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## U.S. 'Studying' Islamic School Report

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Officials Have Not Talked to Saudis Since Panel Urged Shutdown

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Saudi Embassy officials say no U.S. authorities have contacted them about a federal commission's recommendation last month to close an Islamic school in [Northern Virginia](#) accused of promoting intolerance and violence.

### [State Department](#)

officials say publicly that they are "studying" the Oct. 19 report issued by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, which includes a recommendation that the [Islamic Saudi Academy](#) be shuttered until it can prove it is not teaching religious extremism.

But State officials and others with knowledge of the issue, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the ongoing inquiry, said U.S. officials believe the commission was premature in asking that the school, supported by the Saudi government, be closed. They said the State Department was proceeding cautiously, speaking with Saudi officials about issues of religious tolerance and school curriculum, to avoid creating a crisis.

The school, whose main campus is in the [Alexandria](#) section of [Fairfax County](#), remains open.

Commission members said their non-binding recommendation was made after careful study and a number of failed efforts to review a comprehensive set of textbooks from the Saudi government.

They said they were less concerned about intolerance than whether school officials are promoting violence.

A report last year by the nonprofit organization Freedom House showed that textbooks used in [Saudi Arabia](#) contained an ideology of hatred toward Christians, Jews and Muslims who do not follow Wahabism, a branch of Sunni Islam seen by many Muslims as extremist in its views toward women and non-followers. [Osama bin Laden](#) is perhaps the best-known follower of that branch.

An earlier review of textbooks at the [Virginia](#) academy was critical of some parts, and a 2003 report produced in Saudi Arabia by a former Saudi judge showed that parts of Saudi textbooks promoted violence against non-Wahabis.

Saudi officials say the books have since been revised. And officials at the Virginia school said they have created their own textbooks, in part by ripping out pages from books obtained from Saudi Arabia.

The criticism of the Virginia school reflects the delicate nature of U.S.-Saudi relations, according to academic scholars. It also casts light on the line the federal government must straddle as it tries to determine the difference between teachings that are intolerant and those that are violent and illegal.

"The challenge with Islamic schools is first of all the language barrier," said Charles C. Haynes, senior scholar for religious freedom at the nonprofit First Amendment Center in [Arlington County](#). "The reason there is so much controversy is that nobody knows what is being taught.

"Even if they were teaching things that sound to the outsider like it is hateful, the question is, 'Are they teaching people to break the law and go and attack other people?' " Haynes said. "Those are the kinds of things they may not do. That's the line."

The Saudi academy, which operates on two campuses in Northern Virginia, was founded in 1984 to educate pre-kindergarten through 12th-grade children of Saudi diplomats; about 30 percent of the roughly 1,000 students are Saudi, the school said. The school has a governing board headed by the Saudi ambassador to the United States and receives much of its funding from the Saudi government.

The commission was created by Congress eight years ago and issues an annual report about religious freedom around the world. Its members are appointed by the [White House](#) and congressional leadership. The current chairman is Michael Cromartie, vice president of the D.C.-based Ethics and Public Policy Center, at which he directs the Evangelicals in Civic Life program.

The commission has been studying Saudi curricula for years, said Commissioner Nina Shea, director of the Center for Religious Freedom at the D.C.-based nonprofit [Hudson Institute](#).

Shea said the Saudi school is unlike any other private religious school in the country because of its connections to Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of most of the Sept. 11 hijackers, a number of whom were adherents of Wahabism.

She said Saudi officials have promised since 2004 to revise the school's curriculum to remove material.

"[Ronald Reagan](#) used to say, 'Trust but verify,' " she said. "I now believe we must verify and not take the Saudi government's word on faith."

School officials said the commission did not call and ask directly for the books. The commission said it asked the embassy and never received a

response.

Nail Al-Jubeir, spokesman for the Saudi Embassy, said the Saudi ambassador has exchanged letters with Freedom House and invited officials to the school in the past few years. He said the last letter was sent Oct. 16, 2006.

"We never got a response," he said. "This whole issue should never have been raised."

Tom Melia, deputy executive director of Freedom House, said letters had been exchanged but called the embassy invitation "a red herring."

"We've asked them for the textbooks, and they said, 'Sure, when the new editions come in.' We've never received them," Melia said. "We'd still like to see them. . . . We are always interested in dialogue."

Ali Al-Ahmed, founder of the nonprofit Saudi Institute, which monitors Saudi Arabia, said he has seen the revised textbooks and finds that they still contain unacceptable material that promotes extremism. "It is like trying to remove a piece of bread that has a lot of mold," he said. "You can't do it. You remove a spot, but the bread is bad."

But Zenit Chughtai, who said she graduated from the academy and is attending [Michigan State University](#), praised the school. "A terrorist school? A school of hate? This is the exact opposite of how I recall school," she said in an e-mail. "We were taught respect, tolerance, love, and decency."

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