

**U.S. COMMISSION
ON INTERNATIONAL
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

HEARING

**“IS SAUDI ARABIA A
STRATEGIC THREAT:**

**THE GLOBAL
PROPAGATION OF
INTOLERANCE”**

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MICHAEL YOUNG: (In progress) – is Michael Young, and I serve as chairman of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. We're delighted to welcome you to this hearing today on Saudi Arabia. I will engage in the time-honored Washington ritual of first asking everyone to turn off their cell phones, if they would be kind enough to do that.

And I'd like to welcome you today to today's hearings on Saudi Arabia. Let me first introduce the rest of the commissioners who are up here with me. We will have joining us shortly Nina Shea, who is vice chair of the commission and director of the Center for Religious Freedom of Freedom House. We have to my left Dr. Khaled El Fadl, who is a visiting professor of law at Yale University; to my right, Dr. Richard Land, who is president and CEO of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention; to my far left, Professor Preeta Bansal, who is a visiting professor at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University; and to my right once removed, Ms. Patty Chang, who is president and CEO of the Women's Foundation in California. So I welcome my fellow commissioners. I appreciate their presence here today.

The Commission on International Religious Freedom was established by Congress to make recommendations to the president, to the Secretary of State and to Congress regarding ways in which U.S. policy can more effectively advance respect abroad for the internationally recognized right to freedom of religion or belief. The commission's an independent agency, separate from both the executive branch and Congress. Commissioners are appointed by the president and by the congressional leadership of both political parties.

Turning to the subject matter of today's hearing, simply put, there is no religious freedom in Saudi Arabia, as both our commission and the Department of State have said in various reports on Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government forcefully and completely limits the public practice or expression of religion to a narrow religious ideology commonly known in the West as Wahabiism. Consequently, non-Wahabi Sunnis, Shi'as, Sufis, and other Muslim groups, as well as the more than 2 million Christians, Hindu and other non-Muslim foreign workers who do not adhere to the Saudi government's interpretation are subject to severe freedom religion violations. Underlying this very restrictive policy on religious freedom is an education system, which contains offensive and discriminatory material in its religious curriculum that is mandatory for all Saudis in public schools.

Our commission has devoted a substantial amount of attention to Saudi Arabia, both before and after the events of September 11th. As we looked at Saudi Arabia, another issue has emerged that appears to flow directly from intolerant and repressive policies within the country. Since September 11th, there have been a growing number of reports that funding coming from Saudi Arabia has been used to finance religious schools and other activities that are alleged to support the kind of hate, intolerance and in some cases violence practiced by Islamic militants and extremists in several parts of the world.

These reports raise troubling questions about the Saudi government's role in propagating worldwide an ideology that is incompatible with both the war against terrorism as well as internationally recognized guarantees of the right to freedom of religion or belief. We ourselves have tried to track at least the number of allegations that have been made as to which countries it is spreading into, and the country count at this point is somewhat over 27.

The conditions inside Saudi Arabia as well as the possibility that the Saudi government has played a role in spreading hatred and intolerance against both Muslims and non-Muslims have very significant implications for U.S. foreign policy. Unfortunately, advancing human rights, including religious freedom, has not been a public feature of the U.S.-Saudi relationship. The commission has recommended that it should be.

For several years, the commission has recommended that successive U.S. administrations designate Saudi Arabia a country of particular concern, which is its statutory designation under the International Religious Freedom Act, required in cases where a country engages in egregious, systematic, and ongoing abuses of religious freedom. A country of particular concern, or CPC designation, is an important diplomatic tool to put the issue of respect for freedom of religion and other human rights on the agenda of the bilateral relationship. Sanctions are an option following CPC designation but not the only option and not required.

To date, the State Department has not designated Saudi Arabia. We ask how a country where religious freedom does not exist at all could possibly fail to qualify for CPC designation. The commission has also recommended that human rights assistance, public diplomacy and other programs and initiatives directed at the Middle East be expanded to include components specifically for Saudi Arabia.

While addressing conditions inside Saudi Arabia, the U.S. government should not turn a blind eye to the question of global exportation of intolerance. In that regard, the commission has recommended that the Congress fund a study to determine whether and how and to the extent to which the Saudi government, members of the royal family or Saudi-funded individuals or institutions are propagating globally a religious ideology that explicitly promotes hate and violence toward members of other religious groups, including disfavored Muslims.

As pointed out by Commissioner El Fadl last week in the Wall Street Journal, what we seek are facts, whether they vindicate or implicate Saudi Arabia. The bulk of our hearing today will focus on the issue of exportation, but to put that issue in context, we note that since September 11th, there has been increasing attention both inside and outside Saudi Arabia on the need for political and other reforms. Last May's deadly terrorist bombing in Riyadh along with the attack of 10 days ago have underscored the urgency of that debate. But while we have seen public statements by Saudi government officials, we have not seen sustained improvements in the protection of religious freedom and other human rights. We have asked Dr. Mai Yamani of the Royal Institute for International Affairs to bring us up to date on human rights and the potential for reform in Saudi Arabia, and we welcome her with us today.

We're also looking forward to hearing the views of our three other distinguished witnesses on the issue of global exportation of intolerance and its implication for U.S. policy. Joining us today are Ambassador Martin Indyk, director of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution and former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, and he will talk about the need to reassess U.S. policy towards Saudi Arabia in a post-September 11th world.

He will be followed by Mr. Robert Baer, a former CIA case officer and author of the recently published book, "Sleeping with the Devil: How Washington Sold Our Soul for Saudi Crude." And he will talk about his firsthand experience with Saudi exportation in a number of countries around the world.

Our concluding panelist will be Mr. David Aufhauser, who is former general counsel at the U.S. Department of the Treasury, and he will discuss Saudi financing of the exportation of religious extremism and the need to push the issue to the forefront of bilateral relations.

Before we begin, I'd like to add just a short word about the structure of this morning's hearing. The first hour will be devoted to testimonies of our panelists. We have a light in front which will indicate at the end of about 10 minutes, a warning, and then at the end of 15, a red light. I'd ask that you conclude your remarks by then. We'd be delighted to take any additional testimony you may care to write after that. During the second hour, we'd like to allow for questions-and-answer period between the commissioners and the panelists.

I'd like to conclude before I turn the dais over to Ms. Yamani by quoting from a speech recently delivered earlier this month by President Bush, commemorating 20 years of the National Endowment for Democracy. Even though speaking to the larger Middle East, President Bush aptly described the commission's concern with Saudi Arabia. He said, "As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export." Once again, I thank everyone for being a part of this hearing. If I can turn to Dr. Yamani?

MAI YAMANI: Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for giving me this opportunity to express my views on this very important topic. The global propagation of intolerance – that's quite an accusation. Is Saudi Arabia guilty or innocent? My life and my experiences have given me a unique insight into this question.

I was born a Saudi national but educated in Switzerland, here in the United States, and in Britain. I was a lecturer at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah. I started out with an open mind, respecting the rules and customs of the Saudi state, including censorship, the veil, and the oppressive patriarchal system. I accepted all that, up until the point where they threatened to silence me.

And the threats didn't come in a classroom in Jeddah or Riyadh or anywhere within the confines of the kingdom. It came in London just three years ago from Saudi officials in the form of a letter from the Minister of the Interior. I was instructed never to reveal its contents or its existence to anyone else – classic tactics of intimidation. The demand was to seize immediately my writings and speaking activities about Saudi Arabia and consider myself fortunate that I hadn't been jailed for at least five years.

Let me put this in context. I, a research fellow from the Royal Institute of International Affairs, with a degree from Bryn Mawr College and a doctorate from Oxford University, was being ordered by one of the highest officials in the Saudi kingdom to shut my mouth. My crime was this book, "Changed Identities," a collection of interviews with young Saudi nationals that spoke of their aspirations, frustrations, and hopes. As an academic and a liberal, I thought such a book would help the rulers understand their youthful subjects, something essential if they were to be serious about reforms. Their reaction speaks for itself. Contrast my liberal writings, which so angered them, with the most fanatical Islamist statements, which were widely propagated and encouraged. This is the essence of the Saudi crisis.

The same Saudi officials who wanted to silence me now profess to want reforms and liberalization. Such a rapid conversion stretches credibility to the limit. The fact is the Saudi royal family have shown no inclination towards genuine reform. Were the princes serious about reform, they would be reaching out to the liberal middle class and the intellectual elite. But they have chosen not to do so. Not only has the state embraced the hard-liners, the hard-liners are the state, fully embedded in its structure.

Let me dissect this for you. The royal family are deeply connected with the Wahabi religious establishment. In many ways, it is a coalition government. The princes hand them power and money in return for religious

legitimacy. The religious establishment hold some of the most important levers of power: official control of the judiciary or religious educational system; the ministry of Islamic affairs; the ministry of Hajj pilgrimage and Awqaf religious endowments; and the formidably named Committee for the Ordering of the Good and the Forbidding of the Evil, with their employees the mutaween, or religious police.

This supremely powerful faction controls the imams, who would preach in the 71,000 mosques across Saudi Arabia. Despite claims that several hundreds have been sent for reeducation, the royal family is incapable of removing them from their positions. In practice, they are simply reassigned.

The Saudi state relies on education to replicate itself. It's an area that reflects the same internal tensions as the political coalition. At the time when the country is badly in need of a skilled workforce, a major portion of the school curriculum is devoted to religious studies that focus on the Wahabi doctrine.

Let me just emphasize that. Some estimates say that as much as 50 percent of a pupil's schooling is devoted to the hard line and often paranoid Wahabi view of the world. Never mind the blue textbooks for the boys and the pink for the girls. These are instruments of state control. Themes revolve around how to avoid sheik idolatry in its various degrees, around sin, the fear of hell, and the rejection of the ways of the infidels. And don't imagine that these infidels are all Westerners. The Wahabis also reject the Shi'a and consider them heretics. Even the Sunnis from Mecca are treated as deviants for not subscribing to Wahabiism, especially those with Sufi inclinations.

Textbooks used throughout primary and secondary education sharply define the boundaries between the virtuous and those who deviate from the right path. The duties of young Saudis are contained in this sentence: (speaking in Arabic), meaning "Loyalty to the system and hostility to the nonbelievers." That is why you are seeing angry and desperate Jihadis heading for Iraq to kill coalition soldiers. That is the doctrine they are following that comes from the heart of the Saudi state, fed to them throughout their educational lives. Spurred on by unemployment, political uncertainty, and falling living standards, they are easy recruits for Osama bin Laden's

creed, prepared to work for their rewards in heaven.

Ladies and gentlemen, despite their domination of Saudi life, the Wahabis are a minority that has left vast sectors of society alienated and marginalized. The Shi'a of the oil-rich eastern province, the Hijazis of Mecca and Medina, the Ismailis in Nazir (?) – all harbor long-term resentments. But many would put them aside if offered genuine concessions and reforms. That would mean the royal family, with its name firmly stamped on the state, including them in the political process and accepting their religious beliefs. Failure to do so might at worst push such groups into the arms of the Jihadis or, at best, make them turn a blind eye to the fanaticism and violence in their midst.

Saudi Arabia is guilty of propagating intolerance. But I am reluctant to give up all hope of change. If reforms are to mean anything at all, the following urgent measures must be taken: immediate ending of job discrimination on sectarian, ethnic, or gender grounds; immediate ending of discrimination and bias in the judicial process; immediate ending of oppressive laws against women; freedom of expression, religious expression, and the right to assembly. These are huge and dangerous steps, but if the Al-Saud royal family continues with its head in the sand, they will remain hostage to the perpetrators of violence and the forces of intolerance that threaten their very survival.

But simply, a collection of octogenarian rulers cannot understand a population 80 percent of whom are less than half their age. This is a dangerous gap in both age and culture. The fact is Saudi Arabia's rulers constructed a system that was never designed for change, based as it was on corruption, repression, and dogma for the perpetuation of their own power. There is little time left in which to alter their grand design. Thank you.

MR. YOUNG: Dr. Yamani, thank you very much for that very eloquent testimony. Ambassador Indyk?