



CENTER FOR MONITORING

THE IMPACT OF PEACE (R.A.)

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NEWSLETTER – MARCH 2003

Our report "The West, Christians and Jews in Saudi Arabian Schoolbooks", published jointly by the Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace and the American Jewish Committee, was released in the United States at the beginning of February 2003, including a well-attended briefing on Capitol Hill, and meetings at the State Department.

A copy of the report was presented to the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Washington shortly before its release. A representative of the Saudi Embassy attended the briefing on Capitol Hill and queried certain points to which Dr. Arnon Groiss, author of the report, responded. A press release was posted by the Saudi Embassy on their website that day, (this can be viewed at: http://www.saudiembassy.net/press_release/releases/03-PR-0204-education.htm), providing general information, but not relating to any issues raised in the report.

The report has given rise to numerous questions, a selection of which are presented below along with our responses:

Q. – The report finds that Saudi schoolbooks generate not only anti-Semitism but also anti-Christian and anti-Western views. How was it that no Christian or other groups promoted the study as well?

A. – For CMIP the Saudi study is one of a series of researches on the content of school textbooks to determine whether children are being taught to accept and recognize the right of the other to exist. To date we have issued reports on Syria, Israel and the Palestinian Authority. This is the first time we have undertaken research with the cooperation of a partner. We did so because we thought that AJC's international recognition and reputation would help advance our mutual goal of informing the public what children are being taught. We did not in fact approach any Christian or other group to co-sponsor the report with us.

Q. – Have you discussed these findings with Saudi officials? If not, do you plan to?

A. – We sent a copy of this report to Saudi officials prior to making its findings available to the media and to the public, and we would be happy to discuss the findings with them. We understand that the Saudis themselves undertook their own survey, although they have not made public to those outside of the country what that "objectionable material" was, or what has been done. We hope that by making their report available, we can begin a dialogue in which the Saudis will participate.

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Q. – Given that the Saudis say that they will expunge the “15 percent” of objectionable material from Saudi textbooks, do the 93 books surveyed fall under that group of books the Saudis are focusing on?

A. – As can be seen from the bibliography, we covered books published between 1999 and 2000 during which time material has been edited or removed. The issue however, is not the removal of what the Saudis describe as “questionable in 10%” and “abhorrent in 5%” of the material contained in some of the books”, but rather the modifying of an overall distrustful and negative approach to others, especially the West, Christians and Jews, that pervades the entire curriculum.

Q. – The report covers books published for grades 1-10. What proportion of Saudi students uses these books?

A. – Although only the Saudi Ministry of Education would have that information, we know that there are over 25,000 public schools in Saudi Arabia and approximately 5 million students in those schools. Given that the 93 books we reviewed cover a majority of the books used in the public system, we can speculate that millions of Saudi children between the ages of 6 and 16 see them.

Q. – Dr. Groiss is an Israeli. Does that prejudice the objectivity of this report?

A. – No. This report contains translations from 93 schoolbooks published by the Saudi Ministry of Education, providing a maximum of quotations and a minimum of analysis.

Q. – The report states that this is not a full catalogue of textbooks. Why were you unable to obtain all books at grade levels?

A. – Saudi Arabia is a closed society that does not make its schoolbooks available to the rest of the world. We did the best we could to acquire as many books as possible and are confident that we did obtain the majority of the books for the grades covered in this report.

Q. – There is a difference between a class curriculum and what appears in a schoolbook. Were you able to verify that the passages you cite are actually taught in Saudi schools?

A. – This report clearly cannot quote the actual words teachers use in every classroom in Saudi Arabia. It is a report on the schoolbooks published by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and represents the official curriculum. We can hardly imagine that Saudi teachers ignore the textbooks provided to them and it is reasonable to assume that they base their teaching on them. These printed works, therefore, reach millions of children.

Q. – At a time when the US needs Saudi support very badly, what action do you expect the US or other governments to take?

A. – Any person in any part of the world who cares about the world we live in and the future our children have should be concerned about hate, prejudice and intolerance. These have no place in a child’s schoolbooks. Therefore, regardless of the timing or regardless of the country, no one should be printing books that promote or foster hatred and intolerance of people of different religions, skin colors, values and nationalities.

Q. - Do you believe the contents of the textbooks you outline in your report played any part in the 9/11 attacks?

A. – No one is born hating. Hatred is learned. While no one can speculate on the particular motives of any one person, we can say from the careful study of these texts that in their schoolbooks the Saudi government teaches hatred of, and contempt for, the West, Jews, Christians and non-Muslims.

Q. – With terrorism, Iraq, North Korea and major domestic issues like the economy, why should Americans care about the Saudi schoolbooks?

A. – The US is the embodiment of the western values that are discussed in hateful terms in Saudi schoolbooks. But also, tolerance and respect are universal values that we should all share and teach our children. Those are core tenets of proper relations between peoples, nations and religions and everyone, not just Americans, should be concerned about what children are being taught, because what they are taught can lead to that very terrorism.

It is CMIP's aim to encourage a climate of tolerance and mutual respect between peoples and nations, founded on the rejection of violence and the changing of negative stereotypes. In this spirit, CMIP hopes that a dialogue will develop with key leaders involved in the Saudi education system in an effort to refocus the curriculum on the child's basic right to an education that is based on acceptance of the other.