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To: bethany_pulos@rubio.senate.gov
Cc: Brian Walsh
Subject: Why Saudi Arabia Is Scrubbing Hate Speech from School Books | Time

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TIME

Saudi Arabia Is Scrubbing Hate Speech from School Books. Why That's a Win for the Trump Administration



U.S. President, Donald Trump meets Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammad Bin Salman Al Saud on the sidelines of the second day of the G20 Summit in Osaka, Japan, on June 29, 2019. Bandar Algaloud—Saudi Kingdom Council/Handout/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

BY **KIMBERLY DOZIER**

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Students in Saudi Arabia, like so many around the world, have traded in-

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pandemic. But they're also experiencing other major shifts in Saudi Arabia's



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country-wide curriculum, with new reforms stripping out lessons of toward the “other” – whether Christian, Jewish, or gay – and dictats to defend the Islamic faith through violence.

The Kingdom's latest batch of textbooks has for the first time removed sections calling for non-believers to be punished by death, and predicting an apocalyptic final battle in which Muslims will kill all Jews, according to a report released Tuesday by a Jerusalem-based think tank that analyzes global curricula for extremist and intolerant views.

The “trend line is cause for optimism,” says Marcus Sheff, CEO of the nonprofit Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education, or IMPACT SE. “We do see a significant change...a real institutional effort ... at the highest levels to make a change to modernize the curriculum to remove offense.”

That said, the books, which are used in the public K-12 curriculum and made freely available throughout the Arab world, still characterize Jews and Christians as “enemies of Islam.” They say that infidels “do not have any good deeds” and will spend eternity in hell, according to the report, made available exclusively to TIME prior to its publication. “No question about it, there is still a way to go,” says Sheff.

It's a potentially critical change in a country that has been widely criticized for teaching and exporting its strict interpretation of Sunni Islam across the Muslim world. Roughly two-thirds of the Saudi population is under 30, but an old guard of Saudi royals, religious scholars and long-serving government officials remains both powerful and deeply conservative. The curriculum is taught at Saudi Arabia's some 30,000 schools inside the country, available to all its citizens, as well as at Saudi schools overseas, according to the Saudi embassy in Washington's website. The free textbooks are also downloaded by

teachers throughout the Sunni Muslim world, reaching potentially millions of

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The U.S. Files to Reveal How Human Rights Groups Screen Administration officials say the changes are proof that Saudi Arabia is

a corner on extremism, thanks in part to their quiet lobbying to put textbook reform near the top of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's Vision 2030 plan to modernize the Kingdom. A former senior State Department official says President Donald Trump helped facilitate MBS's reform drive by paying attention to the Kingdom's fears of Iran's regional ambitions. "By countering Iran, and engaging privately with them on human rights issues, we have expanded the space for MBS to modernize the Kingdom, and continue the reforms that he has wanted to make," the former official says.

A State Department official tells TIME that the Trump Administration is "encouraged by the report that finds positive changes in influential textbooks used throughout Saudi Arabia," adding that the Administration supports "textbooks free of intolerance and violence" and is also backing the development of a pilot Saudi teacher training program. Both officials spoke anonymously in order to describe sensitive and private conversations with the Saudis.

A Saudi official, asked to comment on the broad outlines of the IMPACT-SE report, tells TIME that "education reform is an ongoing process that will continue into the foreseeable future," as part of Vision 2030, with the "development of more effective teachers and students ... as one of its primary goals." The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the controversial subject.

Fahad Nazer, spokesman for the Saudi embassy in Washington, told a virtual audience in November that Saudi education officials have found "some material that was deemed objectionable ... offensive" in the Kingdom's textbooks, and made "a very concerted effort to remove all of it from the entire curriculum," and replace "this offensive material with lessons that promote moderation, toleration and peaceful coexistence." The IMPACT-SE report did not find new

material had been added for the deleted sections in the latest revisions,

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The U.S. Backtracks on Saudi Arabia's Textbook Changes The U.S. Backtracks on Saudi Arabia's Textbook Changes. The second major revision of the nation's textbooks during the Trump administration. Last year's version dropped many of the worst racist and anti-Semitic references but was still "suffused with extremism," Sheff says, spreading the kind of hateful ideology that has fueled attacks on westerners from 9/11 to the 2019 shooting of U.S. personnel at Naval Air Station Pensacola by Saudi Second Lt. Mohammed Saeed Alshamrani, an officer of the Royal Saudi Air Force, who killed three Navy Airmen. Alshamrani, who was 21 when he carried out the attacks, would have studied the earlier, more extreme, unaltered version of the texts, in which Sheff says "the West was blamed for every conceivable evil."

One of the report's peer reviewers, David Weinberg, Washington Director for International Affairs at the Anti-Defamation League, says "some of the most intolerant parts of the curriculum have now been removed, which is truly remarkable," including the removal of passages calling for the death penalty for adultery, acts of homosexuality and perceived acts of magic. But he agrees problematic passages remain, including references to Jews who commit wrongdoing being turned into "real monkeys," and passages that "encourage enmity and demonization toward infidels and polytheists," a blanket term used for Jews, Christians, Shi'ite Muslims and other perceived nonbelievers, Weinberg says. "They're not there yet."

Ali Shihabi, a Saudi author and political analyst based in New York and Europe, says curricula reform in Saudi Arabia has been underway since 9/11, and "accelerated" under MBS, but that the effort has been "resisted by a 'conservative deep state'" in the Saudi education ministry. "The process has been one of two steps forward, and one back, but forward nonetheless," he says.

MBS has made landmark social reforms since taking power in 2017, advancing women's rights in particular by allowing them to drive, get a passport and travel abroad without the permission of a male guardian. But for watchdog

groups like Human Rights Watch, those reforms don't offset a catalog of human

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has killed scores of civilians, the jailing of women's rights activists, and the



How U.S. Media Reported the Death of Saudi Journalist Jamal Khashoggi
of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who was dismembered
 appeared by Saudi officials at their consulate in Istanbul.

MBS had initially been feted as an agent of change, named one of TIME's most influential people in April 2018. But Khashoggi's brutal killing in October of that year drew widespread international condemnation and raised fundamental questions over the young Crown Prince's commitment to basic human rights. MBS has denied knowledge of the plot, and in September, the Kingdom sentenced eight people to long prison terms for taking part in the brutal extrajudicial killing.

President-elect Joe Biden has vowed to "reassess" the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia, giving priority to "democratic values and human rights." In a statement on the two-year anniversary of Khashoggi's death, Biden said, "Saudi operatives, reportedly acting at the direction of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, murdered and dismembered" him, adding that the Saudi journalist and his loved ones still "deserve accountability."

'Words and deeds have to match.'

The MBS-blessed reforms to the 2020 textbooks include removing most references to Jihad, broadly defined as the fight against enemies of Islam and interpreted differently across the Muslim world. The previous version included an example that declared violent Jihad as the pinnacle of Islamic teaching. Just a decade ago, Sheff says, the curriculum centered around preparing students for Jihad and martyrdom.

The texts no longer include the anti-Semitic trope that "Zionist Forces" run the world and are plotting to expand Israel's territory from the Nile to the Euphrates, according to the IMPACT-SE report. And for the first time, a key Saudi religious teaching has been deleted that describes an end-of-days battle between Muslims and Jews in which all the Jews would be killed.

Ali Al-Ahmed, a critic of the Saudi government from the Washington, D.C.-

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include references to this final battle, also called the fifth sign of Armageddon



How U.S. Backed Bin Laden's Attack on the World Trade Center **How U.S. Backed Bin Laden's Attack on the World Trade Center** **How U.S. Backed Bin Laden's Attack on the World Trade Center**

he said included the Jews being "annihilated" for the sections saying
 ostasy, adultery and homosexuality are punishable by death. A chapter
 concerning Jihad was also removed, says Al-Ahmed, who has done his own
 independent review of Saudi textbooks. "The fact that the Trump
 Administration is in power made it easier, because they have a stronger
 relationship," Al-Ahmed says. "I give them credit for it."

But, he and others caution, simply removing the references is not enough. "If
 you don't talk about Jihad, you leave it for others to interpret. You need to talk
 about it the right way," and replace the hateful material with "more proactive
 instructions on how to deal with other faiths." He points out that Saudi scholar
 Dr. Hassan Farhan al-Maliki is still jailed in Saudi Arabia and facing a possible
 death sentence for allegedly confessing to the crime of "calling for freedom of
 belief" and criticizing some of the more extreme practices of Saudi Salafi
 Wahhabism, the strict sect of Islam upon which Saudi Arabia was founded.

Farah Pandith, author of *How We Win* on how to defeat extremism, agrees the
 Kingdom's "words and deeds have to match." Pandith was part of efforts to
 encourage Saudi education reform during the Bush Administration and as the
 Obama Administration's first Special Representative to Muslim Communities,
 after the attacks of 9/11, in which most of the hijackers were Saudi. Pandith
 says while the latest textbooks have removed "some horrifying things about
 homosexuality and sorcery" and altered language that called for violence
 against nonbelievers, the changes need to be matched by steps to counteract
 the "billions" the Kingdom has spent to export textbooks and clerics steeped in
 the uncompromising Wahhabi sect's interpretation of Islam.

"You've got to be able to say it is okay for different countries...to have Muslims
 practice Islam the way they would like to," Pandith says. The Saudis haven't
 added anything to teach "respect for the diversity of Islam," she says. "By
 omitting that, they're already saying their way is the only way."



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