

Saudi in the Classroom

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A fundamental front in the war.

Stanley Kurtz

Unless we counteract the influence of Saudi money on the education of the young, we're going to find it very difficult to win the war on terror. I only wish I was referring to Saudi-funded madrassas in Pakistan. Unfortunately, I'm talking about K-12 education in the United States. Believe it or not, the Saudis have figured out how to make an end-run around America's K-12 curriculum safeguards, thereby gaining control over much of what children in the United States learn about the Middle East. While we've had only limited success paring back education for Islamist fundamentalism abroad, the Saudis have taken a surprising degree of control over America's Middle-East studies curriculum at home.

Game, Set, Match

How did they do it? Very carefully...and very cleverly. It turns out that the system of federal subsidies to university programs of Middle East Studies (under Title VI of the Higher Education Act) has been serving as a kind of Trojan horse for Saudi influence over American K-12 education. Federally subsidized Middle East Studies centers are required to pursue public outreach. That entails designing lesson plans and seminars on the Middle East for America's K-12 teachers. These university-distributed teaching aids slip into the K-12 curriculum without being subject to the normal public vetting processes. Meanwhile, the federal government, which both subsidizes and lends its stamp of approval to these special K-12 course materials on the Middle East, has effectively abandoned oversight of the program that purveys them (Title VI).

Enter the Saudis. By lavishly funding several organizations that design Saudi-friendly English-language K-12 curricula, all that remains is to convince the "outreach coordinators" at prestigious, federally subsidized universities to purvey these materials to America's teachers. And wouldn't you know it, outreach coordinators or teacher-trainers at a number of university Middle East Studies centers have themselves been trained by the very same Saudi-funded foundations that design K-12 course materials. These Saudi-friendly folks happily build their outreach efforts around Saudi-financed K-12 curricula.

So let's review. The United States government gives money — and a federal seal of approval — to a university Middle East Studies center. That center offers a government-approved K-12 Middle East studies curriculum to America's teachers. But in fact, that curriculum has been bought and paid for by the Saudis, who may even have trained the personnel who operate the university's outreach program. Meanwhile, the American government is asleep at the wheel — paying scant

attention to how its federally mandated public outreach programs actually work. So without ever realizing it, America's taxpayers end up subsidizing — and providing official federal approval for — K-12 educational materials on the Middle East that have been created under Saudi auspices. Game, set, match: Saudis.

What Went Wrong?

How do we know all this? While the full extent of Saudi funding has emerged only recently, the basic outlines of the problem were exposed in 2004, by Sandra Stotsky, a former director of a professional development institute for teachers at Harvard, and a former senior associate commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Education.

Stotsky's stint as a commissioner ran from 1999 to 2003, so she was present when the Massachusetts Department of Education tried to respond to the challenge of 9/11 by organizing special seminars in Islamic history for K-12 teachers. The department accepted a proposal with participation from Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies — which, as a prestigious university and a federally subsidized Title VI "National Resource Center," seemed an obvious choice.

The Massachusetts Department of Education commissioned a teacher-training seminar designed to cover Islamic history and touch on key contemporary questions, such as the nature of Islamic Fundamentalism and terrorism, the lack of democracy in the Middle East, and the challenge of gaining basic legal and political rights for women in much of the Muslim world. It quickly became apparent, however, that Harvard's outreach program had little interest in tackling these issues, or in representing a broad range of views on contemporary Middle Eastern culture.

It took literally months of e-mail exchanges with state officials before the seminar organizers agreed to include a single book by Bernard Lewis, whose writing they persistently dismissed as biased and irrelevant. Even then, Harvard's outreach program refused to include one of Lewis's recent and more critical works, like *What Went Wrong?*

Stotsky came to feel that the Massachusetts Education Department's efforts to achieve balance in its teacher training seminars were giving way to Harvard's "distorted" and "manipulative" political agenda.

Appoint Imams

Whereas Stotsky and the Massachusetts Department of Education had asked for seminars covering Islamic history, and including balanced discussions of contemporary Middle Eastern problems, Harvard's outreach program delivered seminars that virtually promoted Islam as a religion, while sharply criticizing alleged American prejudice against the Muslim world.

Harvard's outreach training prompted K-12 teachers to design celebratory treatments of the life and teachings of Mohammad and the "revelation" and spread of Islam, with exercises calling on students to "appoint imams," memorize Islamic principles, and act out prayer at a Mosque. According to Stotsky, if Harvard's outreach personnel had designed similar classroom exercises based on Christian or Jewish models, "People for the American Way, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and the A.C.L.U. would descend upon them like furies."

Instead of training teachers in the history and contemporary challenges of the Muslim world, Stotsky concluded that Harvard's outreach program was "manipulating" apolitical teachers with a "barely disguised" attempt to "shape...attitudes on specific political issues." The lesson plans designed by K-12 teachers who participated in these Harvard-run seminars included exercises in which students were asked to watch newscasts and spot out instances in which Muslims were stereotyped as violent or barbaric. Lesson plans proposed discussion questions like, "Why have so many groups wanted to control the Middle East?" and "How might the history of repeated invasions influence the history of people in this area?"

Stotsky was taken aback by one of the key teaching resources pushed by Harvard's outreach program: "The Arab World Studies Notebook." The "Notebook" has been widely denounced as a "practically proselytizing" text offering uncritical praise for the Arab world. Stotsky calls it, "a piece of propaganda." Even the Notebook's editor, Audrey Shabbas, acknowledges that it's purpose is to provide "the Arab point of view." One analysis quoted by Stotsky says that the "Arab World Studies Notebook" is designed to "induce teachers to embrace Islamic religious beliefs" and to "support political views" favored by the Middle East Policy Council (formerly the Arab American Affairs Council). The "Notebook" even claims that Muslims actually beat Columbus to the New World, supposedly sailing across the Atlantic in 889. This is the sort of history being pushed on our K-12 educators by Harvard's federally approved Center for Middle East Studies — at American taxpayer expense.

The Stealth Curriculum

There's certainly something troubling here. And once you grasp the Saudi connection, it begins to make sense. Stotsky didn't quite put all the pieces together, but she came very close. Her stint at the Massachusetts Department of Education, and her bad experience with Harvard's Center for Middle East Studies prompted Stotsky to publish *The Stealth Curriculum: Manipulating America's History Teachers* under the auspices of the Fordham Foundation.

Introducing Stotsky's study, Fordham Foundation president, and noted education expert, Chester Finn, calls the use of teacher-training seminars a "vast dark continent within our public (and private) educational system." According to Finn "interest groups and ideologues" have used these seminars to "fly under the radar" of ordinary curriculum safeguards, promulgating "bias, misinformation, and

politically charged conclusions, though never acknowledging their semi-covert agendas." All too often, says Finn, those agendas include viewing "the history of freedom as the history of oppression" and urging students "to be more sympathetic to cultures that don't value individual rights than to those that do." It's a sad commentary on Title VI subsidies to American universities to think that this high-profile federally-funded program has become the parade example of a much broader educational scandal.

Even in 2004, Stotsky had more than an inkling of Saudi financial involvement in Title VI outreach programs. In *The Stealth Curriculum*, she wrote: "Most of these materials have been prepared and/or funded by Islamic sources here and abroad, and are distributed or sold directly to schools or individual teachers, thereby bypassing public scrutiny." Stotsky goes on to note that after 9/11, the Saudi government sent U.S. schools thousands of packages of educational material that, for example, attributed the Middle East's problems to Western colonization.

Saudi Money

Yet the full extent of Saudi curricular funding, and the magnitude of its influence over university outreach programs funded under Title VI, was only revealed in late 2005 by a special four-part investigative report by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA). As the JTA put it: "Saudi Arabia is paying to influence the teaching of American public schoolchildren. And the U.S. taxpayer is an unwitting accomplice....Often bypassing school boards and nudging aside approved curricula....These materials praise and sometimes promote Islam, but criticize Judaism and Christianity....Ironically, what gives credibility to...these distorted materials is Title VI of the Higher Education Act....Believing they're importing the wisdom of places like Harvard or Georgetown, they are actually inviting into their schools whole curricula and syllabuses developed with the support of Riyadh."

Riyadh achieves this by supporting a number of groups devoted to the development and dissemination of English-language curricula about the Middle East. This includes funding from Saudi Aramco, a Saudi government-owned oil company, for a Berkeley, California-based group called, Arab World and Islamic Resources, or AIWAR.

According to the JTA, AIWAR's founder, Audrey Shabbas, also edits the controversial "Arab World Studies Notebook." Shabbas, in turn, is employed by the Middle East Policy Council (MEPC) to conduct its teacher-training and seminar programs, says JTA. And MEPC (formerly the Arab American Affairs Council) is headed by a former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia and, according to the JTA, receives direct funding from Saudi Arabia.

According to the JTA, the Middle East Policy Council was seeking major funding for its teaching efforts from Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal bin Abdulaziz in late 2005. Alwaleed himself initiated contacts with MEPC after hearing about its seminars

designed to shape American teachers' perceptions of the Middle East. It appears that the partnership between MEPC and Prince Alwaleed has borne fruit. This past March, Prince Alwaleed announced that he was supplementing his earlier donation of \$100,000 to MEPC with a \$1 million gift for its teacher-training programs. By the way, this is the same Prince Alwaleed whose \$10 million post-9/11 gift was returned by Rudy Giuliani because that gift was accompanied by a letter blaming American foreign policy for the attack on the Pentagon and World Trade Center. (For more on massive gifts by Prince Alwaleed to Harvard and Georgetown for programs Islamic studies, see this item by Martin Kramer.)

The final piece of the puzzle discovered by the JTA is a little-known but clearly influential foundation called Dar al Islam ("Abode of Islam"), located in Abiquiu, New Mexico. Created with Saudi funding, according to the JTA, Dar al Islam runs teacher-training programs and has employed a number of individuals who've gone on to work in or with public outreach programs at federally-funded Title VI university centers of Middle-East Studies.

According to JTA, for example, Betty Shabbas, who edits the Arab World Studies Notebook and whose work is promoted by outreach coordinators at several Title VI Middle East National Resource Centers, was herself director of Dar al Islam's summer teacher-training program in 1994 and 1995. JTA also notes that an outreach coordinator at Georgetown University's Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, a Title VI National Resource Center on the Middle East, was for several years assistant director of Dar al Islam's teacher-training institute. The precise funding and affiliation history of Dar al Islam is complex and in dispute. According to the JTA, after it began investigating the topic, Dar al Islam changed some of the information on its website. (For details, readers should consult the four-part JTA series linked above, especially parts 1 and 3.)

Although this complex web of financial and organizational involvement was illuminated with unprecedented clarity by the JTA report, Saudi involvement with Title VI Middle East Studies centers has never been entirely secret. For example, a volume published to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies notes three specific sources of funding for the center's public outreach program: federal Title VI subsidies, matching funds from Harvard itself, and funding from the Saudi-government owned oil company, Aramco.

Not College

The upshot of all this is that the close links between Saudi funded curriculum-development and teacher-training programs, on the one hand, and federally subsidized university programs of Middle East Studies, on the other, has opened up a back-door route to Saudi influence over America's K-12 curriculum.

Stotsky's work and the JTA report have been public for some time, yet virtually no-one has noticed. I myself testified before the House in 2003 on the need to

reform Title VI. The problem of bias in public outreach programs was one of my key concerns, yet even I was shocked when I discovered Stotsky and the JTA story. The extent of Saudi influence raises the already deep-lying problems with Title VI to a whole new level.

It's also important to emphasize that Title VI public outreach programs are not part of the college curriculum. In my testimony before the House, I addressed broader issues of bias in university programs of Middle East Studies. Yet I invoked that context to explain problems in Title VI public outreach programs, which are creatures of Congress — yet without real oversight. Opponents of Title VI reform have consistently misrepresented the issue as a question of academic freedom, when every piece of legislation aimed at reforming Title VI has contained a provision preventing the federal government from mandating or controlling the content of college curricula. Moreover, I have publicly endorsed that provision.

The real effect of blocking federal oversight of Title VI has been to create a public outreach program that is not part of the college curriculum — a program funded by the American taxpayer, yet answerable to no-one. The unsupervised state of these university outreach programs leaves them open to exploitation by foreign interests seeking control of America's K-12 curriculum on the Middle East. That is an intolerable situation. Congress must restore federal oversight to Title VI of the Higher Education Act.

Hope?

The good news is that Congress may soon help to solve this problem. Despite the polarization and inaction in the current session of Congress, senators Kennedy and Enzi have reached bipartisan agreement on an excellent plan of reform for Title VI — including the creation of grievance procedures to handle complaints about the public outreach program. (Stotsky recommends a similar solution). The question is, will the House adopt the bipartisan Senate compromise on Title VI, or will the higher-education lobby move to block reform? This issue could easily devolve into an ugly political battle. Yet if the House decides to model its reauthorization of the Higher Education Act on the Kennedy-Enzi Title VI compromise, Title VI reform could become one of the few bipartisan bright spots of the current congressional session.

That's the good news. The catch is that even — or especially — if reform does pass, it's still going to take tremendous effort to counteract the growing Saudi use of Title VI as a lever to gain influence over how America teaches its children about the Middle East. The creation of a grievance procedure for public-outreach programs in no way guarantees the outcome of any grievances that might be filed. This battle isn't over, it's only just begun.

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