting or condoning anti-Semitism and religious hatred.

2. The U.S. government should issue a formal demarche urging the government of Saudi Arabia to cease funding or providing other support for written materials or activities that explicitly promote hate, intolerance, and human rights violations. Further it should urge the government of Saudi Arabia to:

A. Provide an accounting of what kinds of Saudi support have been and continue to be provided to which religious schools, mosques, centers of learning, and other religious organizations globally;

B. Stop funding religious activities abroad until the Saudis know the content of the teachings and are satisfied that they do not promote hatred, intolerance, or other human rights violations;

C. Monitor, regulate, and report publicly about the activities of Saudi charitable organizations based outside Saudi Arabia in countries throughout the world;

D. Cease granting diplomatic status to Islamic clerics and educators teaching outside Saudi Arabia, and close down any Islamic affairs sections in Saudi embassies throughout the world that have been responsible for propagating intolerance, as it has already apparently done within the U.S.;

Finally, even should the Saudis stop exporting and supporting extremist propaganda, their extremist textbooks, study guides, and fatwa collections will remain in circulation here and in other countries for years to come. Some American mosques have voluntarily made it their policy to screen out and reject Saudi-supplied educational materials and publications; this is an important model for all.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. This concludes my testimony.

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