

## A Decade of Effort Rewarded

February 8, 2021

Dear friends,

On July 19, 2017, ICRD's founder, Dr. Douglas Johnston, sat before the House Foreign Affairs Committee as an expert on education reform in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. There, he outlined key elements of ICRD's related programs, which had been initiated in 2011. During the committee hearing, Dr. Johnston explained that ICRD was working to:

*“Develop recommendations that would help facilitate reform efforts that were already underway in the Kingdom ... From the start, our approach was one of seeking to be balanced - giving them credit for whatever progress had been made, not only in that but in their deradicalization program, but to be very unsparing in our detail of what remained to be done.”*

Three years later, ICRD is pleased to report that the overwhelming majority of the substantial recommendations for reform that we presented to the Saudi Ministry of Education (MOE) appear to have been incorporated into the 2020 curriculum.

Simply put, **Saudi students will no longer find the extremist narratives used in ISIS recruitment material in their high school textbooks.** The removal of this content will have a broad and lasting impact.



ICRD has played an important role in this outcome, with the help of your support. Our first review of the Saudi curriculum, commissioned by the US State Department's Office for International Religious Freedom, looked at all of the textbooks from grades K-12 to identify and document emblematic instances of religious intolerance and extremism. However, rather than publicize the results, ICRD chose to brief Saudi counterparts privately and develop a quiet partnership to advance comprehensive reforms.

In 2017, ICRD was again contracted by the State Department, this time with the endorsement of the Saudi government, to analyze the most recent revisions to the curriculum and give recommendations for the removal of remaining intolerant and extremist content. While our 2012 study focused on all grade levels, we found that the most egregious content was concentrated in the high school religious textbooks. Taking a narrow focus, primarily on these texts, allowed us to conduct an exhaustive review and to document, for the first time anywhere, all of the objectionable content – 120 items – rather than just a representative sample of intolerant lessons.

Importantly, at the request of the Saudi MOE, ICRD prepared bi-monthly briefs during this study, which were delivered directly to officials involved in the Kingdom's curriculum reform program. In late 2020, ICRD completed our most recent review: a comparative study focused on the 2019 and 2020 editions of the curriculum. From this study, we can confidently report that, with only minor exceptions, **the material that we highlighted in the 2018 review has been removed.**

A recent report by IMPACT-SE, followed by articles in the New York Times, Time Magazine, and the Washington Post, hailed reforms in the 2020 Saudi curriculum. After a decade of work supporting education reform in the Kingdom, ICRD is grateful to see positive advances being covered in the news. It is important to note that some material remains to be addressed, however. Also, while we can confirm the findings of the IMPACT-SE report, according to ICRD's analysis, the Saudi MOE had expunged most of the intolerant or extremist lessons from those particular textbooks by 2019.

Perhaps even more meaningful news is that a separate selection of textbooks, which held the most egregious content, was not released this year. While a highly credible contact in the Kingdom has confirmed that these textbooks have been retired, ICRD is seeking additional confirmation of their complete removal from the curriculum. If this proves to be the case, it would represent a much more significant shift away from religious intolerance, calls to violence, and ideological extremism in Saudi public education than has been recently noted. ICRD's upcoming report will fully document the extent of the meaningful changes to the Saudi curriculum, as part of the broader reform agenda in the Kingdom. We are especially pleased to share this news of the successful impact of our work with our supporters.

While the improvement of the textbooks represents an important milestone in our ongoing engagement with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and is based on patient, behind-the-scenes relationship building, textbooks are only one factor in the education of young minds. Teacher prejudices can eclipse even the most tolerant educational materials. In 2020, the Saudi MOE committed to going beyond textbook revisions and is currently working with ICRD to prepare and implement significant trainings for their teachers. Grounded in Islamic principles, these trainings will focus on issues of global citizenship, including human rights, religious literacy, tolerance, and preventing violent extremism. The MOE's intention to integrate the material into official teacher training processes will ensure that ICRD's impact goes beyond supporting the simple editing of problematic lessons out of the texts, and instead represents a much more fundamental transformation of the pedagogical environment.

As always, this work would not be possible without supporters like you. If you recognize the importance of ICRD's holistic and collaborative approach to education reform, increasing tolerance and reducing drivers of violent extremism, please consider joining in that effort with a donation. With your help, we can continue this historic engagement and make faith part of the solution!

Warm regards,



James Patton

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