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State Dept. Urged to Shut Saudi School in Fairfax

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A federal panel yesterday urged the [State Department](#) to shut down a Saudi government-supported private school in [Northern Virginia](#) unless it can prove it is not teaching religious intolerance.

In a report released yesterday, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom criticized what it called the promotion of religious extremism in Saudi-run schools around the world, including in the kingdom. It leveled particular criticism at the Islamic Saudi Academy, which operates two campuses in [Fairfax County](#), expressing "significant concerns" that the school is promoting a brand of religious intolerance that could prove a danger to the United States.

The commission does not specifically criticize the school's teaching materials; it said Saudi officials would not make them available. But it said it is concerned about the textbooks used in the school because those used by schools in [Saudi Arabia](#) promote violence against Christians, Jews, Shias and polytheists.

The panel's recommendations prompted a sharp response from school administrators and a Saudi government representative yesterday. They angrily denied that they are teaching radical Islam and said that the commission never asked to speak with any school staff members and never asked to see any materials.

"I think they went to Saudi Arabia and saw some curriculum there and thought we are teaching the same curriculum," said Acting Director-General Abdulrahman Alghofaili, who also is principal of the boys' high school. "And the fact is that we are teaching another curriculum. We are teaching an American curriculum."

Panel members said they attempted to get access to the school's textbooks and curriculum through the Saudi government but were unsuccessful.

"We've made every effort to get this information," commission member Felice D. Gaer said.

As evidence of the type of material it believes is being taught at the school, it cited a 2006 analysis of Saudi textbooks by the Center for Religious Freedom and Institute for Gulf Affairs. One ninth-grade textbook taught teenagers that violence toward Jews, Christians and others is sanctioned by God. A 12th-grade textbook, the 2006 report says, reads "the hour [of judgment] will not come until the Muslims fight the Jews and kill them."

But Alghofaili said that school officials revised their curriculum last summer, eliminating material considered controversial in the United States.

Administrators took textbooks sent from Saudi Arabia, ripped out pages deemed inappropriate and in some cases added material, said Alghofaili and David Kovalik, the education director who was involved in the curriculum changes.

John Whitehead, founder of the [Charlottesville](#)-based Rutherford Institute, which focuses on religious freedom cases, said he is skeptical of the U.S. government judging the intent and content of a religious school's curriculum.

"This is real troublesome stuff," he said. "Religion has a history of saying intolerant things. That's why they're protected."

The Saudi academy was founded in 1984 to educate pre-kindergarten through 12th-grade children of Saudi diplomats; it also enrolls others. Its enrollment has fallen to 1,000 students from 1,300 five years ago, a decrease Saudi activists call a result of negative publicity in recent years. About 30 percent of the students are Saudi.

The academy is unlike other private Muslim schools in the United States, in part because it is heavily funded by the Saudi government, whose official religion is a rigid strain of Sunni Islam known as Wahhabism. The chairman of the school's board of directors is the Saudi ambassador.

The eight-year-old commission, a creation of Congress, puts out a report each May meant to advise the [White House](#), Congress and the State Department about "countries of particular concern" when it comes to religious freedom. It has no power to implement policy on its own.

Rep. [Steve Israel](#)

(D-N.Y.), chairman of the House subcommittee on state and foreign appropriations, announced yesterday that he plans to introduce a House resolution requiring Secretary of State [Condoleezza Rice](#) to close the Saudi Academy until its textbooks are made available for public examination.

State Department spokesman Karl Duckworth said the department is studying the commission's report. "We continue to engage the government of Saudi Arabia on the need to address the intolerant references toward other religious groups in their textbooks and in other educational materials," he said. "There has been progress . . . but they still have a ways to go."

The commission and other religious-freedom groups have been complaining about Saudi textbooks for years, and congressional hearings have been held on the subject. Last year, the Saudi government agreed to make changes. The commission is following up but said it has not been given access to the revised texts.

Ordinarily, the U.S. government would have little power to close a private religious school, said Kevin Seamus Hasson, president of the Becket

Fund for Religious Liberty.

But because the school is funded by the Saudi government, the U.S. government could consider the school a Saudi entity and, thus, subject to a U.S. law that gives the government wide discretion in regulating the non-diplomatic activities of foreign governments in the United States, Hasson said.

At the main campus in the Fairfax County section of [Alexandria](#) yesterday, students and teachers -- some sheathed in veils, others in Western clothes -- went about their day while administrators scrambled to address the commission's report.

Alghofaili said that a number of worried parents called the school yesterday after hearing about the report and asked if the school would be closed. "Our response has been that we are fine," he said.

Staff writer Michelle Boorstein contributed to this report.

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