

ASSESSING U.S. POLICY PRIORITIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

HEARING
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON
THE MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA, AND
INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM
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ASSESSING U.S. POLICY PRIORITIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

April 3, 2019

House of Representatives

**Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and
International Terrorism**

Committee on Foreign Affairs

Washington, DC

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:36 p.m., in Room 2172 Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Theodore E. Deutch (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. DEUTCH. All right. This hearing will come to order. Welcome, everyone.

The subcommittee is meeting today to hear testimony on U.S. policy priorities in the Middle East. I thank our witnesses for appearing today and I will start by recognizing myself for an opening statement.

Thanks to our panel. Thanks for being here today. Thanks for the work you do for our Nation.

At the outset of the 116th Congress and 2 years into the Trump administration, the United States faces a multitude of challenges in the Middle East.

We just marked the eighth anniversary of the start of the war in Syria, which has led to the deaths of more than half a million people, the displacement of millions both inside Syria and in neighboring countries.

The conflict and humanitarian crisis that it created has the potential to reshape the region literally for decades to come. Iran continues to support Bashar al-Assad and carry out its destabilizing activities in countries from Lebanon to Yemen to Iraq.

Outside powers, such as Russia, use military force, economic support, and weapons sales to increase their regional influence at the expense of the United States.

Libya is fractured. Yemen is ravaged by civil war, the intervention of regional States, and the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

While these issues receive the bulk of the headlines and media attention, other events and trends also deserve our focus. Tunisia's nascent democracy confronts serious economic and political challenges.

Algeria's president submitted his resignation yesterday after two decades in power. The dispute splitting the Gulf Cooperation Council is at a stalemate and Israel has threats on its borders and peace that is still elusive.

A youth bulge—approximately 45 percent of the Middle East is under 25 years old—presents a myriad of challenges and opportuni-

ties in the coming decade and more than 8 years after millions took to the streets around the region in protest of corruption and autocracy, too many regional governments remain unaccountable to their people and opposed to democracy and open civil society and human rights.

In the wake of these challenges the United States requires a well-formulated clear-eyed approach to the Middle East. Unfortunately, the administration's policy toward the region is confusing and, at some points, seemingly incoherent.

The president announced the rapid and complete withdrawal of U.S. troops in Syria in December with little notice given to international allies and partners on the ground.

This decision prompted the resignation of Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis and Special Envoy to Defeat ISIS Brett McGurk. Yet, the administration now plans to keep anywhere from 400 to 1,000 troops in Syria, a number that changes in the press almost by the day, and U.S. long-term strategy in Syria remains elusive and ambiguous.

In Yemen, the Trump administration has offered unstinting support to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and while I recognize—understand the risks posed by the Houthis and Iranian forces in Yemen, the conflict has led to tens of thousands of civilian casualties.

It has shifted focus from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and has worsened this horrific humanitarian crisis and catastrophe.

Furthermore, the Trump administration has offered an inconsistent message on human rights and democratic values. At a time when many are questioning the American commitment to the region, the administration has too often turned a blind eye to human rights abuses and has equivocated in expressing support for democratic development in the Middle East.

I believe our relationships with regional States are vital to our national security and to geopolitical stability. These are ties that are enduring and many date to the end of the Second World War.

However, we should view our relationship with regional States through the prism of our own interests and values. Where do our priorities align? What type of actions undermine our goals and undermine U.S. values?

We should be honest in reassessing where our interests and values diverge and identifying actions that set back our mutual objectives and in expressing our opposition when our allies and partners do not live up to those standards.

Furthermore, while the Trump administration often articulates maximalist goals in the Middle East, it has cut the resources needed to achieve them.

For the third straight year the Trump administration has proposed drastic cuts to our foreign affairs budget. The Fiscal Year 2020 Trump budget request includes a 6 percent drop in funding for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, compared to Fiscal Year 2019.

This subcommittee has oversight responsibility over the NEA budget and I hope this hearing can help us better grasp the trends, the challenges, and opportunities facing the United States and the Middle East and help us better execute our oversight responsibility.

I also hope the witnesses will provide an honest assessment of recent U.S. policy and how the U.S. Government, specifically Congress, can take steps to foster a more successful approach to the region that secures our national interests without sacrificing the values that make us unique and admired around the world.

I thank the witnesses for appearing and I now turn to Ranking Member Wilson for his opening statement.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you, Chairman Deutch.

The complexities of the Middle East pose enduring challenges to U.S. interests in the region and have vexed both Republican and Democratic administrations alike.

It is certainly not a region for the faint of heart. Just a cursory glance at the Middle East can be overwhelming. At the same time, I am grateful that the Trump administration has been achieving some important successes in such a complicated environment.

The Trump administration has presided over the defeat of ISIS's so-called caliphate. This certainly does not mean the threat from ISIS has been neutralized, but seizing ISIS's territory denies the terrorist group both a lucrative profit stream as well as a safe haven from which to orchestrate attacks against the U.S. and our allies.

There is no doubt that this is a major achievement that has made our country and world safer. President Trump rightfully withdrew from the flawed Iran nuclear agreement.

The Trump administration has increased the pressure on Tehran to—in response to its reckless development of ballistic missiles and continued sponsorship of global terrorism.

The pressure on Iran has yielded concrete dividends. U.S. sanctions have prevented Iran from delivering any oil to its Syrian client, the Assad regime, since January 2d.

In the last 3 months of 2018, Iran was sending 66,000 barrels a day to Syria. The Syrian will never forget that it was the Trump administration that finally enforced the previous administration's "red line," striking Assad twice for using chemical weapons against civilians.

Sanctions in Iran have also affected Tehran's sponsorship of regional terrorism. Just last week reports indicated that Iran had to slash payments to fighter in Syria by a third due to the pain of the American sanctions.

Even employees of Hezbollah have missed paychecks and lost perks. The administration has also made the bold move of designating major Iranian-backed militias for terrorism including the Nujaba in Iraq and the brigades of Afghan and Pakistani mercenaries Iran has been exploited as cheap fodder in Syria's bloody civil war.

Under the leadership of President Trump, the dynamics of the Middle East appear to be shifting. His first international trip was to Riyadh where Gulf Cooperation Council countries along with other Muslim countries agreed on the need to counter extremism.

The journey is far from complete but the step was unprecedented and positive. In February, the administration convened a conference in Warsaw, bringing Arab countries and Israel together to confront the Iranian regional threat. Notably, this came after the Trump administration's relocation of the U.S. embassy in Israel to

Jerusalem, a move that many incorrectly predicted would upend ties between the Jewish State and its Arab neighbors.

The Trump administration must continue to build on these achievements. Like Chairman Deutch, I too was concerned by the August 2018 decision to freeze U.S. stabilization funding to Syria and the 2018 decision to withdraw troops from the country.

There is simply no substitute for U.S. leadership in the Middle East, especially given that Russia and Iran are more than happy to fill the void.

The administration must also continue going after the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq. Some of these militias won seats in Iraq's parliamentary elections in May and stand to receive U.S. taxpayer money sent to the Iraqi government.

These groups include those with American blood on their hands such as the AAH and the Badr Organization. It is time to correct this long-time standing failure of U.S. policy and cutoff all armed groups taking orders from the mullahs in Tehran.

There is no way to simplify the thorny challenges to the U.S. policy in the Middle East. This is a region that will unfortunately continue to trouble U.S. policymakers for years to come.

While we may disagree on the details, I think we can all agree on one guiding principle. U.S. leadership and engagement in the Middle East is essential.

I look forward to hearing from our expert witnesses today. I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Wilson.

I will now recognize members of the subcommittee for a 1-minute opening statement should they wish to make one.

Mr. Chabot, you are recognized.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will be brief.

As a former chair of this committee, I just want to emphasize that the importance of U.S. engagement it is just critical.

It really cannot be overemphasized, and I would just note that the chair did tag this administration with their policy being—I think confusing, incoherent were the terms that the gentleman used, and I would—I would just make the point that I think many, including myself, believe that the previous administration's policies there were far worse from, for example—and I happened to also chair the Asia and Pacific Subcommittee a while back, and the previous administration was bound and determined to de-emphasize our role in the Middle East and pivot was the initial term they used to Asia.

And then they later on called it a rebalance because pivot seemed a little too clear on what they were trying to do and rebalance, for whatever reason, seemed a little more politically correct.

And, ultimately, it is questionable whether they did that or not. I would argue they perhaps de-emphasized both regions rather than strengthen us in either place, which was a mistake.

The previous administration famously drew a red line and then ignored it, and we have seen untold deaths in Syria as a direct result of that policy, and probably the most disastrous thing the previous administration did was that after all the blood and treasure that were spent in Iraq was then to, against the advice of just about everybody, just pull all our troops out.

Having been there a number of times, having talked to troops and the leaders on the ground and our allies there, no one really anticipated that the administration would actually do that, but they did, and that left a power vacuum which then was filled by ISIS and we saw the horrors that occurred under the hands of ISIS.

And then the administration's response to that—yes, they ultimately did respond after they had taken over a significant portion of the area, especially Iraq, but also Syria.

And then they kind of handcuffed our troops there and we were not really able to respond as was necessary. The current administration took those handcuffs off and we saw the demise of ISIS.

That does not mean that we can ignore them. Some of them scattered into other areas and so we have to, I think, be very aware that they could still be a threat. But compared to where they were, we are much better off.

So just a few points. We do need to continue to be engaged in the Middle East and work with our allies there.

I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Chabot.

Without objection, all members may have 5 days to submit statements, questions, and extraneous materials for the record, subject to the length limitation in the rules.

I will now introduce our witnesses. First, Ms. Elisa Catalano Ewers is an adjunct senior fellow at the Center For a New American Security and a faculty lecturer at the Johns Hopkins University Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies.

For over a decade, Ms. Catalano Ewers served in senior foreign policy and national security positions in the U.S. Government including as a director for the Middle East and North Africa on the National Security Council staff and in multiple positions at the Department of State.

Mr. Daniel Benaim is a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, researching U.S. policy in the Middle East as well as a visiting assistant professor at New York University's program in international relations.

He previously served as a Middle East policy advisor and foreign policy speech writer at the White House, the Department of State, and the U.S. Senate. He was also an international affairs fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

And, finally, Ms. Danielle Pletka is senior vice president for foreign and defense policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute where she oversees the institute's work on foreign and defense issues.

She is also an adjunct professor at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service. Ms. Pletka was a long-time senior professional staff member for the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations where she specialized in Near East and South Asia and where she also worked with our friend who is not here so I will wait until he returns to reunite the two of you.

Thanks very much to all of our witnesses. We appreciate your being here. We appreciate your taking the time to offer your insight with this committee, and Ms. Catalano Ewers, I will recognize you first.

I will remind all of the witnesses to please limit your testimony to 5 minutes and, without objection, your prepared written statements will be made a part of the hearing record.

Again, thanks so much, and Ms. Catalano Ewers, you are recognized.

STATEMENT OF MS. CATALANO EWERS, ADJUNCT SENIOR FELLOW, MIDDLE EAST SECURITY PROGRAM, CENTER FOR A NEW AMERICAN SECURITY

Ms. CATALANO EWERS. Thank you.

Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to join you here today. I am humbled to be sitting here alongside two very respected colleagues.

Nation States and institutions in the region have suffered severe blows. Some States have turned inward, like Egypt. Some have disintegrated, like Syria. And others have taken on a more aggressive foreign policy, like Saudi Arabia.

Non-State actors such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have sought to exploit these power vacuums and multiple levels of competition are happening across the region.

The perception of the last decade is a United States in withdrawal. Whether the perception is correct or not is no longer the point. This view has unsettled partners and encouraged competitors.

What happens in the Middle East rarely stays there, whether in the form of clear and imminent threats, such as terrorism or proliferation, or more intractable threats, like the humanitarian crises that reverberate inside and outside the region.

The reality is that the United States cannot extricate itself from the region and should not try to. However, it could deploy itself smartly and more effectively.

This administration inherited these systemic challenges. It also inherited strategies, some of which, like the counter ISIS campaign, has managed to pursue its success. But such campaigns never end with battlefield wins.

The administration has also relied on cults of personality rather than statecraft. It has placed a high value on individual personal relations with Egypt, Saudi, and others at the expense of institutional engagement.

It has promulgated rhetoric but also a sense of unpredictability. Some governments in the region may embrace the more aggressive posture on Iran but the Syria withdrawal announcement, the lack of active engagement with Iraq, and the absence at the highest level of U.S. diplomatic pressure in Yemen all illustrate that there is not a single comprehensive regional strategy on Iran.

It has ignored bad actions from partners in pursuit of wins. The administration's unwillingness to press partners when they act inconsistently with U.S. interests conveys a sense that some have a blank check.

Going forward, we will need to watch for the resurgence of groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda, the disintegration of political processes in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, the unintended escalation and conflict between Israel and Hezbollah or conflict in the seas around

the Arabian Peninsula, humanitarian displacement and refugee crises, repression against citizens across the region, and the consequences of unanswered economic and political grievances.

In light of all this complexity, I would offer just a number of immediate steps Congress could consider. First, Congress should exercise its powers to receive a full strategy on Iran beyond just the campaign of economic pressure.

Congress should act consistent with the notion that diplomacy and development are tools of first resort, continue the trend of restoring budgets to the State Department and USAID, and field qualified Ambassadors and senior officials.

Congress should insist that the administration pursue diplomatic ends, ways, and means, such as actively supporting political negotiations in Yemen and sustaining full partnership with Iraq.

Congress should also insist that the U.S. support to partners comes with a firm commitment to hold partners accountable for their actions. This includes a full accounting into the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.

The United States retains leverage but it must be exercised. Congress should continue to remind partners that the United States' views on human rights violations and overall repressive policies are part of the continuum of regional instability, not separate from it.

There is no shortage of bipartisan issues on which Congress can use the power of its own outreach, its pulpit, and its purse to support balanced and reasoned approaches. Whether it be support for Israel's security while also keeping the road to peace viable or reaffirming commitments to the security of regional partners without conceding to proxy wars throughout the region, Congress can help ensure U.S. relationships are assessed honestly and in all of their complexity.

I look forward to your questions, and thank you again.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Catalano Ewers follows:]



Center for a
New American
Security

April 3, 2019

Prepared statement by
Elisa Catalano Ewers
Adjunct Senior Fellow
Center for a New American Security

Before the
**House Foreign Affairs Committee, Sub-Committee on the Middle East,
North Africa, and International Terrorism**

Hearing on Assessing U.S. Policy Priorities in the Middle East

Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the topic of the United States' policy in the Middle East. I would like to offer several observations of current dynamics in the region, and follow with an assessment of current U.S. policy and recommendations moving forward.

I. What the United States Contends with Today in the Middle East

Two consecutive administrations of the United States have witnessed fundamental changes to the shape and execution of power in the Middle East. Some of these changes were instigated by the United States, including those springing from the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Others, including the series of domestic uprisings that spread across the region in 2011 that led to violence and, in some cases civil war, were indigenous and had nothing directly to do with the United States.

Nonetheless, the aggregate consequences of these and other changes have resulted in an evolving and complex landscape:

1. Nation states and institutions have suffered serious blows, and states upon whom the U.S. relied for regional matters — such as Egypt — have turned inward, while other nation states — like Libya and Syria — have disintegrated entirely. This has caused power vacuums to emerge where state and non-state actors are testing limits and competing.
2. Non-state actors such as al Qa'eda and the Islamic State (ISIS), Lebanese Hezbollah, and other non-state actors have sought to exploit the vacuums and subsequent ungoverned political and physical spaces.
3. These vacuums also have spurred competition that is multi-layered and proxy-executed between states and across the region, the most notable being the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, but along so-called "Islamist" (Qatar, Turkey supported) and "anti-Islamist" (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, and also in a different way, Israel), and other fault-lines as well.

Bold.

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Against this backdrop, the center of gravity in terms of regional power centers has shifted more attention east of the Suez and towards the Gulf.¹

The perception of the last decade is of a United States that is withdrawing from its interests and its presence in the region, a perception built on domestic war fatigue, changes in the geo-strategic landscape featuring a rising China and a reasserting Russia, the emergence of U.S. energy independence, and any number of other factors.

Whether the perception is correct or not is no longer the point. This view has unsettled partners and encouraged competitors. Regional partners are more likely now to enact their own policies on regional affairs independent of U.S. views.

American leverage is further eroded as partners are exercising more agency; partners are less and less willing to concede to the United States about what is best for the region. This all despite the fact that U.S. force posture in the region is still formidable. Current numbers are less available, but estimates from late 2017 were in the 50-60,000 range for troop numbers alone across 13 or 14 countries and dozens of missions in the region.²

Finally, consistent with geo-strategic changes, great power competition has also flourished in the region. China finds in the region a receptive environment for its economic policies while Russia finds room to pursue a multi-pronged strategy that strengthens its overall hand by filling gaps left by the United States. Each offers an alternative model to regional players as compared to the U.S.: no strings attached cooperation that don't require them to align with values or make any changes in the way they conduct themselves domestically or internationally. While neither Russia nor China can match U.S. traditional presence or influence in the short-term, both are exploiting the real and imagined U.S. absence for their own gains. Russia has re-engaged on military cooperation and diplomatic mediation beyond Syria to Egypt, Libya, and of course Israel and the Gulf. And China continues to pursue its Belt and Road Initiative throughout the region alongside modest forays into the security space.³

¹ Bruce Jones et al, "The New Geopolitics of the Middle East: America's role in a Changing Region," The Brookings Institute (October 2018), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/FP_20190107_new_geopolitics_of_mena_final.pdf

² Micah Zenko, "US Military Policy in the Middle East," Chatham House (October 2018), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-10-18-us-military-policy-middle-east-zenko-final.pdf>

³ This number does not include contractor support presence, and other kinds of missions for which hard numbers are not available, the thousands of regional counterparts that benefit from the hundreds of thousands of dollars in U.S. security training or the billions in arms sales.

³ Johnathan Fulton, "China's power in the Middle East is Rising," The Washington Post (August 2018), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/08/09/chinas-rise-in-the-middle-east/?utm_term=.5339b2a9db37

II. Why Does It Matter Anyway?

U.S. policy toward the Middle East in the last 40 years was predicated on several traditional strategic interests, to include: preserving the reliable flow of global energy supplies and commercial activity; preventing the proliferation of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction; supporting the security and stability of U.S. partners, including Israel; countering terrorism; and supporting prosperity for the region's people and defending universal human rights.

In pursuit of all these interests, the United States deployed its competitive advantage: investments of significant diplomatic and economic capital into the region — diplomacy and development backed up by force through the deployment of military assets. The United States enjoyed being the partner of choice and necessity in the region, certainly since the Iran-Iraq War and first Gulf War.

But the two previous administrations and the current one have grappled with serial regional crises that do not always fit squarely into one of the above interests, but press for disproportionate U.S. attention nonetheless.⁴ Today, after years of war, the U.S. position has changed, and to a lesser extent so have its interests. Threats in the region now emanate as much from non-state extremist actors like ISIS and hegemonic and asymmetric actors such as Iranian proxies as from conventional security threats to partners' sovereignty. Instability is as much a function of internal systemic economic and governance failures across most of the region as from WMD. Combatting terrorism threats to the homeland remains a priority, as does nonproliferation. But U.S. vital interest as an energy consumer has changed (though it hasn't been eliminated). And recent years have shown that much of the strife generated in the region is of its own making, and importantly, more within the region's power ultimately to resolve.⁵ While some countries, particularly in the Gulf, have expanded economically in the last decade, the overall trend in job opportunity and economic equality in the region is discouraging, and experts indicate there is little room for optimism.⁶ Recent protests in Algeria and elsewhere remind us that the powder keg that exploded in 2011 has not been spent.

As well, a false dichotomy has emerged in recent years surrounding whether the U.S. interests in the region truly endure. Some argue that the threats to U.S. interests are stronger today than ever and therefore require a doubling-down of U.S. commitment, while others argue that U.S. over-investment in the region has had devastating consequences, prompting a desire to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater.

In such a fractious debate it's easy, though unproductive, to paint one side as authoritarian supporters and warmongers, and the other anti-war naifs. The truth of course lies somewhere in the middle.

⁴ "Leveraging U.S. Power in the Middle East," Center for American Progress (October 2016), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2016/10/19/146283/leveraging-u-s-power-in-the-middle-east/>

Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes, "America's Middle East Purgatory," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2019 Issue), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-12-11/americas-middle-east-purgatory?cid=otc_authors-january_february_2019-121118

⁶ Rami Khouri, "Why We Should Worry About the Arab Region," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs (February 2019), <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/why-we-should-worry-about-arab-region>

Long-time experts in U.S. policy towards the Middle East caution that what happens in the Middle East doesn't stay in the Middle East: its challenges come knocking on the door sooner or later, whether in the form of clear and imminent threats, such as terrorism or nuclear proliferation, or slower and more intractable threats, like the humanitarian crises caused by refugee movements that have severe reverberations inside *and* outside the region.

The reality is that the United States cannot fully extricate itself from the region and should not try to do so. However, it could deploy itself in a smarter and more effective way.

III. Where is U.S. Policy Today?

U.S. policy towards the region, particularly in the last two years, has been marked by inconsistency and confusion. Admittedly, this administration inherited some of the systemic challenges outlined above. But it also inherited strategies, some of which it has managed to pursue with some success. The counter-ISIS campaign, for example, has achieved its military goals. But this campaign in particular, and comprehensive counter-terrorism efforts in general, never end with battlefield wins. In fact, the counter-ISIS campaign may be at the end of a phase, but that is not the end of the road. The counter-narrative aspects of the campaign, the political conflicts that opened ungoverned space in which ISIS grew, and the important work of stabilization are still necessary to longer-term success. In the counter-ISIS campaign, as on the issue of U.S. strategy in the region, the administration has failed to articulate a clear and realistic approach. It oscillates instead between on the one hand treating regional complexities as transactional engagements (for example, U.S. support of the Yemeni government and Saudi-led coalition in Yemen alluded to as almost a *quid pro quo* for Gulf arms purchases from the U.S.), and on the other hand espousing grandiose aspirations that do not reflect realities on the ground (e.g., Secretary Pompeo's 2019 Cairo speech).

And in some cases, the administration has adopted *de facto* approaches that can only be characterized as exacerbations:

1. Perpetuating a sense of unpredictability and unreliability: The perception of U.S. withdrawal may have been seeded in the previous administration, but heightened over the course of the 2016 presidential campaign and since this administration took office. The president's propensity to talk about the Middle East as an endless quagmire, or about a set of partners who do not carry their own weight, has contributed to the sense of uncertainty. Some governments in the region may embrace a more aggressive and frank tone, like the one the administration has adopted on Iran, but they privately continue to harbor concerns about where the administration is likely to go next. So they continue to hedge, turn to near-peer competitors like Russia and China. The most salient example may have been the president's December pronouncement of troop withdrawals from eastern Syria. While that decision has been walked back, it nonetheless has made partners in the region wonder how they can rely on U.S. support for the anti-ISIS or anti-Iran campaigns — both impacted by the withdrawal announcement — if the President is given to spontaneous policy announcements. The decision to withdraw unilaterally from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is another such decision. It may have been telegraphed previously and even applauded by some regional partners in the short-term, but has highlighted questions about U.S. trustworthiness in the longer term.
2. Relying on cults of personality rather than statecraft: Again, to the satisfaction of some regional leaders, the administration has placed a high value on personal relations at an individual level.

This has currency in the Middle East. But these relationships — whether between President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, or President al-Sisi — carry with them an odor of personal benefit over strategic interest. These relationships also come at the expense of more institutional state-to-state relations and people-to-people engagement. While personal relations between leaders may have appeared strained in the previous administration, the strategic relationships enjoyed unprecedented and institutionally deep and enduring cooperation. Reliance on personal relationships may be politically fruitful in the short-term, but can weaken ties between the United States and key regional partners in the long-term as it casts them in a partisan light and devalues diplomacy as “the tool of first resort.” While the State Department’s professional staff continue to execute their work faithfully, their efforts to assert U.S. leverage are undermined by a shared understanding by partners in the region that they act without the full-throated support of the administration’s leadership. This has served to weaken U.S. influence in the region. And finally, disproportionate focus on select personal relationships obscures policy interests elsewhere in the region such as Tunisia, Morocco, or Jordan, or even Libya, and Iraq.

3. **Promulgating rhetoric but not clear plans:** This administration sometimes says all the right things as far as some in the region are concerned: the rhetoric on Iran could hardly be more aggressive, for example. And that approach is not without some logic given Iran’s regional policies, the campaign narrative and views held by senior administration officials. However, there is little indication that the words are matched with deeds. Yes, economic sanctions have taken a front seat and anecdotally have had some bite. But, then again, decisions such as the Syria withdrawal, the lack of active and senior level engagement with Iraq post ISIS military campaign, or the absence of U.S. leverage at the highest levels supporting and pressing for diplomatic efforts in Yemen, or the want for a broad approach to Lebanon illustrate that there is not a comprehensive regional strategy on Iran.⁷ These challenges are exacerbated by the administration’s announced maximalist objectives and an over-reliance on sanctions as a tool of foreign policy. Similarly, the administration has sent conflicting public messages with respect to the rift between Gulf states, but seems to have downgraded its efforts to broker a return to the status quo ante of a cold peace between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the UAE.
4. **Ignoring bad actions in pursuit of “wins”:** As a corollary to the president’s affinity for “strong” leaders, the administration’s approach of seemingly refusing to use its natural leverage to press partners, like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, where they act inconsistently with U.S. interests conveys a sense that some partners have a blank check from the White House to act with impunity. The administration may argue that the adventurism or missteps by regional partners are not important when compared to core U.S. interests like the counter-ISIS or counter-Iran campaigns. But some partners’ actions at minimum conflict with long-held U.S. concerns, and at worse undermine U.S. publicly professed strategy. For example, the root causes of war in Yemen are complex and pose real threats to regional and U.S. interests. But the Yemeni government and Saudi-led coalition’s actions after four years have created a self-fulfilling prophecy. As the conflict drags on and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates find their intervention ineffective and their reputations damaged, Iran increasingly sees its marginal and relatively recent materiel support for the Houthis as an inexpensive means of exploiting the instability to secure

⁷ Center for a New American Security, “A Realistic Path for Progress on Iran,” (January 2019), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/a-realistic-path-for-progress-on-iran>

strategic advantage over Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and in turn, the United States.⁸ The U.S. still brings value to partners in the Middle East, and that affords the United States the opportunity to express concerns when warranted, and press for changes in approach when required.

IV. Recommendations for Where Policy and Congress Could Go

Middle East policy has presented no shortage of challenges in recent memory. In the coming months and years the United States, and Congress in particular, will need to keep a watchful eye on signs of resurgence of groups like ISIS and al-Qa'eda; the disintegration of internationally supported political processes in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere; the unintended escalation and conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, or in the Gulf and Red Sea; the weight of humanitarian and displacement crises and refugee pressures from and in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen; the ever-increasing use of repressive means against peaceful citizens across the region; and the consequences of unanswered economic and political grievances. Within all that complexity, there are a number of immediate steps Congress could adopt:

1. **Congress should hold the administration to account for a complete Iran strategy.** The administration's Iran strategy is focused primarily on its economic pressure campaign. And while Iran remains relatively faithful to its current commitments under the JCPOA, there is no imminent crisis to avert. The economic pressure can mount (whether or not it can ultimately succeed, especially outside of a multilateral approach, is a different question); Iran, meanwhile, has not fundamentally changed any of its regional policies despite the U.S. strategy of admonishment. But economic pressure is not an end unto itself. Should Iran elect to abandon its obligations under the agreement, the situation could quickly consume the administration's and Congress' attention. What is the administration's overall strategy? How might it map out a path to the diplomatic engagement necessary to get the "better deal" it believes it can achieve? How can the administration pursue its objectives regarding Iran without further alienating U.S. allies? How does it assess Iran's willingness and strategy with respect to the nuclear program, its upcoming elections, and its overall negotiations posture? How will it maintain pressure on Iran to restrain its regional policies in the interim and during possible negotiations? These are questions the administration, two years in, should be able to answer. Congress should ask for these briefings and exercise its oversight on an Iran strategy.
2. **Congress should act consistent with the notion that diplomacy and development are tools of first resort.**⁹ This includes continuing the trend of restoring budgets to the State Department and to the U.S. Agency for International Development, but also consistently exercising oversight of and positive support for those agencies in their hiring, programming, and policy implementation. It also means that Congress should use its oversight powers to insist that the administration pursue diplomatic ways, means, and ends. Just a few areas where diplomatic efforts could be a benefit:

⁸ Nicholas Heras and Elisa Catalano Ewers, "Congressional Action on Yemen Isn't Only About Yemen," Center for a New American Security (February 2019), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/commentary/h-j-res-37-congressional-action-on-yemen-isnt-only-about-yemen>

William Burns, "The Lost Art of American Diplomacy," Foreign Affairs (March 2019), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-03-27/lost-art-american-diplomacy>

- *To actively support the political negotiations to ease the conflict in Yemen.* The reality remains that the United States has the most leverage to bring to bear on the Yemeni government and the Saudi-led coalition. It must continue to press the parties to cooperate with the UN's efforts to expand the ceasefires, allow for humanitarian relief, and cajole myriad Yemeni groups to resolve their long-standing conflicts through a political process. This does not mean conceding to Houthi disproportionate control. And also does not mean abandoning the real threats the Houthi militias have posed to waterways and to Saudi territory. But it must press partners to abandon zero sum formulations for political resolution while also taking concrete steps to defend and disrupt missile threats on land and sea.
- *To compete for influence in Iraq.* Sustaining a full partnership with Iraq is in U.S. interests across the board: economic, counter-terrorism, political inclusivity. Reducing Iraq to a pro-or anti-Iranian asset ignores the benefits of continuing to build strong and reliable relationships with all elements of Iraq's political and civil society.

Finally, Congress should ensure that we field the strongest team possible to pursue diplomacy on par with other tools in the U.S. kit: that means confirming qualified career and political ambassadors and senior officials at the State Department.

3. **Congress should insist that U.S. support to partners does not come with a blank check, but with a firm commitment to hold partners accountable for their actions.** The United States still provides an overwhelming security guarantee to the region through, if nothing else, its sheer presence. It provides economic and investment opportunities beyond almost any other potential partner. The benefits of U.S. partnership to the region go beyond these few examples, even in the context of perceived and real U.S. retrenchment. All that to say that the United States still retains significant leverage in its relationships, if it chooses to exercise it. If the U.S. does not exercise its leverage, it risks losing it either by being seen as too weak, or too divided to do so. This does not mean necessarily shaming partners or undercutting U.S. interests without cause. But it does mean we should expect partners to maintain a policy of no surprises — U.S.-Saudi relations are a good example of this.⁴⁰ Whether it comes in the form of publicly brow-beating the Lebanese head of state, or diplomatic escalation with Canada, or continued operations in Yemen that disregard the devastating, deadly impact on civilian populations. The U.S. should employ its diplomatic powers, privately and publicly when necessary, to curb the most problematic of these instincts. And in the case of the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, Congress has the power to demand at least an objective examination and transparent presentation of the intelligence and other information, so as to draw its independent conclusions. And it should continue to vocalize the need to protect journalists and free and peaceful expression everywhere.

Congress can play a useful role in using the power of its pulpit and its purse to telegraph to partners that they do not have a blank check to operate in ways that are inconsistent with U.S. values and interests. And beyond Saudi Arabia, such leverage should apply whether pressing partners not to exacerbate conditions in Libya by proxy extension, or to reconsider the sale of sensitive surveillance technologies that can be used for repressive means. Congress can pursue a bipartisan approach to the region that does not create room for partners to choose one side over

⁴⁰ Derek Chollet and Ilan Goldenberg, "the United States Should Give Saudi Arabia a Choice," Foreign Policy (November 2018), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/30/Saudi-Arabia-Should-Be-Given-A-Choice-Stop-the-Surprises-or-Suffer-the-Consequences-Mbs-Khashoggi/>

another. There is plenty of room for agreement, whether it be support for Israel's security while also keeping the road to peace open and a two-state solution viable, or reaffirming commitments to the security of regional partners in the Gulf without conceding that proxy wars that further inflame existing instability in half a dozen countries in the region are in the U.S. interest. Prioritizing institutionalized ties over personal relations are critical to a bipartisan and unified national strategy regarding friends and foes alike.

4. **Congress should continue to use its voice and its convening authority to caution against actions that are inconsistent with U.S. values and interests.** The United States should not consider the dissolution of partnerships in the region. It is impractical, and does not serve U.S. interests. But our policy can and should assess its relationships honestly and in all their complexity. Consulting and coordinating with partners closely on shared interests is vital. Similarly, it is critical to remind partners that the United States views human rights violations and overall repressive policies as part of the continuum of regional instability. It is worthwhile remembering that the United States retains those characteristics and values that defined its rise to leadership as a singular superpower in the last century.

While there may be need for healthy domestic discussion about what shape American exceptionalism takes in today's world,¹¹ the United States remains unmatched in its people, values, and innovative spirit, and can still model that approach both to its friends and its adversaries. This need not be zero-sum, but rather a realistic and achievable approach that requires modest action and can be implemented consistently. Congress can keep such a discussion public and present, and check any indications that partners are acting with impunity against U.S. values and interests.

¹¹ Jake Sullivan, "What Donald Trump and Dick Cheney Got Wrong About America," *The Atlantic* (January/February 2019), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/01/yes-america-can-still-lead-the-world/576427/>

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Ms. Catalano Ewers.
Mr. Benaim, you are recognized.

**STATEMENT OF MR. BENAİM, SENIOR FELLOW, CENTER FOR
AMERICAN PROGRESS**

Mr. BENAİM. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of the committee. I appreciate this opportunity and invitation to testify.

I start from the premise that no party and no president has monopoly on wisdom or wishful thinking, on success or failure, least of all in this region that has thwarted so many good intentions.

There are no easy choices, but there are better and worse ones, in my mind, and better and worse outcomes to expect as a result.

The retaking of the last ISIS-held villages in Syria, a bipartisan project started by one president and finished by another, shows that U.S. leadership can still tackle major regional challenges.

But other developments make clear the need for congressional oversight and tough questions in service of bringing out the best policies to serve the country's interest.

That starts with making sure that ISIS cannot come back, Iran cannot acquire a nuclear weapon or hurt our allies, protecting our ally, Israel, and key partners.

But I would argue that these goals cannot be cleanly separated from the destabilization and radicalization due to ongoing regional conflicts and deficits outlined over the years in the Arab Human Development Reports.

Two years in, I am worried that the current approach will leave the Middle East's conflicts deeper and the region less stable, more dangerous, and more likely to require U.S. resources and attention for years to come.

Two years in, I would say the record is decidedly mixed. I think the Trump administration deserves credit for seeing through the military campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

But I am worried that they are under investing in the aftermath. They have sought to reorient Middle East policy around Iran but have yet to offer a realistic path to reconcile maximalist goals and rhetoric with minimal investment beyond sanctions to create the conditions for progress.

They have sought to restore regional partnerships that the chairman spoke of earlier. But they have done so too often by offering a blank check to Saudi Arabia and giving rulers impunity for abuses at home and destabilizing moves abroad.

This committee has held, I thought, commendable hearings on the subject of Yemen and I agree with the need to use legislation to end U.S. support for the war in Yemen and to send a clear signal and give leverage to people pushing for peace to turn a cease-fire into peace talks—while still fighting al-Qaeda and helping Saudi Arabia defend its territory against Houthi missiles.

Tools and process also matter to outcomes, and I worry also about a systematic downgrading and even dismantling of diplomacy and development, leading to uneven and overly personalized approaches that seem to be hurting what should be broad bipartisan support for key partnerships.

Instead, in brief, I would enhance civilian engagement post-ISIS in Iraq and Syria. I would reset the terms for a partnership and cooperation with Saudi Arabia and demand more responsible action.

I would vote to end U.S. support for the war in Yemen in service of a larger peace, which is a bigger project than simply voting on U.S. support.

I would demand an Iran strategy with realistic objectives, and I would protect U.S. diplomacy and development and seek to restore human rights as a U.S. policy priority.

It is not easy, but it is essential to engage with not just States and rulers but societies who will be drivers for long-term stability or instability.

I thank you for having me and look forward to your questions.
[The prepared statement of Mr. Benaim follows:]

Prepared Testimony
Daniel Benaim
House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee
on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism
“Assessing U.S. Policy Priorities in the Middle East”
April 3, 2019

Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, members of the committee, it is my honor to testify before you. No party or president has a monopoly on wisdom or wishful thinking, on success or failure. It is in that spirit that I offer the below assessment.

The retaking of the last Islamic State-held villages in Syria – in a campaign designed and launched by one administration and completed by the next – shows that U.S. leadership can still tackle regional challenges. But other recent developments make clear the need for Congressional oversight and action to deliver more responsible policies to advance U.S. priorities.

Two years in, the current administration’s record is decidedly mixed. It has sustained the anti-ISIS military campaign, while underinvesting in its aftermath. It has sought to reorient America’s Middle East policy to focus on countering Iran, but has yet to offer a realistic path to reconcile maximalist goals and rhetoric with relatively minimal efforts to change the equation beyond sanctions. It has worked to restore frayed regional partnerships, but too often outsourced regional developments to partners while granting impunity for destabilizing moves and domestic repression. It has also undercut U.S. influence by systematically downgrading diplomacy and development tools, contributing to an uneven, hyper-personalized approach at the expense of expertise, civilian capacity, transparency, and bipartisan support for key relationships.

Such an approach – unquestioning embrace of complicated partners, escalating tensions without realistic goals, and shortchanging civilian power, U.S. values, and conflict resolution – may yield near-term tactical gains, but is unlikely to succeed on its own terms. It is far more likely a recipe to exacerbate the region’s underlying divides and deficits, create conflict, and leave behind a less stable and more dangerous Middle East. Part of Congress’ role is to ask tough questions and bring forth a better strategy. Among those it should ask now are: Will a “blank check” to Saudi Arabia and others serve U.S. interests in the long term? What is the end game with Iran beyond continuing to apply the tool of sanctions? And how can we hope to prevent crises or exert influence while slashing support for diplomacy and development?

A sounder approach would enhance civilian engagement to help prevent ISIS from returning. It would put greater emphasis on containing and resolving rather than inflaming the region’s divides. It would seek a partnership model that pairs U.S. reassurance with demands for greater responsibility, including regional conflict resolution and curbing domestic repression. It would seek to contain Iran’s malign behavior with partners, but do so within the context of a strategy that better matches ends and means and leaves open a peaceful path. And it would reinvest in the civilian tools of American power to engage societies as well as states – not simply to counter ISIS or Iran, but to address a broader range of long-term internal drivers of instability.

Regional Trends

The Middle East today is confronting several layers of interlocking competition that feed intense polarization and fragmentation. Regional players, sub-state and non-state groups, and outside powers all vie for power, intervene in each other's affairs, and test the limits of a weakened system. Behind these changes are lingering questions about U.S. intentions and staying power, as the perception of a U.S. "long goodbye" encourages others to fill the void.

Intense Saudi-Iranian competition pits a bloc of Sunni states, backed by the United States and quietly aligned with Israel, against a diverse Iranian-led "resistance axis" featuring Syria's regime, Hezbollah, Hamas, Houthis, and Shia militias. This rivalry has fastened itself onto local conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere as Iran exploits societal divides and governance gaps to cultivate proxies. Countries have put more energy into proxy conflict than peacemaking or rebuilding afterwards, and the people of the region's neglected battlegrounds have paid a steep price. Meanwhile, a deep and growing rift has opened up over the character and leadership of the Sunni world, with Turkey and Qatar on one side and Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt on the other. The split has divided America's regional partners into rival camps instead of uniting them to counter Iran. Both of these conflicts have been intensified by the ascent to power of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS), who has introduced a confrontational, risk-tolerant, and expeditionary foreign policy.

Many regional actors are testing the limits. Turkey has carved out a safe zone inside Syria. Iraqi Kurds attempted a unilateral independence referendum. Gulf countries are fighting a mutually damaging information war of weaponized hacks and leaks. Iranian-backed Houthis have launched anti-ship missiles. Israel has bombed Iranian and Hezbollah positions inside Syria. Some regional maneuvering has been positive. Countries are forging new partnerships on Mediterranean energy, Red Sea infrastructure, and even counterterrorism in Sinai. Gulf states have cemented quiet security partnerships with Israel and taken public steps to normalize ties.

Great power competition is also returning. Russia aims to build on rescuing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to make a bid for regional leadership as a counterweight to America. China, too, is deepening its investments and pledging billions in loans and aid. Both countries have joined several regional powers in jockeying for footholds across the Red Sea in the Horn of Africa.

Bubbling beneath these changes are bottom-up pressures too often overlooked since 2011. While revolutionary fervor has lapsed into disillusionment in many places, protests in Algeria and Sudan remind us that many of the same political and economic deficits remain, driving a crisis of political legitimacy across the region. Autocratic repression is resurgent, increasingly unconstrained and assisted by cutting-edge technologies. Many leaders are also stoking nationalism to forge internal cohesion. Climate change is another underappreciated contributor to unrest. From drought in Yemen and Gaza's unsafe water supply to displaced Syrian farmers to the massive dam Ethiopia is building upstream from Egypt, the intersection of nature and national security appears poised to drive unrest in the years ahead. All of these trends contribute to the complexities of addressing the key U.S. priorities discussed below.

Iraq and Eastern Syria: Mission Incomplete

The Trump Administration deserves credit for continuing the campaign plan launched in late 2014, which mobilized a 70-nation coalition that worked “by, with, and through” local partners to defeat ISIS. Today, the group holds no territory in Iraq or Syria. However, the U.S. Intelligence Community’s Worldwide Threat Assessment found that “thousands” of ISIS fighters remain in Iraq and Syria, where they will “exploit any reduction in CT pressure” to rebuild and “seek to exploit Sunni grievances, societal instability, and stretched security forces to regain territory in Iraq and Syria in the long term.” The U.S. strategic imperative is shifting in both countries from retaking ISIS-held territory to leaving behind political and security arrangements that minimize the odds that ISIS can return.

Iraq in particular is a place where America should sustain and even broaden its engagement. Iraq remains on the frontlines of three interlocking struggles: first, to defeat genocidal terrorists like ISIS; second, to prevent Iran and its proxies from dominating the region; and finally, to show that different sects and ethnicities can still live peacefully together in today’s Middle East. America has a stake in all three, as well as longstanding security partnerships with Iraq’s central government and Kurdish Peshmerga. An Iraq that finds realistic political and security solutions can be a vital building block of a stable Middle East and more coherent U.S. strategy.

We should treat Iraq as more than an arena for zero-sum competition with Iran. Instead, the U.S. should offer military and civilian engagement that helps Iraq for its own sake and in so doing offers what Iran cannot: a training mission that treats Iraqis as military partners and not militia proxies; a broader vision for civilian cooperation to help Iraq do more to stabilize liberated areas and address citizens’ grievances; diplomacy to help Baghdad and Iraqi Kurds coexist inside Iraq; international leadership that reintegrates Iraq into the Arab fold alongside Saudi Arabia and Jordan; and a political agenda that aligns with Iraqis’ own desire to build sovereign institutions.

Success starts with showing up to help address Iraq’s non-military challenges post-ISIS. On my three visits over the past 18 months, I heard persistently that the U.S. needs more dedicated senior-level contact to motivate Iraqi leaders eager for U.S. political support. So far, neither Iraq’s government nor the international community has done nearly enough to create the conditions for 1.8 million displaced Iraqis to return home. Also, Iraq and Iran share a long border and many close ties, and treating Iraq purely as an all-or-nothing proxy battle with Iran will be unsuccessful. It leads Iraqis to view us with suspicion, and risks backfiring at the expense of Iraq’s stability or the U.S. counterterrorism platform. A smarter approach is to push back hard when necessary, but try instead to harness Iraqi nationalism to build sovereign institutions as a bulwark. Finally, we should remember that Iraqi politicians are sensitive to the words and perceived slights of American leaders and can express their discontent by voting in parliament to withdraw Iraq’s invitation to U.S. troops – a major setback that can and should be avoided.

In Syria, the political and security terrain is even more complex. In the western half of the country, the picture is clarifying as Assad continues his crushing effort to consolidate power, causing immense suffering as Hezbollah and Iran seek to create a new front against Israel. It is in eastern Syria where the United States is most directly involved. The United States, France, and the U.K. deployed troops to train and equip the local Syrian Democratic Forces to defeat ISIS.

This created a U.S.-protected zone of influence in eastern Syria. However, in 2018 the Trump administration froze and then terminated stabilization aid and then announced a U.S. withdrawal by tweet in December, surprising both local partners and deployed allies. Since then, an erratic, confusing push and pull of policy pronouncements has created uncertainty about U.S. strategy, timeline, intentions, and reliability. The most recent iteration suggests that four hundred U.S. troops will remain in northeastern and southeastern Syria into 2020.

Syria offers no easy answers. Having squandered hard-won leverage to set the terms for what comes next alongside local partners, the United States must now play a diminished hand. It needs to continue counterterrorism partnerships with SDF fighters against an ongoing ISIS insurgency; urge Arab-Kurdish cohesion as the SDF negotiates future autonomy with Assad; halt further Turkish military incursion; steady allies jolted by U.S. unsteadiness; and ready itself for a streamlined military presence and eventual full departure. All of this is made harder by the decision to freeze stabilization funds last year and request none for the year ahead – funds which could help support both U.S. political objectives and force protection. What happens next in eastern Syria is a chance to influence the broader question of Syria’s future, a process in which the United States should be engaged. Significant questions for oversight include not only the substance and soundness of the overall strategy, but both the legal rationale behind two small U.S. expeditionary deployments in different parts of Syria and plans to protect them.

Finally, America can do better than to ban entry from entire countries or shut our doors to refugees. Just 62 Syrian refugees were admitted in FY2018, a 99.5% drop from FY2016. The U.S. should be proud of its humanitarian aid overseas. However, it is practically feasible and morally necessary to lead by example at home and safely welcome Syrian and Iraqi refugees.

Regional Partnerships: Reassurance and Responsibility

The administration has made a concerted effort to deepen U.S. support for longstanding regional partners, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel. Such partnerships hold the promise of lightening America’s load, but they also present dilemmas when partners diverge from U.S. goals and draw upon or even enlist U.S. support to act contrary to our interests or values.

The centerpiece of the Trump’s administration’s regional strategy and its Arab partner of first resort has been Saudi Arabia and its Crown Prince, Mohamed Bin Salman. He is spearheading dramatic societal and economic change at home, a ruthless crackdown ahead of royal succession, and a more activist foreign policy. Leadership on both sides today hopes to expand cooperation in areas as diverse as Mideast peace, arms sales, counter-extremism, and even nuclear power.

A pattern of destabilizing Saudi policies has also emerged that raises questions about trajectory, priorities, and judgment. Each seems to have been enabled by lack of U.S. pushback or even encouragement at the highest levels. Days after President Trump made Riyadh his first overseas destination, Saudi Arabia led a blockade of Qatar, which hosts U.S. Central Command, bursting open a divide among U.S. partners with no end in sight. In November 2017, Saudi Arabia reportedly held Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri against his will. In August 2018, Saudi Arabia expelled Canada’s ambassador over mild human rights criticisms. Remarkably, the U.S. declined to support Canada. All of this helped set the stage for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a

legal U.S. resident, an act for which there can be no impunity. The United States should insist on full and transparent accounting and that all involved face appropriate consequences.

At the same time, the ongoing Saudi-led, U.S.-supported bombing campaign in Yemen has descended into the world's most pressing humanitarian crisis. Both the full committee and the Middle East subcommittee have heard insightful testimony on this topic in recent months. I share the view that Congress should act to end U.S. support for the war in Yemen and work to turn a shaky ceasefire into a broader diplomatic solution. This alone will not end Yemen's fighting and should be paired with intensive humanitarian effort, continued counterterrorism operations against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and a renewed commitment to assist Gulf partners defending their territory against unacceptable Houthi missile and UAV attacks.

The U.S. has more leverage than it realizes – and reigning in reckless or divisive actions by partners is part of denying Iran opportunities to expand its influence. It is time to reassert that leverage and reset the terms of U.S. Saudi relations to chart a more responsible path forward with broader support. A bipartisan strategic review would be one such path. The goal should be to move past false choices between punitive teardown and unconditional embrace to consider more fully how the U.S. can and should seek to shape Saudi behavior and what that means for future cooperation, such as the sale of offensive weaponry and the export of sensitive nuclear technologies. These are not mere commercial exports. They are strategic decisions with implications for regional and U.S. security and should be treated as such.

In the U.S.-Egypt relationship, President Trump has shifted the tenor of relations, but done so in part by breaking with longstanding bipartisan commitment to champion human rights. As President Sisi prepares to travel to Washington, warm presidential ties have translated into modest improvements in cooperation. Egypt is receiving U.S. security assistance and purchasing Apache Helicopters to fight the Islamic State in Sinai, but tangible military-to-military cooperation remains tightly circumscribed. While security aid has held constant, Economic Support Funds have dwindled, meaning that Egypt's economic reforms have not received significant U.S. support. There has not been a confirmed U.S. ambassador in Cairo in nearly two years. Meanwhile, Egypt's stifling of dissent is unabated as President Sisi's supporters advance constitutional amendments to keep him in office until 2034, without any U.S. comment. Egypt's repression represents a strategic liability to the United States – as well as a moral challenge – because it undermines long term efforts to defeat violent extremists in the battle of ideas and lessens Egypt's chances of rediscovering the intellectual and societal dynamism of its past. While the administration secured the release of Aya Hegazy, other dual citizens such as Mustafa Kassem and thousands of Egyptians remain jailed. Too often the administration has stood silent.

U.S.-Israel relations are a different case. Strong support for Israel remains overwhelmingly bipartisan, reflected in votes for missile defense systems like Iron Dome and the record-breaking security aid package negotiated in 2016. The current administration's views on Iran align more closely with Prime Minister Netanyahu's, and it has taken steps popular with Israelis such as moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem and breaking with U.S. policy and precedent to recognize Israel's claim to the Golan Heights. Arab response has been muted, but such moves – as well as declaring Jerusalem "off the table" and Israeli leaders' suggestion that Golan annexation is a prelude to the same in the West Bank – risk undermining Israel's Arab partnerships.

The current administration professes to be developing a plan for Mideast peace, which remains necessary for both Israel's survival as a Jewish, democratic state and Palestinians' aspirations and rights. This is a worthy objective. But conditions are not ripe on either side now and more action is needed to preserve the possibility of peace in the future. That means maintaining constructive ties with Palestinians. In short order, along with the steps referenced above, America also closed the PLO's Washington office, folded the mission dedicated to Palestinian outreach into the U.S. Embassy to Israel, cut aid to Palestinian refugees, and shut down the work of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in the West Bank, including longstanding partnerships with local hospitals. Steps like these undercut America's position to broker peace and are unlikely to coerce Palestinians into accepting whatever deal is put forward. They close doors that all sides benefit from keeping open. Finally, I am concerned that, in Israel and the United States, the bilateral relationship has been weaponized as a political wedge issue in ways that risk eroding long-term bipartisan support in search of short-term political advantage.

Iran: Choices Ahead

The Trump Administration has made aggressive pushback against Iran its regional priority. Though "maximum pressure," it aims to transform the Iran's longstanding behavior, if not the regime itself. The administration withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, a functioning nuclear deal between the world's great powers and Iran, which took unprecedented steps to address Iran's single greatest threat to U.S. security. The administration has re-imposed sanctions on Iran and listed twelve maximalist demands, from ceasing development of missiles to severing ties with its regional proxies to withdrawing its forces entirely from Syria. Despite alienating European allies, sanctions have indeed badly hurt Iran's economy, dropping oil exports from about 2.5 million barrels per day to just over 1 million. As Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats Congressional testimony made clear, Iran's malign behavior overwhelmingly persists despite sanctions. There are some anecdotal reports of cuts in spending to Iran's proxies in Lebanon and Syria. However, the notion that economic pressure alone can coerce Iran to curtail its regional spending warrants skepticism given Iran's past behavior and relatively small estimated defense budget compared to its neighbors.

The crucial unanswered questions remain what the administration is actually trying to achieve and how it will connect sanctions pressure to larger objectives. One answer is to apply pressure for its own sake indefinitely, in hopes of weakening Iran's hand regionally. Another goal, usually but not always left implicit, is regime change – unpredictable in its outcome, and unlikely to happen absent military intervention or major bloodshed. The declared goal of forcing Iran into a more comprehensive deal would be a welcome prospect but extraordinarily difficult due to both Iran's refusal to pay twice for the same U.S. concessions and the likely unbridgeable gap between current U.S. demands and what Iran would willingly concede even under far greater pressure. In the meantime, Iran may at any time resume the enrichment it foreswore under the deal America left, putting us on the path to confrontation. Congress should push the administration to explain what it realistically hopes to achieve and whether it believes the tools available will accomplish it. The stakes are high. Mistakes along this path risk sliding into conflict.

Investing in Diplomacy and Development Tools and Championing Human Rights

Whatever priorities America sets for itself in the Middle East, it will need all the elements of U.S. power—both military and civilian – to exercise influence on complex terrain. Regrettably, the current administration has set about dismantling America’s diplomatic and development tools in ways that do lasting damage. It was no coincidence that, when journalist Jamal Khashoggi was killed by Saudi agents in Turkey, America had no confirmed ambassador in either Riyadh or Ankara. Acting officials do vital work every day. But U.S. influence is undercut when, twenty-six months in, this administration still has not named ambassadors to Egypt, Jordan, or Turkey. After failing to resolve a Congressional hold, the State Department’s Near Eastern Affairs Bureau still lacks a confirmed Assistant Secretary. These gaps in leadership are just one symptom of a deeper unraveling of America’s diplomatic and development ties. The United States is shuttering its West Bank USAID mission and consolidating an independent mission to the Palestinians. In southern Iraq, it evacuated U.S. Consulate Basra in response to security threats. It froze and then zeroed out U.S. stabilization aid to eastern Syria.

These losses do lasting harm to our ability to engage broadly and deeply with these countries and their societies – and to bring institutional memory and local expertise to inform high-level relationships. Instead, Middle Eastern ties risk becoming hyper-personalized, transactional, and constrained in the hands of the president and a few close aides. While America’s military footprint in the region remains broadly unchanged, a shrinking footprint for diplomacy and development risks creating a worst-of-both-worlds imbalance where America pays for costly hardware and deployments to fight wars but not the far cheaper tools to prevent them.

The other systematic downgrading has been of U.S. support for human rights in the Middle East. Few regions have been as challenging terrain for reconciling near-term interests with enduring universal values. But for all the frustrations and inconsistencies, the knowledge that the United States might stand up for its values has at times acted as a brake on rulers’ worst excesses. Though officials deserve credit for efforts to free unjustly jailed dual citizens and in some cases for raising these issues in closed settings, the prevailing trend is outright impunity for repression.

Policy Recommendations

- **Sustain Military Support and Deepen Civilian Engagement in Iraq.** This includes a narrowly-defined military mission to train Iraqi forces and Kurdish Peshmerga; more dedicated high-level channels to Iraqi leaders, and a U.S. Ambassador in Baghdad; demands for greater effort from Iraq’s government and donors to stabilize areas liberated from ISIS; and an approach to competition that draws on Iraqis’ desire for sovereign institutions as a bulwark against Iran’s domination.
- **Clarify the Mission and Restore Stabilization Aid in Eastern Syria:** The first step for the United States is to reach an internal decision and definitively clarify its timeline, missions, and intentions to its partners on the ground. Congress should demand clarity on this as well, in closed session if needed. In contemplating a longer timeline, Congress should also press the administration to restore stabilization funding for northeast Syria.

- **End U.S. Support to the Saudi-Led Bombing Campaign in Yemen.** The United States should cease support to a military campaign that has contributed to the world's worst humanitarian crisis. It should redouble efforts to expand the current ceasefire into a peace process. Counterterrorism strikes should continue. The U.S. should redouble efforts to help partners defend their territory against Houthi missiles and UAV.
- **With Saudi Arabia, Restore Oversight and Seek to Rebalance Relations:** Congress should press the administration, including through a bipartisan strategic review, to update the terms of U.S.-Saudi cooperation to better advance regional stability and curtail forms of cooperation that do not. Congress should exercise vigorous oversight of sales of offensive weapons; exports of sensitive nuclear technology; and private security contractors and intelligence firms involved in repression and abuses. A confirmed, empowered U.S. ambassador is vital to put relations on a firmer foundation.
- **Support Israel's Security on a Bipartisan Basis, But Keep Open a Path Peace:** U.S. support for both Israel's security and a two-state solution still represents Israel's best path to survive as a Jewish democracy. Shuttering America's longstanding points of contact with Palestinian leaders and society makes peace harder, not easier. Using relations as a partisan wedge issue in either country risks reducing broad support over time.
- **With Iran, Encourage a Realistic Strategy that Matches Ends and Means:** The current Iran policy has squandered the JCPOA to pair maximalist goals with sanctions pressure insufficient to bring about fundamental changes. Oversight should include tough questions on the administration's goals and how it plans to match ends and means.
- **Protect U.S. Diplomacy and Development Tools:** Reject proposed budget cuts and work with administration and Senate colleagues to ensure nomination and confirmation of ambassadors to key posts. Work to restore diplomatic and development programs. Congress and the administration should seek opportunities to broaden relations beyond heads-of-state and close associates to include entire governments and societies.
- **Restore Human Rights as a US Policy Priority.** For all the challenges and friction these issues may cause, America should not abandon its efforts to champion universal rights and political and economic reform in the Middle East. U.S. leaders should continue to raise human rights challenges with regional partners, in public and in private. Where the administration refuses to do so, Congress has a special responsibility to be heard. Congress should also make the moral and practical case to reverse discriminatory travel policies and safely admit well-vetted Syrian refugees.

I thank the committee for the opportunity to testify and look forward to your questions.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Benaim.
Ms. Pletka, you are recognized.

STATEMENT OF MS. PLETKA, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT, FOREIGN AND DEFENSE POLICY STUDIES, AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

Ms. PLETKA. Mr. Chairman, Mr. Wilson, and members of the committee, it is always an honor to testify before this committee.

If I may, I would like to suggest an amendment to the question you pose in this hearing. You ask what are U.S. policy priorities in the Middle East, and that question really cannot be answered without asking what the United States seeks to achieve in the region.

If our only interest is the immediate suppression of ISIS, our leaders should feel free to declare mission accomplished. But for those of us who recognize that ISIS is the fourth iteration of what used to be called al-Qaeda in Iraq and that it will be back, sooner or later, the truth is that our mission is far from accomplished.

Indeed, it seems right to question what our mission actually is, not just in Syria but throughout the region. The real question before us is what is the just and lasting end game for the United States in the Middle East.

We can talk about Syria, and we will, or Iraq or Iran or Yemen or Saudi Arabia in endless detail. I promise. And your members can offer more legislation disincentivizing terrorism, incentivizing cooperation with U.S. allies, arming good guys, sanctioning bad guys.

But without an end game, our policies are nothing more than this year's tactics. What should the end game be? To my mind, the right question to ask is how future presidents of the United States can avoid being drawn into Middle Eastern conflicts.

The problems of the Middle East are national; they are sectarian, regional, political, and economic in nature. Some have suggested that the right thing to do is to ignore them and let the people of the region sort them out. After all, why does who governs Yemen or Syria matter in Florida or South Carolina?

And the answer is, for the most part, it does not until it does. Because we so often wait for a problem to become a crisis, those in the Middle East who are suffering under tyranny or inequality or discrimination or privation seek solutions that do have an impact on us.

Think of the people of Syria turning to ISIS or the Shi'ites of Yemen turning to the Houthis or the people of Iran turning to the ayatollahs. Problems that were smaller and manageable become unmanageable challenges to U.S. interests and security.

The region attracts Salafi jihadis, outside powers, and sundry bad actors because it is rife with opportunity and the question before us whether we want to continue to give them those opportunities.

Every time we decide to do so, Americans are put in harm's way. Every time we decided Iran does not matter, Hezbollah does not matter or Shi'ites get what they deserve or Saudis deserve to be threatened or southern Yemenis do not deserve access to their nation's wealth or Libyans are somehow ungovernable or Muslims are

uninterested in democracy, we open the door to those who offer to resolve those problems for the region.

So what should our policies be? In Lebanon, we need to end the fiction that the government is independent of Hezbollah, a terrorist group. Any other nation in that situation would not be allowed to have a U.S.-designated terrorist group sitting in the cabinet and itself avoid designation as a State sponsor.

We need to more aggressively pinpoint Hezbollah financiers and supporters. We need to be more sure that the Lebanese armed forces has absolutely no relationship with Hezbollah. I am certainly not sure of that.

In Syria, we definitely need to support Syrian democratic forces and oppose the reinstatement of the Assad regime. We need to keep the Russians out. We need to penalize the Iranians as strongly as possible for their involvement in Iraq.

As my colleague said, we need to end the involvement of the popular mobilization forces in the Iraqi government and we need to compete with the Iranians on the ground. In Saudi, we need to demand the end to imprisonment and targeting of political dissidents and move toward a peace process in Yemen, understanding that that is a two-sided problem. We need to lean on the Iranians for perpetuating that conflict as well.

We need to signal to Saudi Arabia that global arms sales are contingent on improvement in its rights and military records, but to do that, we need to work with our allies to ensure that they do not backfill where we pull out.

In Yemen, we definitely need to recognize the complexity of the situation on the ground and bring both parties to the table. We also need to remember al-Qaeda and ISIS are not defeated in Yemen. That is a battle that we need to work with our Arab allies to continue in our own national security interests.

And on Iran, we need to begin to answer the questions that underpin the Trump administration's very successful sanctions campaign. What is the aim of that campaign?

Is it regime change or is it something else? Those are legitimate questions to ask. Salafi jihadi groups, including ISIS and others, need to—we need to be clear these groups remain resilient.

When they leave Syria, Iraq, and, I hope, Yemen, they have opened beachheads in Africa and in Southeast Asia.

I am going to finish in a second. But, you know, there are just so many challenges in the region. I did not list half of them. We have not talked about Algeria or Libya or Egypt or Israel and the Palestinians.

Our priority should be getting our strategy right rather than constantly addressing the most recent crisis. We can do a lot of good in the Middle East. It is really time we think about both the challenges and the opportunities.

Thank you for your time.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Pletka follows:]



House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa and International Terrorism

On Assessing US Policy Priorities in the Middle East

Danielle Pletka
Senior Vice President, Foreign and Defense Policy

April 3, 2019

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Wilson, Members of the Committee,

It is always an honor to testify before this Committee, and I'm grateful for the request to speak on this important topic.

If I may, I'd like to suggest an amendment to the question you pose in this hearing: You ask, "What are U.S. policy priorities in the Middle East?" That question cannot be answered without asking what the United States seeks to achieve in the region. If our only interest is the immediate suppression of ISIS, our leaders should feel free to declare "Mission Accomplished" for the few weeks or months in which that mission will, briefly, have been done. But for those of us who recognize that ISIS is the fourth iteration of al Qaeda in Iraq, and that, because of the current shape of the resolution of hostilities in Syria, it will be back in one form or another, sooner or later, the truth is that our mission is far from accomplished. Indeed, it seems right to question what our mission actually is, not just in Syria, but throughout the region. The real question before us is "what is the just and lasting endgame for the United States in the Middle East?"

We can talk about Syria, or Iraq, or Iran, or Yemen or Saudi Arabia in endless detail. And your members can offer more legislation disincentivizing terrorism or incentivizing cooperation with U.S. allies, or arming good guys and sanctioning bad guys; but without an end game, our policies are nothing more than this year's tactics. Every single president of the United States since the end of World War II has been entangled in a crisis in the Middle East for a crisis he did not expect when he was elected. Are we going to continue to be surprised every decade? Are we going to keep pretending we're winning when we're not?

What should our endgame be? To my mind, the right question to ask is how future presidents of the United States can avoid being drawn into Middle Eastern conflicts. There is no simple answer, as, notwithstanding the protestations of some, the problems of the region are national, sectarian, regional, political, and economic in nature. Some have suggested that the right thing is to ignore these conflicts and let the people of the region work them out, if necessary with the attendant death and destruction. After all, why does who governs Syria or Yemen or Iraq impact life in Florida or South Carolina?

The answer is that for the most part, it doesn't, at least not immediately. But because the United States too often waits for a problem to become a crisis, those in the Middle East who are suffering under tyranny, or inequality, or discrimination seek solutions that do have an impact on the United States. Think of the people of Syria turning to ISIS. Or the Shiites of Yemen turning to the Houthis. Or the people of Iran turning to the Ayatollahs. Problems that were smaller and manageable become unmanageable challenges to U.S. interests and security.

The region attracts Salafi-jihadis, outside powers, and sundry bad actors because it is rife with opportunity, and the question before us is whether we want to continue to give them those opportunities. Every time we decide to do so, Americans are put in harm's way. Every time we decide Iran doesn't matter, or Hezbollah doesn't matter, or Shiites get what they deserve, or Saudis deserve to be threatened, or southern Yemenis don't deserve access to their nation's wealth, or Libyans are somehow ungovernable, or Muslims are uninterested in democracy, we open the door to those who seek somehow to resolve these problems.

What should our policies be?

- In Lebanon, to end the fiction that the government is independent of Hezbollah. Any other nation in that situation would not be allowed to have a U.S.-designated terrorist group sitting in the cabinet, and avoid designation itself as a state sponsor.
 - To more aggressively pinpoint Hezbollah financiers and supporters within Lebanon, and to isolate them through financial and travel sanctions.
 - To cut off US assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces until there is conclusive proof there is no cooperation between the LAF and Hezbollah.¹
- In Syria, to support Syrian Democratic Forces and oppose the reinstatement of the Assad regime, and to support a diplomatic process committed to creating a transitional government for Syria; to oppose Russian intervention in Syria and to penalize all Iranian involvement in Syria. To keep a sufficient number of U.S. troops in the country to ensure terror groups are defeated and that the Assad regime does not return to the wholesale murder of its people.²
- In Iraq, to end all involvement of the Popular Mobilization Forces, or Hash'd al Shabi, in the Iraqi government; and to provide sufficient support, incentives and disincentives to ensure the limitation of Iranian reach.³
- In Saudi Arabia, to demand the end to the imprisonment and targeting of political dissidents; and to move towards a peace process in Yemen, providing Iran ends all support for Houthi groups, themselves on the way to becoming yet another Hezbollah.⁴
 - To signal to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that global arms sales are contingent on improvements in its rights and military records, and to attempt to secure through diplomacy a consensus on this issue.
- In Yemen, to recognize the complexity of the political situation on the ground, and to impose substantial pressures on both the Iranian-backed Houthis and Saudi-backed parties to come to a dialogue that begins to address the drivers of conflict in Yemen.⁵
 - To understand that al Qaeda and ISIS groups remain in the country, and that continued cooperation with Arab allies to disrupt those groups remains a priority.
- In Iran, to begin to answer the question underpinning the Trump administration's extraordinarily successful sanctions campaign, including, beyond the possible renegotiation of the JCPOA, what the aim behind global sanctions actually is.⁶

¹ Danielle Pletka, "Lebanon and Iraq: After the elections," testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, May 22, 2018, <http://www.aei.org/publication/testimony-lebanon-and-iraq-after-the-elections/>.

² Fred Kagan, "Isolationists won in Syria, but internationalists can prevail," *The Hill*, December 26, 2018, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/422864-isolationists-won-in-syria-but-internationalists-can-prevail>.

³ Kenneth Pollack, "Iraq gets a government—and it was worth the wait," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 5, 2018, <http://www.aei.org/publication/iraq-gets-a-government-and-it-was-worth-the-wait/>.

⁴ Danielle Pletka, "Turn Saudi Arabia into a trusted partner in Middle East conflict," *The Hill*, November 4, 2018, <http://www.aei.org/publication/turn-saudi-arabia-into-trusted-partner-in-middle-east-conflict/>.

⁵ Katherine Zimmerman, "Testimony: Taking the lead back in Yemen," testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism, March 6, 2019, <http://www.aei.org/publication/testimony-taking-the-lead-back-in-yemen/>.

⁶ Michael Rubin, "Putting American security first in the post-JCPOA order," testimony before the House Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on National Security, June 6, 2018, <http://www.aei.org/publication/testimony-putting-american-security-first-in-the-post-jcpoa-order/>.

- To press the Trump administration as to whether it has a “regime change” strategy in Iran, and if so, who its desired candidates are to replace the existing Islamic Republic’s government.⁷
- To push back more aggressively on Iran’s disruptive interference and arms exports and terrorist support throughout the region, including in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Bahrain, Yemen and elsewhere.
- On Salafi-jihadi groups, including ISIS, al Qaeda and others, to understand that these groups remain resilient, have embraced new tactics and are aggressively coopting new supporters and establishing new beachheads in Africa, South and Southeast Asia.^{8 9}
 - Both the Trump and Obama administration persisted in following whack-a-mole tactics against Salafi-jihadis, failing to understand the enduring power of this ideology or the tactical nature of the engagement. We can never kill enough jihadis to end these movements, and recognizing that, need to begin to recalibrate both our legal strategy and our understanding of the movement’s appeal, such as it is. Only by denying opportunity and territory to these groups are we going to make headway against them.¹⁰
 - Trumpeting an end to the caliphate promises the same future embarrassment to the Trump administration that trumpeting the end of al Qaeda in Iraq did. The question of our victory is not a political one, however, and should be explored in conjunction with the executive branch to begin to look at new ways to preempt rather than simply react to Salafi-jihadis.

There are many more challenges in the region, whether in Algeria, Libya, and Egypt, or between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Our priority should be in getting a long term strategy right rather than constantly addressing the most recent crisis. In addition, our priority should be on problems that might be solved, rather than the perpetual headline seeking that has characterized, for example, the peace process.

The United States can do a lot of good in the Middle East. It’s high time we think about both dealing with challenges and creating opportunities.

Thank you.

⁷ Michael Rubin, “What will Iran’s looming civil war look like?” *The National Interest*, December 15, 2018, <http://www.aei.org/publication/what-will-irans-looming-civil-war-look-like/>.

⁸ Katherine Zimmerman, “Terrorism, tactics, and transformation: The West vs Salafi-jihadi movement,” American Enterprise Institute, November 15, 2018, <http://www.aei.org/publication/terrorism-tactics-and-transformation-the-west-vs-the-salafi-jihadi-movement/>.

⁹ Emily Estelle, “The Islamic State is not defeated in Syria. Or anywhere else. Look at Africa,” *AEIdeas*, December 20, 2018, <https://www.aei.org/publication/the-islamic-state-is-not-defeated-in-syria-or-anywhere-else-look-at-africa/>.

¹⁰ Katherine Zimmerman, “Trump doubles down on failed counterterror policy,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 19, 2019, <http://www.aei.org/publication/trump-doubles-down-on-failed-counterterror-policy/>.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Ms. Pletka.

Thanks to all of our witnesses for your excellent testimony. I will—I will begin the questions.

Ms. Pletka, I will actually—I will accept your premise for the hearing. What do we seek to achieve? What is our mission? I am going to ask those questions about Syria because that is the place where so many of these issues in the region come together.

The Syrian policy and—Mr. Chabot, I was referring only to the Syria policy in my opening comments—but the Syria policy I do find confusing.

I noticed many of us the decision to pull back our military presence and to declare ISIS defeated, depending upon how you characterize it—the end of the caliphate—we all acknowledge that ISIS can come back—that the fighters are—that they are still fighters—that they could take back territory in months.

So as we make those pronouncements are not we turning our back on the SDF and then are we relying on shaky talks with Turkey to prevent a military incursion?

We have got the stagnant peace process that we hope results in the ejection of foreign forces. But Iran continues to cement its position in Syria, which poses a threat there and to our allies.

And, Ms. Pletka, you said our goal in Syria ought to be to keep the Russians—to keep the Russians out and to prevent Assad from holding power. It looks like we failed on both counts.

I do not want to see the U.S. in an unending war. But our current policy seems to simply perpetuate chaos and instability. What should it look like, Ms. Pletka, to your question?

What should our mission—how should we be defining our mission in Syria, since it is not clear that that has been defined or, ultimately, what we are doing to accomplish that mission?

Ms. PLETKA. Thank you for being amendable to the question.

It is the important one to ask. What we need to achieve in Syria is a lasting and secure government that rests on the authority of the Syrian people. That should be the end game in Syria.

If we know what that end game is, we can begin to work toward it. I think there are ways, but I agree with you, they do involve the continued commitment of U.S. troops.

You said absolutely rightly that there is a coincidence of the moral and the strategic imperative. Martin Indyk and I said the exact same thing to the Obama Administration. People like you and people like me were ignored when we said that when this problem was eminently solvable.

It is much harder now. But we need to recognize that through proxies, if we continue with train and equip, if we leave troops on the ground, if we use the territory that has already been liberated, and if we are committed to the notion that Assad cannot remain and therefore that we must work with the Syrian people to find an alternative government to which we can lend some credibility and authority along with the current liberated Syrian people, we will begin at that moment to understand how we can build the blocks toward that.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thanks.

Mr. Benaim, what role does—I mean, you talked about the need to focus on our values and human rights need to be a U.S. policy priority. I agree with you.

That should be the case, I would argue, through the entire region. What happens when it is not viewed that way? How does that impact our ability to succeed in Syria or to hold our allies together as we confront Iran, for example?

Mr. BENAİM. Well, thank you very much for the question.

I think what happens when human rights are not respected is you see a growing trend of impunity where one regime's actions embolden another and that is certainly the case. I think that it is a tragedy that Bashar al-Assad has been able to do what he has been able to do in the western half of Syria. And to see what has happened and his efforts to consolidate power in western Syria is to have regrets about that.

I think from where we stand today, it seems to me that Assad is likely to remain in power in Damascus and that no configuration of forces is well positioned to remove him in the near term.

In eastern Syria, however, there is a real live dynamic process underway and a U.S. opportunity for—a U.S. opportunity to shape the terms of the rest of Syria over territory where the U.S. has exercised a security guarantee and protected a group of people who have fought very ably against ISIS and are still figuring out the terms of their readmission into Syria.

And I would think about how to use that leverage in that time, even having squandered some of it and already announcing a departure. I would think about how to use that to shape meaningful autonomy in eastern Syria and changing western Syria as well as possible.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thanks.

Ms. Catalano, just a really quick answer before I turn it over to Mr. Wilson. If we leaned in more to the American value of human rights as we interacted with Saudi Arabia, would it change Saudi behavior?

Ms. CATALANO EWERS. I think the short answer is it does not matter whether it changes Saudi behavior in the near term or in the longer term. It needs to be talked about.

This is part and parcel of what relationships with friends include and that sometimes is a hard conversation, and when we do not include that in our consistent and constant engagement with Saudi Arabia, we send the signal that it is something the United States does not care about.

And so to the extent that it has to be part of how we approach our engagement our relationships, it is vital to do. I would argue it probably does on the margins have impact over time, as long as we look at it as a constant and strategic element of our discourse.

Mr. DEUTCH. OK. And I know we will get to talk more about that.

Mr. Wilson, you are recognized.

Mr. WILSON. And thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank each of you for being here today.

Ms. Pletka, last May I was grateful to lead the congressional delegation with the opening of the U.S. embassy in Jerusalem, the capital of Israel.

At the same time, policymakers and analysts suggested that such a move would result in major negative consequences for the region. What have been the consequences?

Ms. PLETKA. All of the warnings that were made about the region lighting on fire, about all of the Arabs who had moved closer to Israel in concert with—in concert with Israel's efforts against Iran actually did not do as was predicted.

There was certainly some pro forma reactions from Arab States, much stronger reactions from Palestinians and from the Iranians, from Lebanon and from Syria.

But I think that in terms of what many predicted, frankly, at a certain moment I was not sure either. The reaction was very, very different than it would have been 10 years ago or 20 years ago or 30 years ago.

That is a remarkable change in the Middle East.

Mr. WILSON. And it is great to see that Congress had authorized this back in 1994, and so it has been achieved.

And Ms. Ewers and Mr. Benaim, one of the—it is disappointing to see the electoral gains that Hezbollah and its allies made last May and by Hezbollah's control over the health ministry in the new Lebanese government.

It is clear that the U.S. strategy to counter Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon has not been as successful as it needs to be. What changes do you see need to be made to have greater success in countering Hezbollah in Lebanon and what role would any U.S. assistance have in the revised strategy?

Ms. CATALANO EWERS. Thank you, Congressman. I think part of what I will say is do no harm. How do you—how do we ensure that Hezbollah and Iran continue to use Lebanon for whatever nefarious activity you want to list, whether it be a position from which to threaten Israel or to continue to foment instability in Syria?

To detach entirely from our engagement from Lebanon, I believe, would be a fundamental mistake. I think it is difficult but not impossible to be able to find those areas, whether it be in supporting institutions that demonstrate that they are not completely owned subsidiaries of Hezbollah inside of Lebanon and to cultivate relationships with opposition groups and political leaders inside the system.

It will be a long, long game. It will not have results overnight. But it is one where the United States and, more importantly, its Arab partners in the region have an interest in ensuring that Lebanon is not completely ceded to Iran.

Mr. BENAIM. I mean, I think first and foremost we have to support a strong Israeli military deterrent against Hezbollah.

What they are able to do inside Lebanon, they have gained a great deal of power and I think that we should strongly sanction Hezbollah as we have and I think that we should look for areas of the Lebanese armed forces that we can work with.

But I think taking our ball and going home—what we have to do is engage and compete here. Show up places and act, because ceding the entire country to Iran and Hezbollah only puts us in a weaker position, I think, ultimately.

Mr. WILSON. And I was grateful, Ms. Pletka. You actually cited the Hezbollah influence in Lebanon earlier. What is your view of how we can counter this?

Ms. PLETKA. I agree with my colleagues. I do not think the right thing to do was to turn around and simply give up on Lebanon, although I think Hezbollah and Iranian influence has grown very, very dramatically.

We need to be a little bit more honest with ourselves about the influence that Hezbollah has inside the government and in the Lebanese armed forces and in the Lebanese banking system.

Our Treasury Department has been after the Central Bank for some time but not with complete success, and the reality is that for as long as we are willing to look away because we want to preserve some goodness in Lebanon that is separate from Hezbollah and Iran, the more we make excuses for certain sectors of the government that Hezbollah then uses to finance itself and to arm itself and to extend its power throughout the country.

So it is a real challenge. We need to compete and we need to use our leverage a lot more than we currently are.

Mr. WILSON. And I have had the opportunity to visit Beirut and Lebanon itself. What an extraordinary country it has been and can be in the future.

And so I appreciate each of you having a positive proposal on how we can help restore what was an extraordinary country back to what it should be.

Thank you very much.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you, Mr. Wilson.

Mr. Malinowski, you are recognized.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

When then current administration took office in 2017, President Trump made his trip to Saudi Arabia, changed a bunch of policies. He met with the king of Bahrain and he said that Bahrain would not have to worry anymore about strains in our relationship over human rights.

Resumed arms sales to that country. Resumed arms sales that had been suspended to Saudi Arabia over the use of those arms in the war in Yemen.

A question to any of you—what signal did that send to the region about our commitment to human rights and the post-Arab Spring Middle East?

Mr. BENAÏM. I think that the signal that it sent was a fairly clear one of impunity and it was—the literal words that he used were, “You will not have a problem anymore.”

And it is striking that the hands that held that glowing orb in Riyadh went back to their own countries and in fairly short order in Saudi launched the Qatar blockade, a policy that has divided U.S. partners; in Bahrain, went back and arrested, I think, 300 people from the village of Isa Qassim, the major opposition leader; and in Egypt, went back and signed a restrictive civil society law that had been sitting on the president’s desk for 6 months.

Now, I think on these questions of how to think about U.S. influence over authoritarians in the Middle East, we have to keep two truths in mind: one of which is that each of these authoritarians is dealing with their own internal dynamic and is domestically

driven, in many ways; but we set the conditions externally and the dynamics in which they act. And I think when you see a set of steps like that in rapid order, what you are seeing is the effect of a green light.

It is not to suggest that had we done nothing they would have, you know, acted very differently or been more—much more virtuous. But I think you do see a real calculable effect of impunity there.

Ms. PLETKA. If I may, you certainly—you know—I think you know full well what the signal was that was sent and I think that the countries in the region got it as well.

Unfortunately, we have been sending that signal for a long time. The reality is cutting off the Bahrainis, punishing the Saudis, was the end of the process that should have been paid attention to long ago. The Obama Administration and even the Bush and previous administrations have not paid attention.

There was a minority government in Bahrain. The majority Shi'ites are oppressed. The United States has done almost nothing to stand with them and has ceded that ground to the Iranians over decades.

The fact is we have our Fifth Fleet there. The fact is that we have forces in Qatar and this also causes us to make concessions to the kind of governance that we see that we ought to be pushing against.

It is not—it is not just—it is not just Donald Trump.

Mr. MALINOWSKI. Oh, I would agree with you. Nothing is quite that simple. I would suggest there is a slight difference between the inconsistency of our previous approach and the tremendous consistency of our current approach.

Let me ask you the follow-on question, though, because I think this is an interesting part of the dynamic. Does that signal help us or hurt us with respect to Iran?

In other words, when we give the impression that we are no longer even inconsistently going to press the Saudis, the Emiratis, the Egyptians, on human rights, torture, women, living within their constitutions, allowing public protest, et cetera, how does it affect our ability to reach out to the Iranian people and to promote whether you want to call it reform, regime change, or respect for human rights, the kind of change that we all want to see in that country?

Ms. CATALANO EWERS. I am happy—I am happy to start.

I think it is demoralizing to populations who are looking for signals from the international community—not just from the United States but, more broadly, that acknowledge their legitimate grievances.

And so for a population like that of Iran, it simply underscores what the United States is not willing to engage on and that is the wellbeing of the people.

I would also add to that that it continues to assist the regime in Iran to do what it does best, which is exploit grievances not just inside of Iran but outside of it, right.

So when you look at Yemen, when you look at Bahrain, when you look at Iraq, when you look at Syria, the lack of consistency and the way the United States talks about the values of human

rights allows those communities that are disenfranchised to become much more exploitable by Iran relatively cheaply and with little effort.

Mr. BENAİM. I think it also undercuts the message that—supposedly being sent to the Iranian people that we care about their human rights and their wellbeing.

It sometimes seems as though human rights are a weapon that you use against your enemy in the way that they are applied rather than something that we should support to make our partners stronger and more durable and viable over time.

So I think there is that as well, and I mean, the nature of Iranian influence—the reason that it has grown—is their ability to exploit these kinds of rifts, fault lines, societal grievances, to make proxies out of minorities within countries that—or even majorities that—have not been treated well.

So I think even just on the basic idea of containing Iran, a policy that abjures human rights, we should be clear that it does earn good will from leaders. Leaders appreciate not having to answer these questions. And that is exactly why we should ask them.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you. Thanks, Mr. Malinowski.

Mr. Zeldin, you are recognized.

Mr. ZELDIN. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman, for having this hearing, and I guess kind of building off of this exchange that was just happening but, you know, taking in a couple of other directions, I was critical of the entry into the Iran nuclear deal. There might be a diversity of opinion among today's speakers. Thank you to today's witnesses for being here.

At the time, I was outspoken about the need to tackle Iran's other non-nuclear bad activities because the leverage that brought the Iranians to the table—they wanted the sanctions relief. When we negotiated away the sanctions relief in entering the Iran nuclear deal there was a lot that we were not negotiating.

But before I get to a couple of the human rights issues, I just wanted to ask a question, and this applies regardless of whether you are the strongest supporter of the Iran nuclear deal or the biggest critic of the Iran nuclear deal.

Regardless, there is still an issue with regard—with respect to the sunset provisions, with the verification regime, and the non-nuclear bad activities.

But specifically with regard to the first two, anything that the witnesses can add? Whether you support the deal or not, there is an issue with regards to sunset provisions and the verification regime.

Path forward for U.S. foreign policy?

Mr. BENAİM. I think, you know, you negotiate the best deal that you can get. And whether you oppose it or not, there were indeed provisions that over time would allow the Iranians very slowly to begin enriching again.

There are some provisions of the deal that extend permanently and the fact is that the visibility and verification under the deal is far greater than under any other equivalent agreement and would continue indefinitely.

These are unsatisfying answers to many, I realize that.

Mr. ZELDIN. In all fairness, I mean, with all due respect, I, as a Member of Congress, I have not read the verification. This side deal that was entered into with IAEA and Iran has not even been provided to Congress.

When John Kerry was here sitting in your seat, I asked him if he had read the verification deal between the IAEA and Iran and he said no. He said he had been briefed on it.

So it is hard to defend the verification regime to enforce the Iran nuclear deal. I do not know of a single Member of Congress who has even seen it.

Mr. BENAİM. I cannot speak to the details of that particular verification.

Mr. ZELDIN. What about the sunset provisions that do exist? What do you recommend as far as a path forward if we were to be able to re-enter negotiations?

Mr. BENAİM. I think—I think it is the right question.

Mr. DEUTCH. Excuse me, Mr. Benaim. Can you pull the mic in front a little closer, please?

Mr. BENAİM. Oh, yes, absolutely, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. DEUTCH. Great.

Mr. BENAİM. Is that better?

It is exactly the right question because, ultimately, whether you supported this deal or opposed it, what we are trying to do here is accumulate pressure toward an end.

Pressure is not the goal. The goal is a change in Iranian behavior. The nuclear question is the single—as our allies told us, when Iran was one to 3 months away from a nuclear break out, this is the single question that can take every other issue and turbo charge it and put a nuclear deterrent behind it or lead the United States into war.

Now, I think it is going to be hard to re-enter this agreement because we are going to ask Iran to buy the same horse twice, essentially, to make concessions for things that we did not deliver the last time.

But I think it is going to be necessary to try to offer more to get more time, because you are right, we need more time. We need longer restrictions and that may, frankly, require offering more in return.

But I think that is what we need to do because there are not other choices. Eventually, Iran will start to enrich again, absent an agreement, and we need a new and better deal.

Mr. ZELDIN. And we are running a little short on time and I want to hear from you with regards to their LGBT issues that we are seeing in the Middle East. We are reading about the new news today from Brunei.

Congressman Cicilline and I have been involved in an effort with regard to Chechnya. It is all over the world. So I want you to be able to speak about LGBT and the human rights.

But I would just also offer there has been a lot of misinformation that has gone on all around the world as it relates to Iran's behavior as it relates the IR-6s, IR-8s, access to military sites, acquiring heavy water, and more.

But we only have a limited amount of time. Is there anything that you can add specifically, continuing the conversation that you

had with Mr. Malinowski about this—I mean, there is growing bipartisan concern here in Congress with regards to criminalizing in the worst ways the LGBT community around the world and including Iran and elsewhere?

Mr. BENAİM. I think it is a terrific question and I am delighted that you asked it. I am in the process of doing research on this topic with a group of graduate students at NYU.

These are human rights. They should be part of human rights. When we talk about human rights anywhere, we should be talking about these issues as well. And we may disagree about marriage or other things. But we can all agree on stoning to death. We can all agree that somebody whose life is in danger for their orientation should be able to gain humanitarian parole. These are the kinds of things that we can and should work on, in some places quietly because they create a backlash that can be disadvantageous to the people involved.

But I think it is a bold and important area and I am delighted to see it gain bipartisan support and have a degree of policy continuity going forward. Because I think it is part of the future of human rights.

Mr. ZELDIN. Well, for lack of time I will have to yield back to the chair. Thank you.

Mr. DEUTCH. OK. Thanks.

Mr. Trone, you are recognized.

Mr. TRONE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

This week marks the sixth month anniversary since Jamal Khashoggi was murdered inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Our own intelligence community has indicated the Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman, has been responsible of the murder. We all could agree this is unacceptable. It goes against all notions of human rights and dignity.

I have been disappointed by President Trump's response, which is basically no response. What should Congress be doing to ensure Saudi leadership does not take away the message that they are free to kill dissidents, use diplomatic cover to do so, and how do we send a clear message to the kingdom we cannot tolerate these actions?

Let us start on the left and work our way across.

Ms. CATALANO EWERS. Thank you for the question, Congressman.

I think what Congress has been doing to date is exactly what it needs to continue to do, and more, keeping the spotlight on this. Despite the fact that the administration is less interested in talking about this in a full-throated way, particularly publicly, leaves this body with some of that work and I think that this Congress needs to continue to demand the information that it demanded last week from Secretary Pompeo, which means full transparency with respect to the information that is available, and whatever continues to become available with respect to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.

I think this needs to be scrutinized. I think, based on your judgments of that information, there could be discussion about an independent investigation that goes beyond what was started by the U.N. earlier this year, but I think keeping conversation both pub-

licly and, of course, privately when Members of Congress as well as the administration talks to the Saudi government about why this is so fundamentally against U.S. interests.

Mr. BENAİM. I agree. We need a full accounting. We need a full accounting and no impunity, and I think the clearest and most important message to send is that this kind of thing affects the entire nature of the partnership.

This goes to basic questions of judgment and I think that this is part and parcel of other reckless moves that we have seen require a broader review of all sorts of cooperation that we would engage in with an ally where we respected their judgement. But, in this case, we might have to think twice about including offensive weaponry and nuclear cooperation and U.S. security and intelligence firms that have worked with Saudi as well.

Mr. TRONE. Do you think we should discontinue those efforts?

Mr. BENAİM. No, I think we should take a careful look at each one and figure out which is appropriate and which is not. I think that with Saudi Arabia we have to be careful to both send a message of impunity and not tear down the relationship as a whole. But I think on offensive weaponry there certainly are things that we should pull back on.

Mr. TRONE. But if we coach—if we coach the discussion regarding aimed at that one individual—not at the kingdom itself but the individual—that did this act that we are setting up to rule the kingdom for the next 50 years, would not it be better to bite the bullet now?

Mr. BENAİM. It is a very good question and it is a very complicated question, and I think we should follow the law where it takes us here in terms of a full and transparent accounting in whatever legal sanction exists there.

And I think when it comes to somebody who may rule a country for 50 years, we should look for the possibility to treat it as a country and get that country to be incentivized to behave more responsibly.

You have got your hands around the core of dilemma—the crux of the dilemma, which is that singling out a person risks giving impunity and singling out a person risks damaging a relationship for half a century.

And I think we should follow the law. Follow the Magnitsky Act. Let the law goes where it takes us and demand a full investigation with no impunity.

Ms. PLETKA. First I would like to welcome back everybody who I really, really missed during the Obama Administration and your support for democracy and human freedom.

Where were you?

Second of all, Jamal Khashoggi did not deserve to be murdered by anybody. But I want to really underscore the point that he is not the only person who has been murdered by his government, right, that we have ignored for the last decade, whether it is our friends in Egypt.

And you want to talk about LGBT rights? How much money do we give Egypt? We do not give any money to Saudi Arabia. What about our NATO ally, Turkey, that is so excited about the Jamal

Khashoggi murder that they are leaking to us all of their intelligence about surveillance on the Saudi consulate.

And yet, it is the country with the most journalists in prison of any country in the world—the country that we just had to cutoff F-35 purchases to because they are buying an S-400 air defense system from the Russians.

What I am trying to say is not that we should excuse the murder of Jamal Khashoggi or that we should not investigate it to its fullest. What I am saying is that if those are our standards, then let them be our standards about everything and everybody.

You will have my support.

Mr. TRONE. Thank you very much.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you.

Mr. Cicilline, you are recognized.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for calling this hearing to examine U.S. policy in what is truly a very important region of the world, and thank you to our witnesses for sharing your insights.

I think, like many members of this committee, I am deeply concerned about the lack of clarity, the contradictions, and the dangerous decisions that have been offered as a substitute for cohesive policy toward the Middle East and North Africa by this administration.

On issue after issue, we see a truly alarming lack of strategy or clear priorities. In Syria, we are leaving 1 minute, staying the next. The administration's unilateral actions vis-a-vis Israel have caused considerable concern regarding the prospect for peace and a two-State solution.

In Saudi Arabia, the administration embraces a crown prince who is believed to have had a journalist hacked to death. In Yemen, the administration supports a military operation that furthers a conflict with catastrophic humanitarian consequences.

In Iraq, millions of dollars in foreign assistance has been redirected from established aid institutions to instead fund religious organizations with little oversight or transparency.

The administration unilaterally pulled out the Iran nuclear deal with no plan to stem Iran's nuclear ambitions, and so it goes on and on. Throughout the region we see no coherent strategy or policy. It seems that the administration lurches from one half-baked idea to the next with dire and sometimes deadly consequences.

So I do think this is an opportunity for Congress and this committee in particular to hold the administration to account and to ensure that some coherent strategy is actually developed and implemented.

So I would first like to ask a broad question, because there has been a lot of discussion about our values, and I am just wondering whether the witnesses believe that this administration's de-emphasis of human rights, which I think most objective observers would say is a fact, that whether or not that has harmed our image in this region of the world? Has it reduced our leverage?

Because we all remain very concerned about what it means to America's leadership in the world and our ability to kind of exercise real influence in the Middle East.

But I am wondering whether your view is that this de-emphasis, which seems very clear and noticed by leaders around the world whether that is in fact happening. I will start with you, if I may, Ms. Catalano Ewers.

Ms. CATALANO EWERS. Thank you very much for the question.

I think the de-emphasis has harmed our leverage to the extent that those partners who are perhaps quite content to not have it be part of the conversation, it is a freebie, right.

It allows them to continue to take these actions, whether it be the arrests of journalists or of oppositionists or actions more severe like assassinations. The fact that this administration has not found it necessary both privately and diplomatically as well as publicly to keep this as part of the discussion.

It is not a zero sum. It is not the only issue we talk to partners about. But that it is not consistently raised suggests to these leaders that we do not care and in fact they can act with impunity.

And so I think it has—it has eroded leverage unnecessarily.

Mr. CICILLINE. Mr. Benaim?

Mr. BENAİM. I think that is exactly right. I think that is exactly right. I think that this is something that they do not want to talk about and sometimes they have convinced their publics not to trust us about.

So I do not think it is as clear cut, as everywhere we go, when we talk about this, publics cheer. There is nationalism in many of these countries. It is an underrated force at work in places like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq, and criticizing the government can lead to that kind of backlash.

But I think what is important is that it gives governments pause engaging in these kinds of activities to know that we just might show up and actually exercise our values.

Now, the natural by-product of mixing principle and prudence is inconsistency. It is what happens. It is part of balancing our various interests.

But the fact that we care and the fact that we show up really does constrain behavior in ways that I think are meaningful.

So I think it is less about our influence with populations than our leverage to work on things we care about. And, ultimately it is about the value of these partnerships and the ability of our partners to hold up as durable partners and not find ourselves in the kind of situation we do with Saudi Arabia where their domestic repression makes them a less valuable partner for the things we need to do together.

Mr. CICILLINE. And is that problem exacerbated when the president of the United States in fact describes the free press as enemies of the people, questions the legitimacy of election outcomes, attacks the rule of law in this country, or the independence of the judiciary or undermines law enforcement?

It seems really difficult for the United States to be an effective powerful advocate for democracy, rule of law, self-governance, frankly, when we have a president of the United States who is saying things which undermine those very institutions we are trying to promote.

How can Congress respond to that in an effective way if there is any way? Or am I just being overly sensitive?

Mr. BENAIM. I think you have described the problem admirably and I think you have, hopefully, opportunities to vote on all sorts of matters pertaining to the promotion of and preservation of various democratic institutions and reform and revitalization of them in this country.

And it is outside of my expertise that I have been brought to discuss before the committee. But I think it is all very deeply connected.

Mr. CICILLINE. Thank you. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you.

Mr. Sherman, you are recognized.

Mr. SHERMAN. Thank you. We have spent several hundred hours in this room, now maybe several thousand hours in this room, trying to discuss what policies would prevent Iran from getting its hands on a nuclear weapon.

I would like to discuss preventing Saudi Arabia from getting its hands on a nuclear weapon, because as I have said all too graphically and all too often, if you cannot trust a regime with a bone saw, you should not trust them with nuclear weapons.

Now, the Emirates entered into a nuclear cooperation agreement with the United States with all the controls. But they are going forward, apparently, with nuclear power. I do not know if this is within the expertise of any of our panellists.

Are the Emiratis going forward with generating nuclear power and does it make any economic sense, given that they are on a peninsula that produces far more natural gas than it consumes and therefore that natural gas is either flared or, at great expense, liquefied?

So does it make sense if you are on the Arabian Peninsula to generate electricity with nuclear power the way the Emiratis say they are going to do?

Anybody have an answer?

Ms. PLETKA. It depends what your attitude toward nuclear power is as an environmental issue. Certainly—

Mr. SHERMAN. I have never—the Green New Deal is a major motivating factor in many places. Probably not Dubai.

Ms. PLETKA. I have not spoken to them about that.

Mr. SHERMAN. So assume that—I mean, obviously, there is some reputational plus for saying we are not emitting greenhouse gases. There is a minus for saying we are using nuclear power. Nobody ever got the Sierra Club award by building a nuclear power plant. Assume that they are indifferent for their worldwide image and on the carbon issue.

Ms. PLETKA. I actually think it is a very interesting area of questioning and I think it is an important area for Congress to pursue. The United—the United—

Mr. SHERMAN. OK. If there is—if there is anybody that can get us an answer for the record, that would be helpful—

Ms. PLETKA. I would be happy—

Mr. SHERMAN [continuing]. Because I know these questions are coming out of left or right field.

So, now, one question that answers itself. Saudi Arabia could enter into a nuclear cooperation agreement with us with all the controls that the Emiratis agreed to. They are balking at that be-

cause they want the capacity to do more than generate electricity with nuclear power.

Does this inference or anything else cause you to think that the Saudis would like to have the capacity to move toward a nuclear weapon, should they later make the decision to go forward?

I will start with—yes.

Ms. CATALANO EWERS. Thank you, Congressman.

I will start with the end of that question and then—and then add a couple of points. I am not sure that I would infer directly that the desire to not adhere to the same kind of agreement that the UAE already has with the United States on civil nuclear energy is directly attributable to Saudi Arabia's desire to maintain the ability to develop a nuclear weapon at some point.

I think it has as much to do with issues of sovereignty, certainly, Saudi Arabia's desire to not telegraph that it gets a shorter deal than Iran.

And so I think there are other considerations.

Mr. SHERMAN. Well, I would point out, the deal Iran gets is significant limits on its nuclear program and enemy status with the United States. They get both of that.

So to say that will they get to have a few centrifuges, they get centrifuges and if there is any sanction that we can put on them that we have not legislated, yes, that should be our next market.

Ms. CATALANO EWERS. I wholly concur, Congressman.

But I think from the perspective of the Saudi government—

Mr. SHERMAN. Yes.

Ms. CATALANO EWERS [continuing]. There is this perception that if Iran has any indigenous enrichment capability, then the Saudis would not concede to giving that up just as a matter of practice.

Now, I think when we come back to the discussion of a 1–2–3 agreement with Saudi Arabia, what we need to keep in mind is what is in the primary U.S. interest and that is that agreement in various forms, and I am not an expert in this particular area, but I can say that we need to demand that commitment that abides by normative standards and—

Mr. SHERMAN. And I see my time is—

Ms. CATALANO EWERS. Sorry.

Mr. SHERMAN [continuing]. And I do want to bring up one thing. The administration has issued seven licenses under Part 810 to allow the transfer of nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia and Congress has not one millimeter of knowledge as to what is in it. That is a departure from the—from not only practice but law.

And I hope this committee joins with my committee, which is the Nonproliferation Committee, among other things, in demanding that we get those Part 810 licenses. And it is simply absurd for the administration to say yes, Congress has a role with regard to nuclear cooperation agreements so we will figure out a way to transfer nuclear technology to the Saudis without having such an agreement.

And with that, I yield back.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thank you very much.

I thank the witnesses and all of the members for being here today. Witnesses, thanks for your testimony.

Members to the subcommittee may have some additional questions for you. We ask that you respond in writing to any of those questions.

I request my colleagues—to my colleagues that any witness questions be submitted to the subcommittee clerk within five business days on a whole range of issues that we will be touching on over the rest of this Congress—our alliances and security and democracy and terrorism and human rights, and so many others.

Thanks for helping to set the stage for what comes next.
And with that, this committee is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:45 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

**SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128**

Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism

Ted Deutch (D-FL), Chairman

April 3, 2019

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, to be held by the Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building (and available live on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>):

DATE: Wednesday, April 3, 2019

TIME: 2:00 pm

SUBJECT: Assessing U.S. Policy Priorities in the Middle East

WITNESS: Ms. Elisa Catalano Ewers
Adjunct Senior Fellow
Middle East Security Program
Center for a New American Security

Mr. Daniel Benaim
Senior Fellow
Center for American Progress
Visiting Assistant Professor
Program in International Relations
New York University

Ms. Danielle Pletka
Senior Vice President
Foreign and Defense Policy Studies
American Enterprise Institute

By Direction of the Chairman

The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202/225-5021 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MINUTES OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism HEARING

Day Wednesday Date 04/03/19 Room 2172

Starting Time 2:36 PM Ending Time 3:45 PM

Accesses 0 (to) (to) (to) (to) (to) (to)

Presiding Member(s)

Chairman Theodore E. Deutch

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session

Executive (closed) Session

Televised

Electronically Recorded (taped)

Stenographic Record

TITLE OF HEARING:

Assessing U.S. Policy Priorities in the Middle East

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

See Attached

NON-SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: *(Mark with an * if they are not members of full committee.)*

N/A

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes No

(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: *(List any statements submitted for the record.)*

QFR - Rep. Colin Allred

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____

or
TIME ADJOURNED 3:45 PM

Ave Alred
Subcommittee Staff Associate

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA, AND INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

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	Guy Reschenthaler, PA
X	Steve Watkins, KS

Questions for the Record from Representative Colin Allred
 Assessing U.S. Policy Priorities in the Middle East
 April 3, 2019

Questions:

“To All Witnesses:

1. The current Administration has announced plans to pull out of Syria.
 - a. How can the U.S. do so in a way that does not endanger our Kurdish-Syrian allies?
 - b. What problems could arise should the U.S. leave Syria precipitously?
 - c. How can the U.S. work to support the Syrian people change their government?”

Answers:

Mr. Daniel Benaim:

How can the U.S. do so in a way that does not endanger our Kurdish-Syrian allies?

Congressman, I thank you for these insightful questions. The best way to pull out without endangering Syrian-Kurdish (and Arab) partners in fighting ISIS is to use the leverage of a U.S. troop presence and diplomatic support to let locals negotiate their future autonomy and protections within Syria. The President’s announcement – notwithstanding subsequent reversals – makes that harder. But that remains the best hope from where we stand today: to use however much time the United States has left on the ground and however much leverage that provides to allow locals to negotiate for their future. I believe President Trump has gravely mishandled the implementation of this policy. My hope, however, is that the remaining troop presence and assertive U.S. diplomacy can still help 1) provide sufficient guarantees regarding Turkey’s legitimate security concerns and intense diplomatic pressure to prevent a full-scale Turkish military incursion into SDF-held areas; 2) help local Kurdish and Arab forces hang together to win a degree of autonomy, as mentioned; and 3) to continue working with them to fight ISIS even as conditions shift.

What problems could arise should the U.S. leave Syria precipitously?

While few favor a permanent U.S. deployment in eastern Syria, several problems could arise from a precipitous, ill-considered approach to pulling out. To be clear, some of these might happen even if the U.S. stays – but leaving the wrong way heightens the risk of:

- Turkish military incursion, to fill the security vacuum and – as Turkey has done further west – carve out a zone inside Syria’s Turkish border, at the expense of local actors.
- Internal SDF divides in which local Kurdish and Arab groups, played against one another by Damascus or outside powers, descend into conflict and displacement, leaving space for ISIS to reconstitute.

- ISIS resurgence. There are already signs of an insurgency underway. A too-hasty U.S. departure, one that leaves counterterrorism partners twisting in the wind and consumed with their own fates, risks creating conditions favorable to ISIS' return.
- Brutal reconquest of eastern Syria by Assad. Another terrible prospect would be the Assad regime and its external backers and militias attempting to retake eastern Syria by force – leading to fresh rounds of bloodshed and mass displacement. While there is reason to hope that both sides would pursue a negotiated solution instead, there are no guarantees.
- Reputational damage. While “credibility” is rarely a good reason for major policy choices, the fact is that the President's hasty, uneven, impulsive-seeming, since-reversed policy announcement by tweet raised questions for partners like the Iraqi Kurds whether they could be next and whether the United States remains a reliable partner.

How can the U.S. work to support the Syrian people change their government?

The question of how the United States can work with the Syrian people to change their government has been an immensely difficult one since the first brave Syrian protestors went peacefully to the streets in the spring of 2011. As Assad brutally reconsolidates his power in western Syria, and that part of the country's future clarifies, it is even more difficult now. From where things stand today, it is hard to see what constellation of actors – either the war-weary Syrian people or outside backers – retains both the will and the capacity to forcibly change the Syrian government. That does not mean the United States should abandon all hope of a better future for everyday Syrians– or even of significant constitutional reforms and other changes as Syria's grim picture clarifies. Nor does it mean a headlong rush to reward Assad for his brutality. It does mean that the goal of outright regime change in Syria should be subordinated to more immediate considerations, including the humanitarian plight of the people on the ground.

Ms. Elisa Catalano Ewers:

In order to have a comprehensive U.S. strategy for Syria that preserves U.S. efforts against ISIS' territory and serves U.S. interests, it will be important that the United States continue to maintain a modest, residual U.S. military presence inside northern and eastern Syria, working with European allies in the area, to support the work of local Syrian partner forces who continue to provide security and stability and prevent the re-emergence of ISIS. Uncertainty around this continued presence, however modest, is complicating calculations of those partners — while encouraging challengers and adversaries — operating in the zone in northern and eastern Syria. Clarity in conveying its strategy would serve the U.S. and its allies in this dynamic. Such clarity should include a long enough time horizon and sufficient enough forces along with enablers to continue to provide the necessary support partners on the ground need.

Because the U.S. has maintained operational control over this area of northern and eastern Syria that includes key natural resources of the country, it holds natural leverage. The Syria regime and its allies also seek to control these valuable resources. The U.S. could use this leverage to continue to act towards and press for progress in the political process that does not normalize Assad and his regime and seeks to preserve some elements of the Geneva process. In addition to

keeping a residual force in the area to maintain this leverage, the U.S. should consider how to increase economic support for reconstruction in northern and eastern Syria, working with partners to fund and execute it. The U.S. staying in the fight in a strategically smart and modest way sets an example for partners also to invest in the reconstruction of this area of Syria, and continues to support local partners to rebuild and govern while providing de facto support against threats from an ISIS reemergence and other regional aggressions.

Such a policy would maximize the ability to combine such leverage and operational control over territory to negotiate an acceptable political end state. It will reassure allies and partners. It keeps pressure on Russia to do its part to facilitate an acceptable end to the conflict, including a possible workable transition from Assad through the Geneva process.

Ms. Pletka did not submit a response in time for printing.