

THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN SAUDI ARABIA AND LEBANON

HEARING BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ONE HUNDRED FIFTEENTH CONGRESS

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THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN SAUDI ARABIA AND LEBANON

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2017

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:00 a.m., in room 2172 Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. The subcommittee will come to order.

After recognizing myself and Ranking Member Deutch for our opening statements, I will then recognize other members seeking recognition for 1 minute. We will then hear from our witnesses.

Thank you so much for being with us today, and without objection, your prepared statements will be made a part of the record and members may have 5 days to insert statements and questions for the record subject to the length limitation in the rules.

The chair now recognizes herself for as much time as she may consume.

The one true constant in the Middle East has been the uncertainty and the instability of Lebanon since it gained its independence from France in the 1940s.

Sectarian divisions and decades of mistrust among the predominant forces—Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims, Shiite Muslims, as well as outside actors exerting undue influence on what should be internal matters—has ensured that Lebanon will remain in a constant state of uncertainty and instability.

It was just 7 weeks ago today that this subcommittee convened a hearing on U.S. policy toward Lebanon. I cautioned then as I have for many years now that U.S. policy in Lebanon must be calibrated to scale back Iran and its proxy, Hezbollah's, influence while spurring much needed security, stability, and prosperity to the country.

Then, on November 4th, Lebanon's prime minister departed for Saudi Arabia, where he announced his resignation from office.

It is probably no coincidence that this surprise announcement came on the very day that Saudi Arabia had intercepted a Houthi-fired missile outside of the international airport in Riyadh.

The Saudis blamed Iran and Hezbollah directly for providing the arms and support for the Houthis that allowed them to carry out this attack, calling it an act of war on Tehran's part.

It should also be noted that Iran provided the missiles for the Houthis that were fired directly at U.S. ships off the coast of Yemen as well.

These events also happened to coincide with the crackdown by Saudi's crown prince on that same day, which he says is an anti-corruption campaign. Others say it is a power grab, and the truth may be somewhere in the middle.

Hariri, a Saudi citizen himself, stated in his resignation speech that Iran and Hezbollah had undermined Lebanon's sovereignty and he said that his life was in danger.

And if anyone would know what Iran, Hezbollah, and other outside actors are capable of in Lebanon, it is Hariri. As we know, it was his father who was assassinated in 2005 in Beirut with both Hezbollah and Syria's Assad linked to that act of terror and it is no secret that Iran and Hezbollah's influence undermine the sovereignty of Lebanon.

And, unfortunately, we are seeing an effort by Iran to expand this influence and its presence across the region, which has given its main rival, Saudi Arabia, justifiable reason for concern.

Hariri has since returned to Lebanon this week, where he has put his plans to resign on hold but has demanded that Hezbollah cease its interference in regional conflicts.

I would take that a step further and say that Hezbollah and Iran must not be legitimized nor allowed to interfere in domestic issues as well.

I still believe the U.S. must remain cautious over ties between the terror group and the Lebanese Armed Forces—LAF—and we should not put all of our support behind the LAF until those ties are severed completely.

And while this committee has focused on Hezbollah and Iran's role in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, we haven't spent as much time focusing on Iran's latest strategic position in Yemen.

The new Saudi crown prince has taken a series of drastic steps in recent weeks and has shown that he is perhaps more willing to engage Iran directly and he is seeing what would be a great cause for alarm in Saudi Arabia, for the Gulf and for the United States.

Aside from Iran's continued support for the Houthis, there is increasing concern of a Hezbollah presence in Yemen. Imagine what that would mean for Iran's ability to interfere in internal matters of other countries and to put the entire region under threat.

There is simply no way that Saudi Arabia would allow for Hezbollah to gain a presence in Yemen and then build up an arsenal presence on the Saudi border.

Perhaps this is why we are seeing rumors of a willingness for Saudi and Israel to work together. Saudi now understands what it means to be living under constant and immediate threat from Hezbollah and Iran.

But these recent developments should be a cause for concern for the U.S. and our partners. Lebanon is already hosting 1.5 million or more Syrian refugees.

Millions more would flee, likely making their way to Europe or elsewhere. It is also likely to spark yet another conflict as Iran continues its malign behavior and threatens its neighbors.

So how should the United States respond? We must make it clear that Iran cannot continue its destabilizing activity and we must continue to put pressure on it and its proxy, Hezbollah.

We must make it clear that we support a stable Lebanon, free from outside interference, free from Hezbollah's damaging behavior.

We must also make it clear that Iran's support for the Houthis and its buildup of Hezbollah presence in Yemen are red lines that cannot be crossed. We must also continue to support the people of Yemen and the people of Lebanon.

I believe that the U.S. and international partners need to have unfettered access to help deliver humanitarian assistance in Yemen.

I welcome the announcement from Saudi Arabia and the Saudi-led coalition that it is reopening ports and the international airport to allow the urgent flow of humanitarian aid to the people of Yemen.

The Saudi-led coalition must play a role to allow humanitarian assistance into Yemen but the Houthi leadership must stop preventing the shipment and distribution of lifesaving aid without manipulation or diversion to those people in critical need, particularly in those residents in areas controlled by the Houthis' militias.

I further call on all parties to work toward a cessation of hostilities and I urge the Houthi leadership to return to the peace process to halt any further escalation including cross-border attacks in Saudi Arabia.

We need to find a way to hold all parties accountable while working with those willing to work with us to curtail the violence and to bring stability to both Yemen and Lebanon free from outside interference.

I am now pleased to yield to my friend, the ranking member of our subcommittee, Mr. Deutch of Florida.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thanks, Madam Chairman, for convening today's important and timely hearing and thanks to our excellent panel of witnesses for being with us today.

The past few weeks have been dizzying and today's hearing offers an opportunity to help understand the implications of the changes that we have seen in the region.

At the 30,000-foot view, we are clearly seeing a continuation of the ongoing power struggle in the region between the Sunni Arab kingdom of Saudi Arabia as they seek to push back against the expansionism of the Persian Shiite Republic of Iran.

But the Middle East is a complex region and simply painting everything as Iran versus Saudi Arabia is an oversimplification when there is a vast web of actors nations and interests at stake.

I think it is worth reviewing a quick time line of the past few months that have brought us to this moment. In May, the United States reached a \$110 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia, and President Trump flew to Riyadh for his first foreign travel.

Shortly after that, Saudi Arabia and its Gulf neighbors imposed a blockade on Qatar, presumably over its support for Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, and ties to Iran.

Then Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Nayef was pushed in an unusually public way in favor of Deputy Crown Prince Moham-

med Bin Salman—MBS—who will likely succeed the current King Salman.

Now, the new crown prince then launched an unprecedented crackdown on corruption, or a purge of political rivals, or both, in which princes, government ministers, and scores of officials were arrested including the commander of the Saudi National Guard and Prince Al-Waleed Bin Talal, the international investor worth \$17 billion.

That same day, Lebanon's Prime Minister Saad Hariri, a close ally of Saudi Arabia, resigned from Riyadh over Iranian meddling in this country and now, 3 weeks later, Hariri is actually back in Lebanon resuming his duties as prime minister.

So the question for our witnesses is what is going on. I know we're all eager for you to help unpack this whirlwind of activity. I would like to just touch on a few of the issues that I see as crucial to today's discussion, though.

The first is stability in Lebanon. When I was young, the capital of Lebanon, Beirut, was known as the Paris of the Middle East. Tragically, a long civil war, sectarian strife, and proxy conflicts have changed its image.

Lebanon remains an important country, though, and we should work to maintain the delicate power sharing that exists between Sunni Muslims, Shiite Muslims, and Maronite Christians, particular at a time when Lebanon has accepted more refugees per capita than any country in the world, due to the war in neighboring Syria.

Sadly, Iran has taken advantage of the chaos in Lebanon to exert its influence through its proxy, Shiite militia, Hezbollah. Over the past several years, Hezbollah has built up its military capacity and firmly entrenched itself in the Lebanese Government.

In Hariri's resignation speech, he called Hezbollah the arm of Iran that has, and I quote, "managed to impose a fait accompli in Lebanon using the force of its weapons."

Hezbollah's capabilities now rival those of the national army, the Lebanese Armed Forces. And it is worth repeating when I said in this committee last month a legitimate Lebanese Government cannot function effectively when it is in a constant power struggle to govern with a nonstate actor.

Hezbollah is an Iranian-backed terrorist organization responsible for attacks around the globe and we should all be interested in marginalizing their influence.

The second issue is Saudi stability. Our relationship with Saudi Arabia is vital to the Middle East as strategic partners who share common interests.

But we have to be honest in assessing where those interests diverge. While the new crown prince has stated his commitment to reforms, progress on human rights has been slow and unacceptable practices against minority groups and women remain national policy.

And I am worried that the current administration's sole focus on the strategic relationship while ignoring other aspects does not help provide full American leadership on issues vital to the United States like human rights in the broader region.

This administration's perceived carte blanche support for Saudi Arabia has empowered them to take additional steps like the public split from Qatar.

And while Qatar's behavior has no doubt been problematic, and we need to push back against harboring terrorists, Al Jazeera's biased coverage, and their close ties to Iran.

I am concerned that this crisis is a distraction from precisely those efforts needed to combat Iran and lead the fight against terrorism.

Similarly, the war in Yemen is both a distraction from larger challenges and a horrific human disaster. The war has killed more than 10,000 civilians. Twenty million are in need of humanitarian support.

Three million have fled their homes and the country is now facing the fastest-growing cholera epidemic in history with nearly 1 million cases recorded.

The third key issue is the need to push back against Iran, and while this administration continues to talk tough against Iran, I am concerned that our policies on the ground paint a different picture, particularly in Syria where we are allowing Iran, Iran's client Assad, and its proxy Hezbollah to assert greater control over the future of the country.

The de-escalation zones that the administration negotiated with Russia have allowed Iran and its proxies to essentially set up permanent forward bases, operating across from Israel's northern border.

This should be deeply troubling to anyone interested in preventing another war between Israel and Hezbollah and safeguarding Israel's and Lebanon's future.

So, clearly, a lot to discuss. I look forward to learning and getting the answers to all these questions from our witnesses, and I yield back.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you very much, Mr. Deutch, as always.

And so pleased to yield to our members so they can make their opening statements and we will start with Mr. Chabot of Ohio.

Mr. CHABOT. Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you for holding this very important hearing here this morning.

We have a—clearly, a distinguished panel all looking forward to hearing, especially Mr. Abrams. Unfortunately, I have a markup which began at the same time as this hearing started in Judiciary and I have to chair the Small Business Committee starting at 11:00.

But I can guarantee all the witnesses that I will read their testimony and thank you for giving it. I just, unfortunately, won't be here for much of it.

Stability in the Middle East is in the best interests of our nation, obviously, and the world. That is why today's hearing is so timely.

Prime Minister Hariri's pending resignation and a too-powerful Hezbollah in Lebanon threaten to bring more chaos to a region that is already volatile.

Further, political developments in Saudi Arabia raise questions about near and long-term stability in the Middle East, and then, of course, there is Iran.

President Obama and his now famous deal with Iran and infamous side deals have allowed Tehran to meddle even more throughout the Middle East.

This committee has, of course, paid very close attention to that as Tehran seizes opportunities to increase its influence, to develop its military capacity, and to strengthen its proxies, especially Hezbollah and Lebanon.

Nothing threatens our allies in the region more than an unchecked Iran. So I, again, want to thank you, Madam Chair, for holding this important hearing and I yield back.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. And we thank you very much for always making the time to come to our hearings in spite of other commitments. Thank you, Mr. Chabot.

Mr. Boyle is recognized.

Mr. BOYLE. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you as well, Ranking Member Deutch, for holding this hearing. I look forward to this as an opportunity to learn specifically because the last few weeks in the kingdom have been among the most dramatic in decades.

And I am of two minds in terms of what MBS is doing. One was forward in the New York Times piece by Friedman I think a few days ago, which is a fairly generous view that this is a modernization, a crackdown on corruption, a returning of Saudi Arabia back to a more moderate practice of Islam.

However, that piece has also come in for some criticism that that is a naive or overly generous view. So this is really one of the most critical questions that we face, given the Saudi role in funding Wahabbism for the last several decades.

If Saudi Arabia were to return to a pre-1979, more open practice of Islam, that certainly would have a dramatic effect not only on the kingdom but on the wider region in the world.

And so as we go through the witness testimony today, I would be very interested in hearing your thoughts about what you think is behind what MBS is doing and what direction you see Saudi Arabia taking.

Thank you. I yield back.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you very much, my friend.

And now, I don't know if any of our Republican members would like to be—we will go to Mr. Lieu.

Mr. LIEU. Thank you. One of the issues I am interested in hearing about today is Jared Kushner's role in U.S. policy toward Saudi Arabia.

I am concerned that he has no idea what he is doing. He has no foreign policy experience and zero foreign policy credentials.

I am equally concerned he has a massive conflict of interest. Earlier this year, media reports that Jared Kushner companies—the Kushner companies sought a \$500 million cash infusion for the troubled 666 Building in New York.

From the ex Qatari prime minister that didn't work out and then Saudi Arabia blockaded Qatar. Did Jared Kushner give them the green light?

Last month, Jared Kushner took an unannounced trip to Saudi Arabia. Did he ask those Saudi Arabia officials for a cash infusion for the 666 Building?

We need to know if Jared Kushner is working on behalf of the American people or is he working for himself and his family?

I yield back.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you, Mr. Lieu.

Ms. Frankel of Florida.

Ms. FRANKEL. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you for this hearing to you and the ranking member.

I look forward to the testimony here. I know there are a lot of scary things going on in the world, including right here in the United States of America, where we are witnessing a depletion of State Department personnel and resources, which in the opinion of many is a threat to our own national security because we are failing to use the tools of diplomacy and development, and I am interested in your opinion on that subject.

And I yield back.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you, my friend.

Any other members wish to be recognized? Seeing no other signs, I would like to introduce our panelists.

First, I am delighted to welcome back an old friend, Mr. Elliott Abrams, senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Prior to holding this position, Mr. Abrams served in various roles for previous U.S. administrations including Deputy Assistant to the President, Deputy National Security Advisor for Global Democracy Strategy, Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs, and Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs. Wow.

Thank you for your service. We look forward to your testimony.

And next, I am pleased to welcome Dr. Paul Salem—Salem? What—Salem is good? Okay. I don't—I don't know which one is correct, sorry—who serves as the senior vice president for policy research and programs at the Middle East Institute.

Prior to joining the Middle East Institute, Dr. Salem was the founding director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut. He served in various other capacities, focusing on Lebanon.

Thank you for being with us today. Thank you, sir.

And finally, we welcome back our good friend, Dr. Tamara Cofman Wittes, senior fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings.

Previously, Dr. Wittes served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs. She also served as a Middle East specialist at the U.S. Institute of Peace and as director of programs at the Middle East Institute.

We look forward to hearing your testimony. Welcome back.

And we will begin with you, Mr. Abrams.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE ELLIOTT ABRAMS, SENIOR FELLOW FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

Mr. ABRAMS. Thank you, Madam Chairman and members of the subcommittee. I've got material here for about five hearings.

Let me start with Saudi Arabia. I will try to answer some of the questions—what's going on. I think that what the crown prince is doing is reacting to several crises that face the kingdom.

The first is economic—a very young and fast-growing population, huge decline in oil prices, the old economic model that is going to collapse. The state just couldn't throw off enough revenue to support the population and the government.

So some way had to be found—has to be found to employ all of these young people, men and women, and make the economy more productive and less oil dependent and that is the goal of his plan, Saudi 2030.

Second challenge is governance, moving from the old model where you go from one very elderly brother to another. Any event or passage of time is going to render that generation out of the picture.

And the third challenge is the challenge of Iran, and as the Saudis see it, there is a nightmare here, being sandwiched between an Iranian-controlled Iraq and an Iranian-controlled Yemen, with growing Iranian power in Lebanon, growing Iranian power in Syria, and we now see some subversion in the Gulf States as well.

So they've seen a decade of Iranian advances. They believe they see American reluctance to halt those advances and thus, I think, their more assertive foreign policy.

So I think if you ask the crown prince he would say he is reacting rather than acting, and I think that basically we should very much hope that these plans succeed.

But let me turn to Lebanon. Obviously, I'd be happy to go back to that in the Q and A. We have seen in the last decade a very significant increase in the power of Hezbollah in Lebanon and outside Lebanon.

Their realm of operations now includes a lot of the Middle East—thousands of fighters in Syria, trainers to Iraq, backing the rebels in Yemen, organizing a battalion of militants from Afghanistan.

So now Iran has a foreign legion. In addition to the Quds Force, it has Hezbollah. And I say that in part because I have heard people say the Saudis are creating a crisis in Lebanon and I don't think that is right. I think Iran and Hezbollah have created this crisis in Lebanon and, more broadly, in the region, and it raises some real questions for us about our policy toward Lebanon.

What the Saudis are asking for in Lebanon, which is for Hezbollah to stop acting as if it were completely independent of the state, acting on behalf of Iran, refusing to allow the state to have sovereignty within the borders, these are actually the demands of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701 that ended the last war between Hezbollah and Israel.

It called for the extension of control of the Government of Lebanon over all Lebanese territory, full sovereignty, no weapons without the consent of the government, disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon.

That—that is 1701. So when—that Saudi policy that is also American policy. That is also what the U.N. Security Council called for.

Hezbollah is creating, I think, enormous dangers with these actions including the increasing danger of another confrontation with Israel.

In the remaining time I'd just like to raise the question of aid to the LAF—Lebanese Armed Forces—because I wonder if—you

know, we have given them over \$1 billion and the most recent year's amount was I think FY 2017 \$123 million—I wonder what we are getting for that money.

It seems to me we are financing a model that we know is failing, a model in which Iran is serving increasingly as foreign—Hezbollah is serving as the Foreign Legion of Iran.

I am not suggesting today that we cut off all of that aid but I do think it is worth asking. I believe it is the fourth or fifth largest recipient of American military assistance.

If we are trying to strengthen Lebanon's independence we are failing. If we are trying to limit Hezbollah's power, we are failing. If we are trying to eliminate the degree to which Hezbollah serves Iran, we are failing.

If we are trying to strengthen the Sunni or Druze or Christian influence inside Lebanon against Hezbollah, we are failing. So should we continue with this policy of significant financial support for the LAF when it seems not at all to be working?

That is why I think this committee and others need to reassess those expenditures.

Thank you, Madam Chairman.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Abrams follows:]

The Latest Developments in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon

Prepared statement by

Elliott Abrams

*Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies
Council on Foreign Relations*

Before the

Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

*United States House of Representatives
1st Session, 115th Congress*

Madam Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for inviting me to testify before you today about events regarding Lebanon and Saudi Arabia.

Let me begin with Saudi Arabia.

As you know, several weeks ago the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, announced the arrests of eleven princes, some of the Kingdom's most prominent businessmen, and some former officials. He also announced several dramatic changes to top government ministries, including the creation of a powerful new anticorruption committee.¹

The background to these events is the continuing centralization of power in the hands of the crown prince, who is one of King Salman's sons. Over the past two years he has taken over most of the key economic and

¹ Portions of this testimony have been excerpted from Elliott Abrams, "‘Game of Thrones’ Comes to Saudi Arabia," *New York Times*, November 6, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/06/opinion/crown-prince-saudi-arabia.html>, and Elliott Abrams, "Riyadh Realpolitik," *Weekly Standard*, November 17, 2017, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/riyadh-realpolitik/article/2010533>.

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security posts and has clearly emerged as the most powerful person in the government. The crown prince is also deputy prime minister (under the king, who is also prime minister) and minister of defense. All this at the age of thirty two.

This steady seizure of power has given rise to resistance within and outside the royal family, and Mohammed bin Salman's elevation to crown prince was not unanimously supported when the top royal princes met to approve it. In the Saudi system, power has been passed among the sons of the founder of the modern Saudi kingdom, known as Ibn Saud, since his death in 1953. That made the king more *primus inter pares* than absolute monarch. One king was removed by his brothers (Saud, in 1964), and the system has permitted fiefs: The late King Abdullah was head of the National Guard for decades, and his son Miteb bin Abdullah took it over after his death; the late Prince Nayef served as minister of interior for thirty seven years and his son came after him; the late Prince Sultan was minister of defense for nearly a half century, and his son Khalid was his deputy.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is putting an end to all that, taking some of those posts himself and removing others from the seemingly permanent control of any one branch of the family. All power is going to his branch—to his father, himself and his own allies; one brother is now the new Saudi ambassador to the United States.

Is this centralization of power a good thing for the United States, or even for Saudi Arabia? That question will best be answered retrospectively, in about a decade. What's clear now, though, is that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has announced ambitious economic and social changes, from allowing women to drive and mix with men in sports stadiums, to selling off a part of the kingdom's key asset, the Aramco oil company, to challenging the ideology of the Wahhabi clerics. He appears to believe that such moves require sheer power, both to overcome resistance and to move the Kingdom's poorly educated and youthful population (roughly half are under the age of 25) of 33 million into the twenty first century.

The crown prince has spoken of a more modern Saudi Arabia, at least when it comes to the role of religion and the rights of women. Last month he called for "a moderate Islam open to the world and all religions."² But political liberalization is not in the cards. Indeed, a serious crackdown has been underway for the last two years, including lengthy prison terms for tweets that criticized the Saudi authorities. The message from the palace is clear: get on board or pay the price. That message applies not only to commoners, but to the entire royal family.

The crown prince is reacting to several crises that face the kingdom. The first is economic: with a fast-growing and youthful population, and the decline in oil prices we have seen, the old economic model was

² Elliott C. McLaughlin, "Saudi crown prince promises 'a more moderate Islam,'" *CNN.com*, October 25, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/24/middleeast/saudi-arabia-prince-more-moderate-islam/index.html>.

going to collapse. No longer could the state throw off enough income in oil revenues to support the entire population. Some way would need to be found to create jobs for young men, and women, and make the economy less oil-dependent and more productive. That is the goal of the Saudi Vision 2030 plan. The second, as noted, is the challenge of governance, and the crown prince has turned away from the old brother-to-brother system which in any event the passage of time was rendering impossible. The third is the challenge of Iran.

To the Saudis, recent years have presented a nightmare vision of being sandwiched between an Iranian-dominated Iraq and an Iranian-dominated Yemen, with Iranian-dominated Lebanon and Syria to the west, and with Iranian subversion of the Sunni Gulf states. In their eyes, the last decade has seen extraordinary Iranian advances and a reluctance on the part of the United States to halt them. Thus their more assertive foreign and defense policy, in Yemen, Lebanon, and elsewhere.

It is common to refer to Mohammed bin Salman's actions, at home and abroad, as remarkably bold, assertive, and risky, but I am willing to bet that is not how he sees them. My sense is that he sees himself less as acting than as reacting—to a series of events in the Kingdom and in the region that bring the Kingdom into real danger. That is, a steady-state policy, where the next brother had become king for a few years, where the state continued to live solely on diminishing oil revenues, where the Wahhabi strictures held back the development of a more modern society, and where Iran became the regional hegemon, was simply too dangerous. Inaction was the real danger, in his view—not bold action. So he is taking action. He will have failures and he will make mistakes, but it is very greatly in the interest of the United States that in the main he succeed.

Now I would like to turn to Lebanon.

Since the resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Sa'ad Hariri was announced from Riyadh on November 4, there has been renewed attention to the situation in Lebanon and Saudi policies toward that country.

What are the Saudis trying to do in Lebanon? Is the new Saudi approach another example of the often-alleged over-reach of the crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman?

Not in my view. On the contrary, the new and tougher Saudi approach seems to me more realistic—and unsurprisingly in line with the new Israeli approach. And both are not actions but reactions, to the reality that Hezbollah is in fact in charge of Lebanon.

First, a bit of history. In the 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon, Israel made a sharp distinction between Hezbollah and Lebanon. Israeli attacks decimated Hezbollah targets, but did not focus on the Lebanese infrastructure. For example, to put the Beirut airport out of use the Israelis hit the runway, making take-offs

and landings impossible. They did zero damage to the terminal, hangars, and so on, so that repaving the runway and opening the airport could be done fast when hostilities ended. Similarly, I recall visiting Beirut with then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice during the conflict and seeing the tall lighthouse in the port. An Israeli missile had gone right through the lighthouse's top and taken out its searchlight. There was no damage to the structure, so that all that was needed was a new searchlight and the lighthouse would instantly be operational again. Israel made a special effort to avoid major damage to the Lebanese national infrastructure, despite claims to the contrary from the Lebanese government.

In May 2008, Hezbollah ended a government crisis over its own powers by using its weapons—allegedly meant only to protect the country from Israel—to seize control of Beirut's streets and effectively of the entire state. The *New York Times* quoted one expert on Hezbollah concluding "This is effectively a coup."³

In the near decade since, Hezbollah's power has grown and so has its domination of Lebanon. During the war in Syria since 2012, Hezbollah has served as Iran's foreign legion and sent thousands of Lebanese Shia across the border to fight. A story in the *New York Times* in August summed up the current situation: Hezbollah

has rapidly expanded its realm of operations. It has sent legions of fighters to Syria. It has sent trainers to Iraq. It has backed rebels in Yemen. And it has helped organize a battalion of militants from Afghanistan that can fight almost anywhere. As a result, Hezbollah is not just a power unto itself, but is one of the most important instruments in the drive for regional supremacy by its sponsor: Iran. Hezbollah is involved in nearly every fight that matters to Iran and, more significantly, has helped recruit, train and arm an array of new militant groups that are also advancing Iran's agenda.⁴

That story concluded that "few checks remain on Hezbollah's domestic power" in Lebanon. And throughout 2017, Israeli officials have been warning that the distinction between Hezbollah and "Lebanon" can no longer be maintained. Hezbollah is quite simply running the country. While it leaves administrative matters like paying government salaries, paving the roads, and collecting garbage to the state, no important decision can be taken without Hezbollah's agreement.

Lebanon's president must constitutionally be a Christian, but today that man is Michel Aoun, an ally of Hezbollah since 2006. That is why he got to be president in 2016. As an analyst at the Institute for National Security Studies in Israel put it, "Hezbollah has been very squarely backing Aoun for president and this was

³ Robert F. Worth and Nada Bakri, "Hezbollah Seizes Swath of Beirut From U.S.-Backed Lebanon Government," *New York Times*, May 10, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/10/world/middleeast/10lebanon.html>.

⁴ Ben Hubbard, "Iran Out to Remake Mideast With Arab Enforcer: Hezbollah," *New York Times*, August 27, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/27/world/middleeast/hezbollah-iran-syria-israel-lebanon.html?_r=1.

always the deal between Aoun's party and Hezbollah. Hezbollah has upheld its end of the deal. With this election...you can see Hezbollah being consolidated in terms of its political allies as well as its position in Lebanon."⁵

Tony Badran, a research fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies who specializes in Lebanon, summed up the current situation: "In terms of the actual balance of power, the actual power on the ground, regardless of the politics, regardless of the Cabinets, regardless of the parliamentary majorities: it's Hezbollah."⁶

The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), a recipient of U.S. assistance, is increasingly intertwined with Hezbollah. David Schenker of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy described the situation this way:

in April 2017, Hezbollah brought more than a dozen international journalists on a tour of Lebanon's frontier with Israel, breezing through several checkpoints manned by national intelligence organs and LAF units, suggesting a high degree of coordination. The next month, Hezbollah turned over several of its Syria border observation posts to the LAF. Finally, in late June, the LAF sent 150 officer cadets to tour Hezbollah's Mleeta war museum, near Nabatiyah, a shrine to the organization's 'resistance' credentials vis-a-vis Israel.⁷

Last summer Badran, in an article entitled "Lebanon is Another Name for Hezbollah," concluded that "The Lebanese state...is worse than a joke. It's a front."⁸

Sometimes, it is worse than a joke; it is an insult. A reminder of the way in which Lebanese political culture has been undermined and warped by Hezbollah is the story of Samir Kuntar. Kuntar was a terrorist. CNN described his crimes:

A member of the Palestine Liberation Front, Kuntar led a group of four men who entered Israel from Lebanon by boat in 1979. They killed a police officer who came across them. Then they took a 28-year-old man and his 4-year-old daughter hostage.

⁵ Reuters et al., "Lebanon's New Pro-Hezbollah President Vows to Retake 'Israeli-Occupied' Land," *Jerusalem Post*, October 31, 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Hezbollah-ally-Michel-Aoun-elected-President-of-Lebanon-471301>.

⁶ Jenna Lifshits, "Lebanese PM's Resignation Magnifies Congressional Scrutiny of Hezbollah," *Weekly Standard*, November 7, 2017, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/lebanese-pms-resignation-magnifies-congressional-scrutiny-of-hezbollah/article/2010377>.

⁷ David Schenker, *Policy Watch 2840: U.S. Security Assistance to Lebanon at Risk*, (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2017), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/u.s.-security-assistance-to-lebanon-at-risk>.

⁸ Tony Badran, "Lebanon is Another Name for Hezbollah," *Tablet*, July 26, 2017, <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/241749/lebanon-is-another-name-for-hezbollah>.

Kuntar shot the father dead at close range in front of his daughter and tossed his body in the sea. He then smashed the girl's head, killing her.⁹

Kuntar was captured by Israel, tried, convicted, and imprisoned, and then released in 2008 in an exchange with Hezbollah for the bodies of two Israeli soldiers captured in 2006. Kuntar returned to Lebanon—and was celebrated as a hero. But this greeting came not only from Hezbollah, which is grotesque enough; it came from the entire Lebanese government, from all parties. Lebanon's president and its prime minister greeted Kuntar as a hero. He was flown from the border to Beirut International Airport, where he was met on a red carpet by the entire cabinet. Kuntar was killed by an Israeli air strike in 2015. But think about a government and a political system that celebrates a Hezbollah murderer this way. That may be the true measure of Hezbollah's influence.

That is the situation to which Mohammed bin Salman is reacting. The key man in maintaining this façade has been Lebanon's prime minister, who must constitutionally be a Sunni and is Saad Hariri. Hariri is the son of Rafik Hariri, the former prime minister assassinated in 2005 (almost certainly in a joint effort by Hezbollah and the Assad regime in Syria). Mohammed bin Salman looks around the region and sees his own country in danger of being sandwiched between Iranian-dominated Iraq and an Iranian-dominated Yemen, while Iran—and Hezbollah—increasingly dominate Syria as well as Lebanon. Saad Hariri has always been subject to Saudi pressures, in large part because his family's fortune was made in Saudi Arabia and depends to this day on Saudi largesse. Mohammed bin Salman must have wondered why he was paying to maintain that front or façade, propping up a Lebanese government that does not govern and instead allows free rein to Hezbollah. Indeed Hezbollah is part of Hariri's coalition government, and his resignation could collapse that coalition. It now appears that he has rescinded his resignation, at least for the moment.

In addition to pressuring Hariri, the Saudis have several ways of pressuring Lebanon economically. The Saudi deposit of \$860 million in the Lebanese Central Bank, meant to stabilize Lebanon's currency, might be withdrawn.¹⁰ Remittances from Lebanese working outside the country are critical for the country's economy, constituting about 15 percent of Lebanon's GDP, and Lebanese working in Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies provide a significant portion of that; those workers could start to be sent home.¹¹ "80 percent of foreign direct investment in Lebanon comes from the Gulf," and it could decline precipitously.¹² Finally, Gulf tourists are a key part of Lebanon's tourism sector both in numbers and per capita spending. "The number of Saudi tourists to Lebanon increased by 86.77 percent in the first 7 months of 2017 compared to

⁹ "Lebanon hails militants freed in prisoner swap," *CNN.com*, July 17, 2008, <http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/mcast/07/16/israel.swap/>.

¹⁰ Ianin Ghaddar, *PolicyWatch 2891: Saudi Arabia's War on Lebanon*, (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2017), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-arabias-war-on-lebanon>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

the same period last year,” the *Daily Star* of Beirut reported in August, but now the Saudis and other Gulf nations have told their citizens to leave Lebanon.¹³ This will hit the tourism industry hard.

Why punish Lebanon? There is no doubt that such measures can affect every Lebanese—but that is the point. The Saudis are no longer willing to prop up Lebanon while it serves as the base for Hezbollah’s military and terrorist activities in league with Iran. They are asking a different question: what will it take for Lebanese to pressure Hezbollah to cut back on its actions and to allow the Lebanese state to govern again? Is it possible that if all Lebanese—not just Sunnis, Christians, and Druze but also Shia—pay a higher price for Hezbollah’s subservience to Iran, Hezbollah might begin to worry about its own political base in Lebanon? One estimate in *Newsweek* puts Hezbollah’s own toll at 2,000-2,500 dead and 7,000 injured in Syria, meaning that every Shia village and most families have suffered some loss.¹⁴ The Shia population is about one million, so about one percent has been injured or killed fighting for Iran in Syria, and every casualty is of course a member of a much larger family group.

The point is, it is not Mohammed bin Salman who is bringing danger to Lebanon; it is not the Saudis who are bringing Lebanon into the region’s wars; it is not Saudi policy that threatens to collapse Lebanon’s coalition politics. It is the actions of Hezbollah, abandoning any national role to act as Iran’s enforcer and foreign legion. What the Saudis are doing is saying, Enough—let’s start describing Lebanese reality instead of burying it. Let’s stop financing a situation that allows Hezbollah to feed off the Lebanese state, dominate that state, and use it as a launching pad for terror and aggression in the Middle East, all on Iran’s behalf.

There is of course no guarantee that this approach will succeed: Lebanese may be too terrified of Hezbollah. And success will require action by the United States and its allies, particularly France. If all of Lebanon’s friends take the same approach, demanding that Hezbollah’s grip on the country and the state be limited, we may embolden Lebanon’s citizens and its politicians to protest Hezbollah’s chokehold. Economic assistance to Lebanon and military assistance to its army should be made dependent on pushing back on Hezbollah and regaining Lebanese independence. The price Lebanon pays for Hezbollah should be made far clearer, and the advantages Hezbollah gains from its control of Lebanon should be reduced—and made far more controversial.

It remains to be seen if Saad Hariri himself will now seek to limit Hezbollah’s room for maneuver in any way. In the last several years he has not, but his statements since returning to Lebanon have been tougher and have criticized Hezbollah for its involvement in the affairs of other Arab states. What the Saudis, and

¹³ “Saudi tourists return to Lebanon in droves: report,” *The Daily Star*, August 12, 2017, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Business/Local/2017/Aug-12/415750-saudi-tourists-return-to-lebanon-in-droves-report.aspx>.
¹⁴ Mona Alami, “Will Hezbollah remain in Syria forever?” *Newsweek*, March 28, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/will-hezbollah-remain-syria-forever-573818>.

perhaps Saad Hariri, are asking for is a government in Lebanon that actually governs the country, and does so to advance and protect the interests of Lebanon, not those of Iran.

Are these outrageous demands? On the contrary, they are in fact demanded by UN Security Council Resolution 1701, adopted in August 2006 to end the war between Hezbollah and Israel. It's worth recalling what started that war: an unprovoked attack by Hezbollah into Israel, killing and kidnapping Israeli soldiers. Resolution 1701 includes these provisions:

Emphasizes the importance of the extension of the control of the Government of Lebanon over all Lebanese territory [and] for it to exercise its full sovereignty, so that there will be no weapons without the consent of the Government of Lebanon and no authority other than that of the Government of Lebanon...

Calls for...the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon, so that, pursuant to the Lebanese cabinet decision of 27 July 2006, there will be no weapons or authority in Lebanon other than that of the Lebanese State...¹⁵

In other words, what the Saudis are demanding is what the UN Security Council demanded unanimously over a decade ago—and the Lebanese government accepted days later. Now, Hezbollah is once again thrusting Lebanon into deadly conflicts in the region—including the risk of another war with Israel. These dangers will not be avoided by burying our heads in the sand, nor will Lebanon's sovereignty be restored by ignoring Hezbollah's destruction of that sovereignty. A better way forward is to tell the truth about the situation in Lebanon, and use both diplomatic and economic pressure to undermine Hezbollah's iron grip.

This raises, of course, the question of U.S. aid to the Lebanese Armed Forces. On November 6, Senator Ted Cruz commented on this matter:

'The resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri is the latest consequence of Iran's increasingly pervasive influence in Lebanon through its terrorist proxy Hezbollah,' Sen. Cruz said. 'Given these developments, it is time for the United States to reassess the military assistance we provide to Lebanon, including to the Lebanese Armed Forces, and conduct a formal review of our strategy there. It was just a few days ago that Lebanon's President Aoun yet again threatened Israel, saying, 'All the Lebanese are prepared to fight against Israel.'¹⁶

¹⁵ UN Security Council, Resolution 1701, Middle East, S/RES/1701, ¶3, ¶8, <https://www.un.org/en/sc/documents/resolutions/2006.shtml>.

¹⁶ Office of Senator Ted Cruz, "Sen. Cruz Issues Statement in Response to the Resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri," press release, November 6, 2017, https://www.cruz.senate.gov/?p=press_release&id=3474.

This seems to me the correct approach: to reassess our military assistance and our entire strategy. After all, if our strategy has been aimed at strengthening Lebanon's independence, we have failed. If our goal has been to limit the power of Hezbollah and its integration into Iran's regional system of military aggression, we have failed. If our goal has been to strengthen Sunni, Druze, and Christian minorities in Lebanon, we have failed. If we have tried to make the LAF a counterbalance to Hezbollah, we have failed. Perhaps things would be even worse today without our aid and our efforts, but that is a proposition that should be examined and tested.

On July 25, when Prime Minister Hariri visited the White House, President Donald J. Trump said this:

What the Lebanese Armed Forces have accomplished in recent years is very impressive. In 2014, when ISIS tried to invade northern Lebanon, the Lebanese army beat them back. Since that time, the Lebanese army has been fighting continually to guard Lebanon's border and prevent ISIS and other terrorists—of which there are many—from gaining a foothold inside their country.

The United States military has been proud to help in that fight and will continue to do so. America's assistance can help ensure that the Lebanese army is the only defender Lebanon needs. It's a very effective fighting force.

Threats to the Lebanese people come from inside, as well. Hezbollah is a menace to the Lebanese state, the Lebanese people, and the entire region. The group continues to increase its military arsenal, which threatens to start yet another conflict with Israel, constantly fighting them back.¹⁷

I think we would all agree with the comments on Hezbollah, but I am not sure we would all agree with the comments on the LAF. We've given the LAF over a billion dollars in military aid, including \$123 million in FY2017, and Lebanon is the fifth largest recipient of foreign military financing (FMF). Our ambassador to Lebanon, Elizabeth Richard, said publicly on October 31 that total support for the LAF from State Department and Defense Department accounts totaled \$160 million over the previous year.¹⁸ The State Department's proposed budget for FY2018 zeroes out FMF for Lebanon, which may suggest some doubt within the administration regarding the LAF's achievements. According to the most recent report on Lebanon by Congressional Research Service, dated November 9, 2017,

As part of the Trump Administration proposal to cut 12% of overall bilateral aid to the Middle East and North Africa (from FY2016 enacted levels), FMF grants to a number of regional governments—

¹⁷ Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Hariri of Lebanon in Joint Press Conference," press release, July 25, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/07/25/remarks-president-trump-and-prime-minister-hariri-lebanon-joint-press>.

¹⁸ Jack Detsch, "US Sticks by Lebanese army despite Hariri Resignation," *Al-Monitor*, November 6, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/us-support-lebanon-army-hariri-resignation-saudi-arabia.html>.

including Lebanon—would be halted. FMF has been one of the primary sources of U.S. funding for the LAF, along with CTPIF funds. Both the House (H.R. 3362) and Senate (S. 1780) FY2018 State and Foreign Operations appropriations bills envision FMF continuing to Lebanon. The Senate appropriations report (S.Rept. 115-152) recommends \$105 million in FMF to Lebanon...

In October 2017, Ambassador Richard announced the delivery of the first two (of six) A-29 Super Tucano aircraft to the Lebanese military, and stated that U.S. support to the LAF in 2017 totaled \$160 million. Also in October, the Trump Administration notified Congress of its intention to provide more than \$121 million in new Department of Defense support to the LAF Special Forces and LAF Air Force using 10 U.S.C. 333 authority, including helicopters for close air support...

In the 115th Congress, language in proposed aid legislation for Lebanon largely mirrors previous years, with some exceptions reflecting enhanced concern among some Members and the Trump Administration about the LAF's role and operations in Lebanon. In July 2017, the House Appropriations Committee reported its version of the FY2018 State and Foreign Operations appropriations bill (H.R. 3362) without a notwithstanding provision exempting ESF for Lebanon from the LAF deployment certification requirements of Section 1224 of P.L. 107-228. The committee report on the bill also directed the Administration to submit a report on LAF operations. H.R. 3362 was incorporated into the omnibus bill (H.R. 3354) which the House passed in September. The Senate Appropriations Committee reported version of the bill includes a notwithstanding provision for ESF aid to Lebanon (S. 1780). The House version of the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act (H.R. 2810) would require reporting on threats to the United States posed by Hezbollah operations in Syria and Iranian use of commercial aircraft to support Hezbollah and other groups.¹⁹

There is also the question of LAF coordination with Hezbollah. As a Center for American Progress report stated, "The Lebanese government has repeatedly denied any coordination with Hezbollah. However, events along the border make these claims increasingly implausible. Reports of such coordination undercut the LAF's standing and raise vexing questions for policymakers regarding the utility of U.S. security assistance to Lebanon."²⁰ The leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, himself "characterized the LAF as a 'partner' and a 'pillar' in what Hezbollah has described as the 'golden formula, which means the resistance, the Army, and the people'" in the words of a recent Congressional Research Service report.²¹

¹⁹ U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Lebanon*, by Carla E. Humud, R44759 (2017), 27-29, <https://fas.org/spp/crs/midcast/R44759.pdf>.

²⁰ Tardin Lang and Alia Awadallah, *Playing the Long Game: U.S. Counterterrorism Assistance for Lebanon* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2017), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2017/08/30/437853/playing-long-game/>.

²¹ Humud, *Lebanon*, 11.

A reassessment of what we've gotten for that money seems essential to me, and it's clear that many in Congress take this view. Is Lebanon closer to meeting the demands of 1701 than it was a decade ago—to exercising sovereignty over its territory and disarming militias and terrorist groups? I think not. And that's why American strategy for Lebanon requires a careful reassessment.

Thank you, Madam Chairman, for this opportunity to testify.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you very much, Mr. Abrams.
Dr. Salem.

**STATEMENT OF PAUL SALEM, PH.D., VICE PRESIDENT FOR
POLICY ANALYSIS, RESEARCH, AND PROGRAMS, MIDDLE
EAST INSTITUTE**

Mr. SALEM. Madam Chairman, Ranking Member Deutch—

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Punch that button.

Mr. SALEM. Madam Chair, Ranking Member Deutch, distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify.

My opening statement will be mainly on Lebanon but I would be happy to share my views on Saudi and Iran in the discussion.

Lebanon occupies a strategic position on the eastern Mediterranean and as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Michael Ratney said in this venue last month, a stable pluralist prosperous Lebanon is in the U.S. national interest.

Lebanon has been an effective ally on the war on ISIS and al-Qaeda, defeating and expelling both in August. The country hosts over 1 million Syrian refugees.

It maintains a society of pluralism, openness, and democracy in a troubled region, and the army, along with U.N. multinational forces, have kept the peace across the critical Lebanon-Israel border for the past 11 years.

But Lebanon has also been a very contested space between a pro-Iranian pro-Assad coalition that now includes Russia and a pro-Arab pro-Western coalition.

If allies give up on Lebanon, it will fall fully into Iran, Syria, and Russia's sway, and if tensions are pushed too high, we risk having another collapsed state in a region which already has too many.

It is a long-term commitment, in my view, not one that can be won overnight nor one that should be abandoned in frustration. Many parties and leaders in Lebanon including Saad Hariri have been struggling in this contest for many years.

Saad's father, Rafic, was assassinated in 2005 along with numerous others for doing just that. But these leaders have not and will not give up and they deserve support and encouragement for struggling to rebuild national sovereignty under very difficult conditions.

Both coalitions share power in Parliament and government. Iran and Syria have built a massive armed nonstate actor in Hezbollah, starting from the days when Lebanon was a failed state.

But the Lebanese have also maintained an inclusive democratic nation-state and with American help have built an effective national army and internal security force.

Although successive governments have insisted on a policy of noninterference in regional affairs, Hezbollah has violated that principle since 2012 and become militarily engaged in Syria as well as in Iraq and in Yemen.

Hezbollah's involvement in Yemen is what mainly sparked the latest crisis with Saudi Arabia, particularly its apparent assistance in delivering and helping militants launch missiles into Saudi Arabia, including the capital, Riyadh.

Obviously, this is completely unacceptable to Saudi Arabia and it is fully understandable that Riyadh could not countenance that

an ally of theirs would head a government that includes a party lobbying missiles on their own capital.

Hariri's resignation was perhaps a necessary signal, a positive shock, as he himself put it, that the Lebanese Government could not continue with business as usual.

Hariri is now back in Lebanon. He has put his resignation on hold until he receives guarantees that Hezbollah will cease its activities against "friendly Arab governments."

If Hezbollah ceases its involvement in Yemen, this latest Lebanon crisis might subside. Some signs from Beirut and regional capitals indicate that that might be in the works.

But the challenge of Hezbollah is a large and long-term one. It might be pulling back from limited engagements in Yemen and Iraq. We don't know yet. But its sizeable presence in Syria is part of the challenge of dealing with the tens of thousands of Iranian proxies there.

Making sure all proxy forces leave Syria as part of a final settlement should be a primary objective for the U.S. and other regional partners in the next phase of contest and diplomacy over Syria.

In Lebanon, as you know, Hezbollah has both a political and military presence. Politically, it is a principal elected representative of the Shiite population. Militarily, it has been armed by Iran to go head to head with Israel.

An attempt to fight Hezbollah internally would likely lead to a devastating and losing civil war and another Hezbollah-Israel war would cause much harm in both countries and Iran would be around to rearm Hezbollah immediately afterward.

In the short term, the goal should be to withdraw Hezbollah from regional conflict zones, maintain peace across the Lebanon-Israel border and seek to reduce Hezbollah's influence on the Lebanese state.

The long-term resolution of the challenge of Hezbollah will depend probably on wider regional developments such as a reckoning militarily or diplomatically with Iran or a breakthrough in Israeli-Palestinian or Israeli-Arab peace, an issue that Hezbollah and other armed non-state actors thrive on.

I address a number of other issues in my written testimony, but I thank you for your attention and look forward to questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Salem follows:]

HEARING, HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE
MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA, NOVEMBER 29, 2017

THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN LEBANON AND SAUDI-IRANIAN PROXY TENSIONS

WRITTEN TESTIMONY SUBMITTED TO THE SUBCOMMITTEE

PAUL SALEM

Senior Vice President for Policy Research and Programs

The Middle East Institute

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify in this hearing. I was asked to share my views on the recent developments in Lebanon, the elements of a Saudi-Iranian proxy contest there, and the implications this may have for Lebanon's future and stability.

Prime Minister Saad Hariri and other like-minded leaders in Lebanon have had a long history of struggling with the presence of Hezbollah in Lebanon¹. Saad's father, Rafik Hariri, struggled with this challenge for a decade and a half, and was assassinated in 2005 for trying to stand up to the Assad regime and their ally Hezbollah in Lebanon. Numerous other political and media figures were also assassinated apparently for the same reason. Iran and the Assad regime have been building up Hezbollah as an arm of their foreign power for 37 years. Particularly since the Israeli withdrawal of 2000, the persistence of Hezbollah as an armed non state actor answerable mainly to Iran has been the primary obstacle to Lebanon achieving stability, security, and economic prosperity. The challenge that Hezbollah poses is part of a much wider Iranian empowerment in the region that has only gotten more acute after the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the 2011 Arab uprisings. The Saudi outrage at Hezbollah's apparent involvement in Yemen is real and legitimate. Hezbollah must abide by the Lebanese government's own policy of non-interference in regional affairs, and there are

¹ See Annex

some steps that Lebanese leaders can take. But these steps are limited, and policy makers must balance between the limited capacity of Lebanon to confront an Iranian proxy army, and the need to maintain stability in Lebanon and avoid another fully failed state in a region which already has too many.

Run-up to the Crisis

Hariri's current government was formed in December 2016. It contains two Hezbollah members, and a slight majority of Hezbollah political allies. This formation reflected the unfavorable balance of power that had transpired in Syria after American prevarication and decisive Russian intervention in 2015. Nevertheless, the government was formed with the formal understanding that all parties would maintain a policy of neutrality and non-interference in regional affairs (what is termed 'dissociation' in the Arabic text). Hariri was also given tacit assurances that his government would not be pushed to normalize relations with the Assad regime.

Both conditions were violated. Hezbollah not only continued its presence and interventions in Syria and Iraq, but escalated its presence in Yemen. Also, members of Hariri's government, without his approval, visited Damascus and held meetings there and elsewhere with Syrian government officials, pushing for a de facto normalization. Hariri also feared that Iran, the Assad regime, and Hezbollah, after their 'victory' in Syria, would ratchet up the pressure on him to translate their victory there into even more sway over his government in Lebanon. Ali Akbar Velayati, the foreign affairs adviser to Iran's supreme leader, met with Hariri just hours before the latter's sudden departure, and in a public statement afterward boasted that the victories against terrorism in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq "means that the axis of resistance has achieved victory in the battles in the region." Hariri also feared that assassination could return as a tool of politics in his country. Despite the pressures, he felt that holding his ground and maintaining the power sharing government in Beirut was in the best interests of Lebanon.

The strains with Saudi Arabia began months before the events of November 4. The new leadership in Saudi had been making it clear that they did not approve of the policy of coexistence and accommodation with Hezbollah and its political

allies in Lebanon. So while the events of that fateful week were a surprise in terms of the rapidity and conditions within which they unfolded, they did not constitute a major *political* surprise. Saad Hariri has long been a citizen and ally of Saudi Arabia, and he could not maintain a policy for too long if it clashed with serious Saudi concerns.

What had intensely piqued Saudi concerns was Hezbollah's championing of the Houthi cause in Yemen and their apparent involvement in **delivering, assembling and launching missiles** from Yemen into Saudi Arabia. Indeed, Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, had raised the Houthi cause and the war against Saudi Arabia as a primary cause for Hezbollah in fiery speeches throughout the past year. The last of these missiles was reportedly launched at Riyadh airport on November 4, the day of Hariri's announced resignation.

Saudi Arabia legitimately fears that as Iran had built up Hezbollah's missile arsenal in Lebanon over the past two decades to threaten Israel; it was now starting, with Hezbollah's help, to build a large missile presence in Yemen to permanently and strategically threaten Saudi Arabia. It is fully understandable that the Saudi authorities could not countenance an ally of theirs sharing power in a government that included a party that was apparently involved in organizing missile attacks on their own capital. But the strategic and political alternatives and next steps were not clear.

The Resignation and Its Impacts

Hariri's sudden resignation unsettled Hezbollah and their allies. They had enjoyed relative calm in Lebanon, and Hariri's presence gave them some cover from Arab or Western pressure. They rushed to issue conciliatory statements and urged Hariri to return home and reconsider. Hariri's own followers were taken aback by the murky conditions of the sudden resignation and while they understood and sympathized with the Saudi concerns about Hezbollah, they felt that the conditions of the sudden resignation had humiliated and weakened Hariri and his movement.

American, French and Egyptian diplomacy made a difference in de-escalating the crisis. These parties all argued that while they agreed with Saudi Arabia's

concerns about Hezbollah, maintaining Lebanon's precarious stability was also a common shared interest. Instability and disintegration in Lebanon would strengthen Hezbollah, not weaken it; it would also give an opportunity for groups like ISIS and AQ, that had just been evicted from Lebanon, to come back. And it would jeopardize the condition of over 1 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon that might then seek shelter further west.

Hariri left Saudi Arabia to France and Egypt, and then back to Lebanon. He did not go through with his resignation, but agreed to put it on hold and to give diplomacy and mediation more time to find a resolution. Hariri is insisting that he could return to a government that includes Hezbollah, provided that Hezbollah respects the government's principal of neutrality and non-interference in regional conflicts, and most importantly, that it **stops any activities that "affect the security of our Arab brothers and their states."**

In effect, this boils down mainly to Yemen. Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, has claimed that Hezbollah has no military involvement or presence in Yemen—a claim that might be negotiated into a commitment; and French President Macron is attempting to mediate with Iran to seek de-escalation in Yemen in exchange for stability in Lebanon.

Hariri might also gain commitments that normalization with the Assad regime will not be pursued and that Hezbollah could agree to restarting a National Dialogue about a national defense strategy that, at least in theory, is supposed to agree a pathway for Hezbollah to eventually integrate into the Lebanese state armed forces.

Hezbollah and Iran indeed do not want instability in Lebanon, and hence **the shock resignation might bear some limited fruit.** And that fruit might be a disengagement of Hezbollah from Yemen, and a gradual withdrawal from Iraq. **But there are limits to what further political or economic moves can produce.** Iran and Hezbollah are hard targets that soft political and economic measures cannot greatly impact. Even in a military escalation, Lebanon would be easily devastated while Hezbollah would survive and thrive.

While Riyadh is clearly giving diplomacy a chance, it is not clear what the Saudi decision will eventually be. Yemen is indeed a main national security concern for Riyadh. They would welcome a full Hezbollah disengagement from Yemen; and

that might be enough to at least resolve this current Lebanese crisis. But if Iran just replaces Hezbollah operatives with others from the Quds or other allied forces, and continues to build up a missile presence in Yemen, Riyadh might still want to react in Lebanon. It might feel that punishing an Iranian asset in Lebanon, even if that asset is not itself involved, is one of the means to raise the cost for Iran of its involvement in Yemen. Obviously, a more lasting resolution to the current Iran-Saudi clash in Lebanon, is to find a negotiated end to the Yemen conflict, and for Iran to use its influence to stop all missile attacks on Saudi from Yemen.

Riyadh certainly has great economic leverage over Lebanon. And economic concerns have already galvanized intensified political bargaining in Lebanon. Hezbollah and their allies certainly don't want an economic disaster on their hands. But if it came to that, Hezbollah and its Iranian backers, would be better able to ride it out, than any other sectors of the country.

Hariri's options are limited. He can go ahead with his resignation and go into opposition from outside the government. But that will not weaken Hezbollah or its allies, nor will it block the formation of a new government that might be more under their sway. Or he can use the threat of resignation to get a better deal, especially over Hezbollah's interventions against other Arab countries, which he is trying to do now. Other more extreme options are dead ends; attempting to move into some form of armed opposition would be both a losing battle and ruinous for the country.

Weighing Interests and Policy Options

As Acting DAS NEA Michael Ratney said in this venue just last month, **"A Lebanon that is stable, tolerant, moderate and prosperous" is in the US national interest.** Lebanon, and the LAF, have been critical partners in the war against ISIS and AQ affiliates. Lebanon hosts over one million Syrian refugees who otherwise might be desperately making their way to allies in Europe. And Lebanon is an example of communal coexistence, tolerance, and democracy—even if flawed—that undermines extremism, and that Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya can learn from.

It is important to note that Hezbollah, Iran and the Assad regime do not want the Lebanese government or the Lebanese army to have strong relations with the US or with Saudi Arabia. They assess correctly that those relations weaken their hold on the country. When Prime Minister Hariri met with President Trump this past July, Hezbollah undermined him and the army by launching a unilateral attack against an AQ affiliate and preempting the army's own attack. When he met with President Obama in January 2011, Hezbollah waited until he was seated in the Oval office to bring down his government in Beirut. Hezbollah and its backers were also relieved when Saudi Arabia cancelled its \$4 billion aid package to the Army and internal security forces in February 2016.

Saudi Arabia is correct to insist that Hezbollah's involvement in regional wars is intolerable. And if the latest crisis serves to stop Hezbollah's involvement in Yemen, then it would have not been in vain. But shoring up Lebanon's precarious stability should also be an important priority. The region can ill afford another failed state.

For the US and other friends of Lebanon, that means continued support to Lebanese state institutions and the constitutional order, precarious as it is, as well as economic engagement and refugee aid. It should also mean continued support to the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Internal Security Forces. They have fought and defeated ISIS and AQ-affiliated groups and have managed to maintain stability and security in Lebanon while war raged next door; and they play an important role, along with UNIFIL, in maintaining stability across the southern border and working to avoid another Hezbollah-Israel war.

But the LAF should do more to enforce the government's own policy of non-interference in regional conflicts. This means that the LAF and Lebanon's internal security forces should be pressed to play a more effective role in monitoring border crossings, ports and airport. Also there had been some coordination, dictated by the geography of the fight, in the recent battle against ISIS and AQ in the Eastern Bekaa; but it should be made clear that this coordination must end.

At a higher level, one of the weaknesses of the UNSCR 1701 that ended the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war is that it mandated international forces in the south, but not along the eastern border with Syria. If the international community wishes to

truly prevent Hezbollah from acting as a proxy for Iran and a regional army, then the UNSC could take up the matter under Chapter VII.

Saudi Arabia and other friends of Lebanon who are concerned about Hezbollah, could also **work more closely together to enact targeted sanctions** that would impact Hezbollah without simultaneously threatening the Lebanese economy.

On a more general political level. **Opponents of Hezbollah in Lebanon have had to tread a difficult path**; facing a formidable Iranian-armed and Syrian-backed force, under constant threat of assassination, and struggling to maintain a nationalist line against long odds. It is understandable that friends and allies are occasionally **frustrated** that they can't achieve more; and indeed, they should always be pressed to at least try to do more. But friends and allies should also appreciate the enormous challenges under which they operate, and the risks they and their country takes. These political forces require continued backing. If they are cut off, this will only weaken them further, strengthen their opponents, and make the challenges ever more difficult.

Engagement is preferable to disengagement. And building influence is preferable to ceding further influence to Hezbollah, Syria and Iran. In this vein, support to the Lebanese armed forces and Lebanese state—with their imperfections—is preferable to disengagement; and providing political and other forms of support to those in Lebanon trying to counterbalance or stand up to Hezbollah and its political allies is preferable to cutting them off.

Broader Considerations

Lebanon is a victim and a symptom of Iran's empowerment in the region. Limited change and pushback on Hezbollah can be realistically asked of Lebanon without jeopardizing the country's broader stability. But rolling back Iranian influence and/or stabilizing the Middle East requires a much broader and sustained strategy. Among considerations for a wider strategy should be the following.

First, it must be recognized that armed non state actors, whether ISIS and AQ or Iranian proxies, essentially **thrive in the context of failed states and unresolved civil wars**. Hence, one way to gradually undermine armed non state actors and

regional proxies is to end civil wars and work with reformed state institutions to rebuild nation-state capacities.

- **In Iraq**, this means working with the Iraqi government while pressing it to continue along the path of national reconciliation with the Kurds and Arab Sunnis and to reform and clean up state institutions.
- **In Lebanon**, it means working with the state institutions on maintaining stability and security, while pressing them to do what they can to limit Hezbollah's extra constitutional behavior, both inside and outside the country.
- **In Yemen**, it means focusing intensely on trying to find a negotiated end to the civil war, withdrawing all foreign forces, and encouraging partners to help rebuild Yemeni state capacities.
- **In Syria**, it means not giving in to the Russian-Iranian supposed victory, but rather keeping the pressure on for some meaningful political resolution to the conflict that could create the possibility of rebuilding some measure of legitimate and effective national governance in Syria.

Second, it means **an effective and multi-tiered strategy vis a vis Iran**. This means *serious pushback* on Iran in areas where it is clearly violating international agreements and regional stability, but also a *robust negotiating track*—whether direct or indirect—that proposes to Iran a secure way forward if it plays by the rules of international order.

The grave concern of the Saudi leadership regarding Iran's extended reach in the Middle East is not new. Previous Saudi leaders bemoaned the fact that the US-led invasion of Iraq ended up empowering Iran, and that the Obama administration's fixation on the nuclear deal only led to further Iranian involvement in the Middle East.

The focus on Iran is shared with the new US administration, but although the US administration announced a **new Iran policy**, that policy is **short on details or teeth**.

- **In Syria**, although US forces are likely to stay for the medium term, the US has stopped support to the anti-Assad anti-Iranian opposition, and appears to be leaning toward a Russian-managed outcome there.
- **In Iraq**, the US plans to keep forces there and to support the central government, but the Baghdad government will likely remain quite close to Tehran.
- **On Qatar and Lebanon**, the two capitals seem to have not been on the same page.
- **And on Yemen**, there is still no pathway to ending the crisis despite a horrific humanitarian crisis.

The US is also weakening its diplomatic arm, the state department, at a time when able and tough diplomats are needed most. And on the nuclear deal, the policy has been confusing at best, and currently idling somewhere between decertification and actual abrogation.

Saudi Arabia has an intense interest in a stable Middle East. The new leadership, in particular, wants to move along with the ambitious *domestic* priorities of economic, social and cultural reform. It can be a partner in the attempt at regional stabilization. But until the US has a more comprehensive strategy that combines pushing back on Iran with working toward ending civil wars and stabilizing failed states in a conflicted region, the responses to crises that erupt will remain episodic.

I thank you for giving me the opportunity to share some of my views about Lebanon and the region, and I look forward to your questions and comments.

Annex

Background: Lebanon and Hezbollah

Lebanon has been deeply split over the presence of Hezbollah for many years. At the end of the 15 year civil war in 1990, all Lebanese militias agreed to disband and hand in their heavy weapons; but the Syrian regime of Hafez Assad, which held sway over the country, rammed in a provision that Hezbollah would be allowed to keep its weapons as the nucleus of armed popular resistance against the Israeli occupation of part of south Lebanon that had started in 1978. Lebanon and Israel, under American mediation, negotiated an Israeli withdrawal agreement in 1983. Syria opposed the agreement because they felt that if Lebanon got its occupied territory back unilaterally, that would weaken their leverage with Israel to get their own Syrian Golan back. The Soviets backed the Syrians in this opposition, because they did not want another Arab country to drift closer into the pro-Western orbit. Syria scuttled the agreement and encouraged Iran to ramp up its support for a nascent Hezbollah. This ushered in 17 years of resistance activity led by Hezbollah that eventually resulted in the Israeli unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000. The withdrawal was a great victory for Hezbollah and was welcomed nationally. But Syria was disconcerted by the unilateral withdrawal, as it again left them with less leverage regarding the return of the Golan.

In Lebanon the Israeli withdrawal of 2000 reignited calls for the armed group to disband; but Syrian dominance once again protected the group. In 2004, the current prime minister's father, Rafik Hariri, began assembling a political coalition to attempt to stand up to the Syrian diktat and to Hezbollah's free hand in Lebanon. Likely for doing just that, he was assassinated in February of 2005. The international tribunal for Lebanon has charged what many suspected, that the Assad regime and Hezbollah operatives were involved in the assassination. The assassination further deepened the political divisions in Lebanon between opponents and supporters of the Assad regime and Hezbollah—what came to be known as the March 14 and March 8 coalitions, respectively.

The Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in April 2005 ended a military presence that had started in 1976, and indicated to some that their withdrawal would leave Hezbollah weak and vulnerable. But Hezbollah adapted quickly to the new conditions. It consolidated its political coalition and secured a Christian ally in Gen. Michel Aoun, and built a strong presence in parliament and government. Even so, the government in May 2008 issued a decision to shut down Hezbollah's telecoms networks and to replace the head of airport security who was thought to be close to Hezbollah. The group reacted by sending their fighters onto the streets where they clashed with, and quickly defeated, armed men loyal to current Prime Minister Saad Hariri. Eighteen years after 1990, the capital was once gain on the brink of civil war. The national army did not intervene in that fight, and came under great criticism; but the army command feared that the multi-confessional army would disintegrate if it was used in an internal battle in which battle lines were drawn up on confessional lines.

Israel too had hoped that the Syrian withdrawal in 2005 would leave Hezbollah more vulnerable. In 2006 Israel reacted to a Hezbollah cross border attack with a full scale war. The two sides effectively fought each other to a draw. Although Hezbollah and Lebanon took heavy losses, Iran, through Syria, quickly re-equipped and reinforced Hezbollah after the war and rendered it stronger than before the war.

The uprising in Syria in 2011 was another turning point. Opponents of Hezbollah hoped that the uprising would succeed in removing Assad, and thus weaken Hezbollah in Lebanon. Hezbollah apparently had the same assessment of risk; and although the Lebanese government of which they were a part had a declared policy of 'non-interference', Hezbollah fully entered into the war in Syria on the side of Assad, and in alliance with Iran and, eventually, Russia. American prevarication on Syria, and the Russian military intervention in 2015 finally tipped the scales in Syria in the decisive favor of the Assad coalition.

In Lebanon, this result in Syria dismayed anti-Hezbollah parties and convinced them, grudgingly, that they were going to have to continue to coexist with Hezbollah and its allies for the near future. By this time, the country had entered into a constitutional crisis after the term of president Michel Suleiman had come to an end. To break the crisis, Hariri nominated a member of the Hezbollah coalition, Suleiman Frangieh, to the presidency, apparently at the time with Saudi backing. Hariri's Christian allies, the Lebanese Forces, rejected this nomination, and nominated another Hezbollah ally, Michel Aoun, instead. Aoun was elected to the presidency in June of 2016, and Hariri was subsequently named prime minister.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you very much, sir.
Dr. Wittes. Thank you.

STATEMENT OF TAMARA COFMAN WITTES, PH.D., SENIOR FELLOW, CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY, THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

Ms. WITTES. Thank you, Madam Chairman, Ranking Member Deutch, members of the subcommittee. I appreciate the chance to share my views with you.

ISIS is on the run militarily, and the JCPOA has, for now, constrained and rolled back Iran's nuclear program, and it is these gains that allow America and its partners to turn our attention to Iran's relentless effort, directly and through local proxies, to subvert other sovereign states in the region and gain influence over their politics.

For Saudi Arabia, this has long been the dominant regional security concern and it is now motivating dramatic moves in Saudi foreign policy.

Constraining and reversing this expansion of Iranian influence in the region is a worthy and important goal for the U.S. and it is a goal that, for the moment, unites most of America's regional partners.

It is one that could bring others in the international community on board. Although our regional partners see a common threat, they have different priorities and that means American leadership is essential to bring them together.

Building this coalition will require persistence, trust with our allies, resolution of regional conflicts, dialogue with a wide range of international partners—in other words, containing Iran will require adroit and assertive American diplomacy.

Now, the swiftness and decisiveness of Saudi decision making has surprised many and raised some alarm. Saudi tactics and tone have changed from hedging bets between dialogue and confrontation with Tehran to going all in in a face off designed to unsettle Iran, raise its costs, and try to impose some red lines on its behavior.

In certain areas, Saudis' policy has involved primarily soft power and it has brought noticeable gains such as the kingdom's concerted outreach to Shi'a politicians in Iraq.

In other areas, like Yemen and now Lebanon, the approach has been more unilateral and more coercive and I think it reveals some limits to the kingdom's leverage and its capacity to shape events.

The bottom line is that Saudi Arabia is more effective in regional affairs with carrots than with sticks, and this new propensity for all-out confrontation has already complicated some U.S. policy goals in the region.

Most notably, the Saudi intervention in Yemen is now, at nearly 3 years old, both a military and humanitarian nightmare.

It has mired the kingdom in an expensive quagmire, it has produced a horrific level of human suffering, and it has strengthened both al-Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula and Iran.

It is time for this war to end. Every day the war goes on, the humanitarian costs mount with little real impact on the outcome,

which will inevitably involve intricate political compromises and power sharing amongst Yemen's rival factions.

In the domestic arena, Mohammed Bin Salman, the crown prince, is now dancing on the edge of a knife. Some of his political and economic goals are very worthy. Some seem contradictory.

For example, it is hard to inspire the confidence of foreign investors while casting doubt on the rule of law by arresting hundreds on vague charges with no public evidence or judicial process.

My own view is that top-down reform without meaningful improvements in government accountability, transparency and respect for human rights will not ultimately succeed in winning the support either of foreign investors or, more importantly, the kingdom's citizens.

The missile attack on the Riyadh airport last month was a wake-up call, but Saudi worries about the missile threat from Yemen have been growing steadily.

The kingdom faces the possibility that Iran and Hezbollah could create in northern Yemen a duplication of the challenge Israel faces in southern Lebanon and that is an intolerable prospect for the kingdom, one they are prepared to take dramatic steps to forestall.

I think it is possible that Hezbollah will agree to some concessions regarding its purported activities in Yemen in order to keep Hariri as prime minister in Lebanon.

But an undeclared end to unacknowledged activity in Yemen is hard to see and it is hard to enforce. So I think we should expect to see continued tussles between Saudi Arabia and Iran over Lebanese politics.

It is important to note that none of our regional allies want to see Lebanon destabilized or to become a front in a regional war, and American support for Lebanon is valuable in maintaining that stability.

The U.S. should stay engaged to support democratic development there, push for parliamentary elections that are scheduled for next spring, and hope that one legacy of the Saudi pressure on Hariri is increased support for his coalition at the ballot box.

Now, the United States can successfully build an international coalition to constrain and push back on Iran's destabilizing influence.

Components of that effort would include diplomacy with Iraq, with Russia over Syria, pressure on Iran in the U.N. Security Council, intelligence cooperation with allies and persuading European and—European nations and China that Middle East stability is a public good that Iranian intervention degrades.

But as with the effort that brought Iran to the nuclear table, ramping up this international pressure to a level that shifts Iranian behavior will require painstaking diplomatic work.

The most important tool in the American policy toolbox to contain Iran and restore stability in the region is the tool that the current administration seems most committed to degrading—our diplomacy.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Wittes follows:]

**Testimony of
Tamara Cofman Wittes, Ph.D.
Senior Fellow, Center for Middle East Policy
The Brookings Institution**

**before the
House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and Africa
Hearing: The Latest Developments in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon
November 29, 2017**

Madam Chairman, Ranking Member Deutch, distinguished members of the subcommittee, good morning. Thank you for inviting me to share my analysis with you today. I must begin, as always, by noting that I represent only myself before you today; the Brookings Institution does not take any institutional positions on policy issues.

Today's hearing is called amidst events that mark a turning point in two interwoven Middle Eastern conflicts that have consumed the attention of the region and the United States in the last several years.

- The ouster of the Islamic State group from nearly all of the territory it controlled in Iraq and Syria is an unalloyed good, but begs the question of who will establish and administer governance in the liberated areas, how displaced populations can return in safety and security, and how to prevent extremist violence from reemerging in Syria and Iraq.
- The Assad regime, with robust support from Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, and in the face of global indifference, has nearly defeated its armed opposition, after displacing half its population and slaughtering a half-million people. Assad and his patrons seem prepared now to enshrine his victory in a political settlement, and this begs the question of what kind of diplomatic process can produce any hope for lasting peace, much less dignity or justice for the Syrian people.

The answers to these questions will shape the future of the Middle East, the balance of power amongst the major players in the region, and the role of outsiders, including the United States, in the region's future order. It's thus an important moment to review and reconsider American policy. So I will address the committee's questions regarding Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and American policy through the lens of this regional fulcrum, and the choices facing the United States at this key moment.

Iran's Gains from the Syrian War and the Anti-ISIS Campaign

With ISIS on the run, the overarching strategic challenge in the region, for both America and its partners, is Iran's relentless effort, directly and through local proxies, to subvert other sovereign states in the region and gain influence over their politics. In recent years, regional upheaval has given Iran numerous opportunities to expand its influence and its reach, by exploiting divisions

and conflict within Arab societies. At times, Arab leaders have played into this strategy by sharpening instead of healing divisions within their nations, by stoking instead of resolving civil conflicts in the Arab world, and by employing sectarian rhetoric as a tool to mobilize popular support for their policies. When I testified before this committee two and a half years ago, prior to the completion of the JCPOA, I predicted that Iranian efforts at regional influence were likely to escalate whether or not a nuclear deal was agreed to, simply because the opportunities for Iran were so wide and the cost of exploiting them so low. Sadly, that prediction has proven true.

It's been clear for some time that, should the Assad regime survive the Syrian civil war, it would emerge even more dependent on Iran than before, and that a Syria dominated by Iranian power and influence would be destabilizing and dangerous for the region and for American partners. I testified to this committee about eighteen months ago as to growing Israeli concerns over precisely the scenario we now see unfolding, in which Assad remains the head of government in a Syria that is essentially an Iranian suzerainty. What's changed in recent months is the public voicing of those concerns by Israeli officials, and increased Israeli activism to establish its own red lines with respect to Iranian and Hezbollah behavior in Syria.

What's also changed is that these concerns are exacerbated by the role of Iraqi Shia militias in liberating territory on the Iraqi-Syrian border from ISIS and then reportedly crossing into Syrian territory in early November to help the Syrian Arab Army oust ISIS from Al-Bukamal. This apparent coordination between Iranian-backed militias in Syria and Iraq, and the effort to solidify hold over a land corridor stretching from Baghdad to Beirut, represents an escalation of the challenge Iranian influence poses to American partners and to regional stability. But it is worth noting that this presents a difference of degree, not a difference in kind. The Iranian challenge has been consistent, and consistently growing, at least since 2011 and some would argue since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Constraining and reversing this expansion of Iranian influence in the region is a worthy and important goal for American policy in the context of stabilizing a disordered region. It is a goal that, for the moment, unites most of America's regional partners, and one that could bring others in the international community on board. But pursuing this goal will require persistence, trust with American allies, resolution of regional conflicts, dialogue with a wide range of international partners – in other words, adroit and assertive American diplomacy.

Whereas two years ago, America's major regional partners disagreed as to whether Iran's regional troublemaking, or its nuclear program, was the greatest threat, today they are united in their focus on the regional subversion. Indeed, this singular goal has become the shared focus of America's regional partners in part *because* the JCPOA has, for now, bracketed the nuclear program that had been a second major vector for Iranian threat projection against America and its allies. Saudi Arabia is one of America's closest regional partners, and the government in Riyadh views regional developments almost exclusively through the lens of their concern about the rise and expansion of Iranian influence in the Arab world. Israel, America's closest Middle Eastern ally, likewise is focused primarily on the implications of this moment for the Iranian threat. Both these American partners seek to push back against Iranian expansionism, and both seek a more active and engaged American role in the Middle East. This convergence of interests

around a shared threat may offer opportunities for these two countries to work more closely together with the United States to establish a more stable and secure equilibrium in the Middle East.

A shared threat, however, does not a shared strategy make. Saudi Arabia, Israel, and other American partners like Egypt and Jordan, do not share common priorities in the region, not even when it comes to where and how to try and constrain Iranian influence. They do not share a vision for what a more engaged American role should look like. And most significantly, they do not share a vision for what a new Middle East order should look like, or what they themselves must do to achieve it. This means that American leadership is necessary, although not sufficient, to harmonize the efforts of our various friends on behalf of a shared goal. I will try in the testimony that follows to lay out a few of these divergent perspectives, and suggest components for a successful American effort to contain Iranian expansionism.

What is Riyadh Thinking?

Saudi Arabia's greatest concern in the region is the rise and expansion of Iranian influence. Everything that the Kingdom is doing outside its borders – and some of what it's doing inside its borders – is a response to this threat.

Over the last months, the Saudi government has taken a number of steps that serve to consolidate, centralize, and underscore Mohammed bin Salman's control over the levers of power in the Kingdom, and his determination to undertake significant changes in the orientation of both domestic and foreign policy. The events of the past month – the wide-ranging arrests on vague charges of corruption, and the forced resignation of Saad Hariri as prime minister of Lebanon – are of a piece with the approach we've seen since King Salman ascended the throne and designated his son as then-deputy crown prince. The swiftness and decisiveness of Saudi decision-making has surprised many, and raised concerns about recklessness or at least a tolerance for risk that some observers find unnerving. Most concretely, the Saudi decision to intervene in Yemen appears impetuous and ill-considered, miring the Kingdom in a military quagmire, producing a nightmarish level of human suffering, and strengthening both Al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula and Iran.

Domestic Policy

At the same time, it's important to recognize that this shift in leadership style follows years of decision-making in Riyadh that was slow and cautious, even as events in the region and at home demanded a robust response. To Saudis and others in the Middle East who were concerned about the wave of popular revolution sweeping the region, alarmed at the growth of Iranian influence, and frustrated by the stagnation of the Saudi economy and society, this double-barreled assault on the status quo must feel refreshing, if uncertain.

In the domestic arena, Mohammed bin Salman is now dancing on a knife's edge. He has announced and begun, but has not fully carried out, a set of reforms that will dramatically reset the economic and political foundations of the Kingdom. Politically, he is laying the basis for the first transfer of power to a grandson of the Kingdom's founder, Abdul Aziz al-Saud; he is also

shifting the monarchy's political base from a network of royals and elites who live off state patronage to a wider more populist base in Saudi's overwhelmingly large rising generation. He seeks to consolidate this shift by centralizing power in his own hands, marginalizing and discrediting rival royal family members, and promising young Saudis better services, greater social freedom and wider economic opportunities.

Economically, Mohammed bin Salman seeks to diversify Saudi Arabia's energy-based economy and expand its private sector, to compensate for long-term lower oil prices, to create more jobs for young Saudis, and to extend the country's prosperity into the post-oil era. But to do this, he must slash government subsidies and rein in a very leaky and bloated government budget, while raising cash for domestic investment, including through a public offering of 5% of the state oil company.

Some of the young crown prince's political and economic goals seem contradictory – for example, it's very hard to inspire the confidence of foreign investors while casting doubt on your nation's reliability and rule of law by arresting hundreds on vague corruption charges with no public evidence or judicial process. It's very hard to encourage innovation and promise young Saudis greater opportunity to pursue their dreams, while severely restricting freedom of expression and enforcing the horrific guardianship laws that allow Saudi males to treat their daughters, sisters, and wives like chattel.

The real question is whether Mohammed bin Salman's bold decision making can keep up with the changes already underway in and around Saudi Arabia. Can he shift his political base and make new friends faster than he is alienating his opponents amongst the royal family and the old elites? Can he catalyze new growth and investment in the Saudi economy faster than the drop in oil prices and the burdens of social services and regional leadership are draining government reserves? And can he really put a fence around the extreme interpretation of Islam that has dominated Saudi public life, overtaken the educational system and the airwaves, and been an arm of Saudi foreign policy for decades? My own view is that top-down reform, without meaningful improvements in government accountability, transparency, and inclusion, will not ultimately succeed in winning the support either of foreign investors or, more importantly, the Kingdom's citizens. I detail that analysis in [this paper](#).

Foreign Policy

Despite the dramatic shift in speed and tone, in foreign policy, the primary motives of Saudi policy remain the same: to push back revolutionary movements and to contain Iranian influence. But Saudi tactics and tone have changed, from risk-averse to risk-taking, from hedging bets between dialogue and confrontation with Tehran to going all-in on a face-off designed to unsettle Iran, raise its costs, and try to impose some red lines on its behavior. In some areas, the policy has involved primarily soft power, and brought noticeable gains – such as Saudi Arabia's warmer relations with the government in Baghdad, its opening of the Saudi-Iraqi border to trade, and its outreach to Iraqi Shia political figures. In other areas, like Yemen and now Lebanon, the approach has been more unilateral and coercive, and reveals the limits of the Kingdom's leverage and capacity to shape events. These are the areas of greatest risk for the United States and its partners. The bottom line is that Saudi Arabia is far more effective in regional affairs with

carrots than sticks, and its current leadership's propensity for confrontation has already complicated key U.S. policy goals including the fight against Islamist terrorism. U.S. policy should encourage Saudi Arabia to stop picking fights and instead invest in conflict resolution and coalition-building around common and concrete objectives.

What is Happening With Lebanon?

Saudi Arabia's power play in Lebanon should be understood as an attempt to gain leverage over Iran by pressuring its main regional proxy, Hezbollah. The Saudi government is alarmed, not just by Iranian expansionism, but by Hezbollah's role in facilitating it.

The missile attack on the Riyadh airport last month was a wake-up call, but Saudi worries over the missile threat from Yemen has been growing steadily. While Hezbollah's Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, denies sending missiles to Yemen, the missile fired on Riyadh came from somewhere outside Yemen, and someone either came into the country to fire that sophisticated missile, or trained Yemenis to do so. U.S. forces have intercepted arms shipments from Iran that they believe were destined for the Houthis. And over the last year or so, Hezbollah members have boasted about their involvement with the Houthi insurgency and targeting Saudi Arabia with rockets. Saudi Arabia has faced the possibility that Iran and Hezbollah would create in northern Yemen a duplicate of the challenge Israel faces in southern Lebanon: a hostile militia armed with long-range missiles that threaten Saudi infrastructure and civilian populations. This is an intolerable prospect for the Kingdom, and they are prepared to take dramatic steps to forestall it.

Since 2006, shortly after Rafik Hariri's assassination and Syria's military withdrawal from Lebanon, Hezbollah has exercised an effective veto over Lebanese politics. It was Hezbollah's insistence that left Lebanon without a government for nearly two years before Saad Hariri acceded to the deal that made Hezbollah ally Michel Aoun president and returned Hariri himself to the prime ministry. By removing Hariri's Sunni fig leaf on a Hezbollah-dominated government in Lebanon, the Saudi leadership apparently hoped to isolate Lebanon economically and politically, and so increase international pressure on Hezbollah to curb its regional activities in favor of shoring up its domestic legitimacy. The Hariri resignation was thus an indirect move to try and constrain Iranian behavior in other conflict arenas outside Lebanon itself.

But the Saudi gambit was ill-suited to this task, for two reasons. First, Lebanon is really on the periphery of the geopolitical struggle between Saudi and Iran. The Kingdom's leverage there is both limited and blunt, while Hezbollah's roots in Lebanon are deep and strong. Beyond the Hariri resignation itself, Saudi leverage over Lebanon is economic, and is entirely negative – it could withdraw deposits in the central bank or block the flow of remittances from Gulf-based Lebanese citizens back home. These steps would harm Lebanese Sunnis as much as Hezbollah, if not more – and could plunge Lebanon into political chaos, with unpredictable repercussions. Second, the ham-handedness of the Saudi pressure on Hariri backfired in Lebanon itself, reducing Saudi influence. There, Hariri was seen as acting under a Saudi diktat, held hostage and forced to resign against his own preferences and those of his constituents. Hariri himself has gained popularity even as he has lost Saudi support. Saudi Arabia appears in this context as both a bully and a fickle ally willing to sacrifice its client, Hariri, for the sake of its own interests.

Hezbollah gets to paint itself as the reasonable party, committed to the rules of Lebanese politics in the face of external demands; and Iran is seen as a stalwart supporter to its allies in Lebanon in Syria.

At the moment, Hariri's resignation is "suspended" while the Lebanese political factions negotiate on a possible bargain to keep him in office. Saudi Arabia's most urgent concern regarding Iranian and Hezbollah external activity is to halt their cooperation with the Houthis rebels, and especially what the Saudis allege as their supply to the Houthis of long-range missiles. Since Hezbollah publicly denies involvement in Yemen, it's possible to imagine a deal whereby this covert cooperation ends and Hariri remains as prime minister. But an undeclared end to unacknowledged cooperation is hard to see and hard to enforce; I think we should expect to see continue tussles between Saudi Arabia and Iran over Lebanese politics in the months to come, even if neither of them wants to entirely upset the Lebanese apple cart.

How should the United States respond to these events? The Lebanese state is indeed tainted by Hezbollah – not just its role in formal governance, but also its effective veto power over political decision-making and its apparent penetration of government entities that we hope would serve as independent, unifying national institutions in the fractured country. For example, we saw in August the Lebanese Armed Forces apparently coordinate with Hezbollah, for example, in fighting ISIS along the Lebanese-Syrian border. Additional sanctions and other pressure to cut financing and support for Hezbollah are certainly worthwhile endeavors.

At the same time, increased isolation of or pressure on the Lebanese state by the United States or European countries is unlikely to constrain Iranian or Hezbollah regional behavior in any meaningful way. Destabilizing Lebanon's politics or economics might even increase the incentives for Hezbollah to bolster its nationalist credentials in the country by provoking a confrontation with Israel. The prospect of instability in Lebanon is unnerving to Israel. Jerusalem is resolutely working to contain the missile threat it faces from Hezbollah and to prevent the group gaining additional capabilities, and Israel is fully prepared for a scenario in which it must quickly work to destroy the extensive missile capability Hezbollah already has. But Israel does not seek to be drawn into a conflict with Hezbollah due to external factors or miscalculations. Such a war, should it come, would likely be intense and costly for civilian populations on both sides of the border.

Hezbollah faces continual pressure in balancing its regional activism on Iran's behalf with its national claims and constituents in Lebanon itself. As the Syrian war winds down, and Lebanese electoral politics heat up, this balancing act becomes more difficult. The United States should take advantage of this trajectory. The regular functioning of the Lebanese state and the democratic demands of the Lebanese citizenry remain the best mechanisms for constraining Hezbollah's behavior in Lebanon and toward Israel. The U.S. should stay engaged, continue to support democratic development in Lebanon, push for parliamentary elections to take place next year under maximally free conditions, and hope that one legacy of the maladroit Saudi pressure on Hariri is increased support for his March 14th coalition at the ballot box.

The Disaster in Yemen

The Saudi intervention in Yemen, now nearly three years old, is both a military and a humanitarian disaster. Deaths from the conflict itself have topped 10,000, including many civilian deaths from airstrikes by the Saudi-led and U.S.-backed coalition. But the greater loss of life today is as a result of starvation and disease amongst a beleaguered population that was living on the edge even before this conflict began. According to the U.N., twenty million people living in Yemen need emergency humanitarian assistance. Cholera has already infected more than 900,000 people, and killed more than 2000. More than four million women and children are acutely malnourished. The blockade imposed by the Saudi-led coalition after a missile launched from Yemen nearly reached the international airport in Riyadh exacerbated an already-dire lack of food and medicine, and the partial lifting of that blockade has only marginal impact at ameliorating this humanitarian nightmare. The war needs to end as soon as possible.

Militarily, the conflict is at a stalemate, but in a state far worse for Saudi Arabia and for American interests than when the Kingdom intervened nearly three years ago. Intense Saudi suspicion of Houthi connections to Iran is what drew Riyadh into this conflict —and by intervening the Kingdom created a self-fulfilling prophecy, one that boosted the Houthis with support from Iran and Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was once a Saudi client but was ousted with Saudi support in the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011. Meanwhile, the intensification of the conflict via Saudi intervention increased maneuvering space for Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the Al Qaeda affiliate that has been the most fixated on attacking the U.S. homeland.

In its effort to beat back Houthi territorial gains and reestablish the Hadi government, Saudi Arabia has achieved what it can through an intensive aerial campaign. It is unlikely to make further territorial gains for the Hadi government without ground operations that would cost significant additional blood and treasure. Saudi Arabia's allies in this fight have mostly been reluctant partners from the first, and are wary about further investments. Every day the war goes on, the humanitarian costs mount with little real impact on the outcome, which will inevitably involve intricate political compromises and power-sharing amongst Yemen's rival factions.

The Houthi's bullheaded approach torpedoed the last round of serious negotiations in 2016, and there appears to be no viable process now underway to seek a settlement for the war. The Saudi Arabian government in fact expressed renewed interest in negotiations just days before the missile attack on Riyadh's airport last month; the seriousness of the missile threat, if anything, underscores the urgency of effective negotiations. While the previous administration, like this one, provided logistical and intelligence support to the Saudi war effort, Secretary of State Kerry also actively supported a diplomatic process to end the war and President Obama sought toward the end of his term to use American weapons sales as leverage to reduce civilian suffering and push toward conflict resolution. But when it comes to diplomacy, the Trump Administration, aside from the occasional press release, seems to be missing in action. Congress can and should play a role in encouraging an early end to this conflict, and meanwhile should assiduously oversee the implementation of American laws designed to prevent our weapons and assistance being used in ways that violate human rights or the laws of war.

Yemen is another area, like Iraq and Syria, where divergent priorities amongst seemingly allied governments complicate efforts to end conflict and stabilize the region. In this instance, the United Arab Emirates objects to the inclusion of Yemen's Islah (Reform) party in a postwar government, because of the party's ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, and has reportedly given support to a separatist coalition that rejects the internationally recognized Hadi government. Mohammed bin Salman recently met with representatives of Islah to build support for the Hadi government. Until the Saudi-led coalition can resolve its own internal differences, it's hard to see how diplomacy can make progress.

U.S. Policy: How to Push Back on Iran?

Confronting the reality of stalemate in Lebanon and Yemen, we return to the Syrian-Iraqi arena as the place where it might still be possible, and meaningful, to push back against Iranian influence. How might the United States achieve such a goal?

The first step is to realize that America cannot afford to rapidly draw down engagement in Syria and Iraq just because ISIS has been ousted. As recently as August, U.S. special envoy Brett McGurk emphasized to international partners that the United States would not seek to rebuild effective security or governance in those parts of Syria it had liberated from ISIS, but would undertake "basic stabilization" before withdrawing. This sent a signal to actors in the region, and to Russia, that the United States sought no direct leverage over a political settlement in Syria. It's no surprise that Iranian-backed forces then rushed for the Iraqi-Syria border. Carrying through such an intention also means leaving America's anti-ISIS partners, primarily the Kurdish fighters who make up most of the Syrian Democratic Forces, to cut their own deal with Damascus and its Iranian patron.

More recently, administration officials have backtracked and signaled that U.S. forces may remain on the ground in Syria longer, but it's not clear what the administration's strategy is for leveraging that military presence into gains at the diplomatic table. It is hard to imagine how this tactic can work when President Trump seems satisfied leaving the diplomatic initiative in Putin's hands. It is imperative that the United States seek to enforce Russia's formal commitment to the Geneva process, and to a political transition in Syria, as the bases for a political settlement. The clear priority for American engagement in the Geneva process should be to insist, with the united support of the Arab parties to the talks and the Syrian opposition, that all foreign fighters – including and especially the Iranian-sponsored foreign militias, and Hezbollah – demobilize and ultimately withdraw from Syrian territory. Russia can hardly object to a goal of removing non-state foreign fighters, when its ostensible justification for intervening in Syria was to combat terrorism.

In Iraq, it is imperative that the United States remain engaged diplomatically and politically, to head off further Kurdish-Arab confrontation, to encourage Saudi-Iraqi rapprochement, to constrain the role of the pro-Iranian Popular Mobilization Forces, and to nudge important Shia political leaders like Moqtada al-Sadr and Ayatollah al-Sistani farther away from Tehran's orbit. Iraqi elections are expected next spring, and like the Lebanese elections they are an opportunity

for local champions of national sovereignty and opponents of Iranian influence to demonstrate their strength and determination.

More broadly, containing Iran demands a wide and diverse international coalition to constrain Iran's regional interventions, to marginalize and weaken its proxy forces, to expose Iranian sponsorship of terrorism, and to enforce constraints on Iran's missile proliferation and missile program. Components of such a coalition effort would include:

- persuading Russia, as the dominant actor in Syria, to constrain IRGC and Hezbollah freedom of movement within the country, and to enforce understandings excluding these forces from the "de-escalation" zones and, later, to extend those understandings into other parts of the country by writing them into a political settlement of the civil war.
- using the United Nations platform to call out and punish Iranian violations of Security Council resolutions pertaining to its ballistic missile program.
- building on strong intelligence cooperation with regional and international partners, expose and interdict Iranian activities such as weapons proliferation, sponsorship of terrorism, and subversion of domestic politics.
- persuading European countries and China that Middle East stability is a global public good, and that Iranian interventionism degrades that good. They should therefore slow their diplomatic and economic re-engagement with Iran, and condition those relations on Iran's pulling back especially from the conflicts in Syria and Yemen. Iran's involvement in these two wars has prolonged their violence, magnified the human suffering, displaced large numbers of people including into Europe, exacerbated the terrorist threat emanating from these places, and threatened free flows of energy and commerce in and out of the Middle East. These phenomena should be of significant concern to European and Asian governments, and motivate them to cooperate in a multilateral pressure campaign on Tehran.

As with the effort that brought Iran to the nuclear table, ramping up international pressure to a level that shifts Iranian behavior will require painstaking and persistent diplomatic work by the United States, alongside stepped-up pressure through sanctions and U.N. bodies. It should be obvious that building this international pressure is an uphill climb as long as the U.S. commitment to its JCPOA obligations is in question.

The most important tool in the American policy toolbox to contain Iran and restore stability to this disordered region is the tool the Trump Administration seems most committed to destroying: our diplomacy. Congress and this Committee can work to hold the administration accountable for building a credible, coherent diplomatic strategy to advance American interests and support American partners in the Middle East.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you very much to all of our panelists.

Mr. Abrams, I will start with you. You have written that successfully undermining Hezbollah's grip on Lebanon will require diplomatic and economic pressure from the United States and our allies, especially France.

European nations, as we have seen, have long been reluctant to designate the totality of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.

So what is it going to take for France and all the members of the EU to take a harder line on Hezbollah and what can the U.S. do to push everyone in the right direction?

Mr. ABRAMS. As you know, Madam Chairman, the French have had, for obvious historic reasons, a special interest in Lebanon. There was a lot of cooperation between the U.S. and the French at the time that the Cedar Revolution rose up and the Syrians were finally forced to leave Lebanon.

So I think we could start a process of talking to the French privately about exactly what you are proposing. How do we move ahead here?

They would have to bring the Europeans along. But I think there is a real good chance that—because the Europeans recognize the special French role that this would happen.

I think Ms. Frankel is right in saying that we are, in many ways, weakening our diplomatic instruments. But I think the beginning of it is for us to adopt a policy that says we have a goal of weakening Hezbollah.

Let us go to the French with that and say okay, what do we do in terms of military aid, in terms of economic aid, to put pressure on Lebanon not to say the current deal where Hezbollah gets to do whatever it wants anywhere in the Middle East is fine with us and we will keep paying.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you very much.

And to either Dr. Salem or Dr. Wittes—either one would like to answer in the interest of time—Saudi Arabia has accused Hezbollah of playing an increasing role in Yemen by allegedly helping to train, equip, and finance the Houthis and there are also concerns of a Hezbollah presence on the Saudi border.

And in announcing his resignation, Hariri was particularly grieved by the presence and participation of Hezbollah and the IRGC in Yemen.

So what does a Hezbollah presence in Yemen mean for Saudi Arabia? How does Hezbollah's assistance to the Houthis change the current situation on the ground and how do the U.S., the Saudis, and others work together to curb Iran's latest attempt to expand its presence?

Thank you, sir.

Mr. SALEM. I think what concerns the Saudis most about Hezbollah and Iran's presence are the missiles that are being launched on Saudi Arabia and as my colleague said, I think the Saudis fear that there is a reproduction of the pattern that happened in Lebanon vis-a-vis Israel and I think that is probably accurate—that the Iranians have that ambition.

As far as anyone knows, the Hezbollah presence in Yemen is limited to advisors, technicians, maybe missile experts and so on—very different than the thousands of fighters that they have in

Syria, that they have rotated through Syria, and that have fought there. So the presence is limited.

The Saudis are also concerned, as are many Lebanese, that Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, for many, many months has championed the anti-Saudi cause publicly in all of his speeches and his media, and that is something that is also unacceptable to the Saudis.

There is, obviously, general rejection of Iran's presence in Syria and Iraq, but for Saudi, Yemen is the urgent case; and I think if there were some de-escalation or some commitments whether public or behind the scenes—that could be something that could resolve this temporary Lebanese crisis.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much.

Did you want to add anything, Dr. Wittes?

Ms. WITTES. Well, I will only add that although Hassan Nasrallah has denied that Hezbollah is engaged in Yemen or in supporting the Houthis, the U.S. military has intercepted shipments of weapons that seem to come from Iran and are destined for the Houthis in Yemen and there has been news reporting of Hezbollah fighters boasting about their engagement in Yemen.

So it is something that they formally deny but the evidence is mounting.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much to all three of you.

Now I will yield to my friend, Mr. Deutch of Florida.

Mr. DEUTCH. Thanks very much, Madam Chairman.

Just to follow up, Dr. Salem, the last point about Hezbollah's presence in Lebanon, what—what happens to all of the now well-trained Hezbollah fighters after Syria?

And Mr. Abrams referred to them as Iran's Foreign Legion. Where do they go and how disruptive will that be? Will they return home to be disruptive there?

Mr. SALEM. Well, Hezbollah has about 20,000 full time fighters, and about 50,000, 60,000 reservists. It has been rotating about 8,000 at any one time in the Syrian battlefield, as far as we can tell.

They have lost from 1,000 to 2,000 people killed, 4,000 to 5,000 at least wounded. So it is a heavy toll in terms of the fairly small community that they come from in Lebanon, but it is a very massive force.

They have expanded: They have gained a lot of capacities and fighting skills and so on through their engagement in Syria.

They still are deployed in Syria in those ratios so there isn't any massive sort of exit from there. Their presence apparently in Iraq and Yemen, while it is there it is not in massive numbers.

This is part of an Iranian expeditionary force which probably numbers about 150,000, if you add Hezbollah numbers plus some of the Popular Mobilization Units in Iraq, which are very close to or answerable to the Quds forces and General Qasem Soleimani as well as Afghan and Pakistani and other fighters that have been brought to the fight, particularly in Syria.

We are talking about an Iranian expeditionary force of around 150,000. Indeed, they are already causing a lot of trouble in the four arenas where they are.

But it is a very troubling question for countries in the region, probably countries around the world: Where will Iran deploy these people if things settle in Iraq or settle in Syria?

Mr. DEUTCH. Dr. Wittes, you—at the end of your testimony you said that the most important tool to contain Iran’s ability is the same tool the President seems committed to destroying our diplomacy.

Many members of this committee expressed our deep concern over the exodus of more than 100 senior Foreign Services officers from the State Department since January.

It was particularly startling to learn that 60 percent of our career Ambassadors have left the department since the President took office.

When you say that we need our European allies, we need others to understand the Middle East stability is a public good, how can we convince them of that when in our own public sphere—in our own Government we seem less inclined to want to play any role in international diplomacy?

Ms. WITTES. I think that is a crucial question at the moment and I would say as well that President Trump’s approach on U.S. involvement in implementation of the JCPOA has also raised a lot of questions amongst those same international partners that we would need to deal with the regional behavior of Iran.

If they see the United States walking away from its JCPOA commitments, they are—they will at the very least question whether it is worthwhile cooperating with the U.S. on this dimension of Iranian behavior.

But I think that the rhetoric about America first only takes us so far. The widespread nature of Iranian subversion and the variety of tools that they use are such that this is not something the United States can do alone.

It is not something the United States and its regional partners can do alone. We need maximum leverage over this situation and that means that we need those who are economically reengaging right now with Iran to reconsider the consequences of those choices.

Mr. DEUTCH. Mr. Abrams, you have lots of experience in government. Yesterday, when the Secretary of State defended—attempted to defend the massive cuts to the State Department budget by effectively suggesting we won’t need the personnel because the efforts of this administration will help to resolve so many of these crises that we face around the world, and yet here we are less than a day later and we are talking about 150,000 Iranian-trained militias, soldiers.

We don’t know where they go next. It doesn’t seem like the conflicts are being resolved and how do we—first of all, is there any—does that argument make any sense to you at all, and assuming that it does not, how do we help everyone in the administration understand that the challenges that we face require more than—more than one conversation with world leaders or one visit but actually ongoing diplomacy?

Mr. ABRAMS. Are you trying to get me in trouble here on this?
[Laughter.]

Mr. DEUTCH. Indeed I am, Mr. Abrams.

Mr. ABRAMS. Well, I didn't—I would have to say I think you could always, in an organization as large as the State Department cut 5 percent, maybe 10 percent, and there are efficiencies in any large organization.

But the kind of cuts that we are hearing about—30 percent—have had a devastating impact on morale. I think that is obvious and cannot be denied if you go over and visit the State Department.

I don't know what to say except that I would think influential Members of Congress such as yourself might try to have these conversations with the Secretary of State and try to persuade him that there is an enormous amount of diplomatic work that needs to be done.

It is not a one-man job. It is going to require people at the second and third and fourth and fifth level and Ambassadors in the field.

Mr. DEUTCH. I appreciate that.

I would also suggest, Mr. Abrams, that important figures like yourself with a relevant history might also have an important voice in all this, and I yield back.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. That would be great. I am all for that.

Mr. Donovan of New York is recognized.

Mr. DONOVAN. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Many of you spoke in your statements about Hezbollah and their activity. We know that it is a criminal enterprise, is financed through a lot of drug trade. They use the proceeds of that drug trade to buy weapons in Syria and a lot of the drugs that are being traded are sold in Europe and here in the United States.

Anyone have any ideas? I mean, this is a twofold problem—one, the drug crisis, secondly, that they are using the proceeds to buy weapons.

And if you have any ideas if there is activities that the United States should be doing and aren't doing now that could help quash this activity both in the drug trade and the purchasing of weapons.

When everyone looks at one another I see nobody wants to answer this question.

Mr. ABRAMS. I would just say I think a lot of this drug trafficking takes place in Latin America—that is, Hezbollah drug trafficking.

We are, I believe, doing a lot to try to stop it through DEA and through other parts of the U.S. Government. Whether it could be made much more effective, I don't know.

But we would have to say that they are getting an enormous amount of money—in the hundreds of millions of dollars—from Iran and part of the problem here is that it is likely that, you know, if we turn off one spigot, the Iranians will just open another spigot just that much more because they are apparently so committed to the Hezbollah model.

Mr. SALEM. Yes, if I may—I mean, I second that view that I don't have much information about the drug activity and other criminal activity but I am aware that the U.S. and others are trying to interdict it.

But I would second that view that Hezbollah essentially is an emanation of Iranian financial military ideological support. It is part of their sort of defense and security deployment, with a lot of support from the Assad regime in Syria. So I don't think that stop-

ping one source will end the problem. It would just go in other directions.

But I do want to comment on the issue of diplomacy and say effectively that, I mean, obviously, having less diplomats is a serious problem.

I see the real problem is the lack of an overall strategy to address the problems that military and diplomatic tools could be used toward a broad strategy.

To my mind—and I will just mention a few things—one is that the crisis that we are going through that includes empowerment of Iran has to do with the collapse of states and the outbreak of civil war.

That is where Iran as well as ISIS and other sort of radical and terrorist groups can grow and thrive. We still have four ongoing collapsed state civil wars in the region. Ending those civil wars—and each one has very different conditions—must be a very high priority for the U.S. and all regional players.

We have talked about Yemen. We have talked about Syria. Iraq might be moving in the right direction; and we still have Libya lying out there.

Secondly, in the approach toward Iran, I think a comprehensive strategy must have both more push back and more diplomacy.

But the point is to get Iran to change its behavior, to change its policy, and neither are the costs being made high enough for Iran nor is there any sort of diplomatic or political offer on the table to say, “If you want us to reduce the pressure, you have to abide by international law, do this, do that.”

What we seem to be having now is sort of “speak loudly and carry a small stick” rather than “speak softly and carry a big stick.”

And in effect, in terms of push back, this administration has rolled back anti-Iranian support in Syria. It is basically, you know, stopped support for the Syrian opposition, possibly dropping support for the Kurds.

Handing over Syria to a Russian-managed situation—that is not pushing back on Iran, nor is there any visible push back in Iraq, and Lebanon alone won’t do it. The big arenas need to be addressed as well, and there needs to be engagement with Iran, with a lot of pressure at the same time.

Mr. DONOVAN. Madam Chair—quickly, because my time is running out, I know Saudi Arabia spoke about extracting uranium recently as last month to promote or develop a nuclear power system.

Is there any concern that at some point this will be upgraded to weapon-capacity uranium?

Ms. WITTES. Congressman Donovan, I think that the question of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East is one that the U.S. Government and policy experts have focused on for a long time.

I would say that if there were a risk of nuclear weapons in Saudi Arabia, it probably would not come from that kind of ground up program.

Saudi would probably look to relationships with other nuclear powers, especially Pakistan, to get something off the shelf rather than developing it indigenously.

So I think we do always have to pay attention to nuclear programs that have the capacity to create proliferation challenges.

But I think that in the case of the kingdom what this is really about is a very swiftly escalating domestic energy demand and their desire to use more of their petroleum for world markets and revenue generation than for domestic consumption.

Mr. SALEM. But I would say that this concern about nuclear proliferation in the Middle East relates directly also to the nuclear deal with Iran—that despite its faults and limitations, other than the risk of what Iran will do, if the nuclear deal itself is dismantled or is no longer applicable, that will immediately spur countries like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, possibly Egypt and others, to acquire some kind of nuclear option, whether it is off-the-shelf or to build it themselves.

So I think the whole nuclear deal is, obviously, a key component of what we are talking about.

I think it is true that under the Obama administration the nuclear deal had some maybe unforeseen consequences. One, it gave Iran a sense of immunity that they could do things in other parts of the Middle East and the Obama administration wouldn't react.

Secondly, I think when they no longer had the nuclear option as deterrent, that spurred them to do more in asymmetric warfare.

It sort of created a bigger problem, that they wanted to assure their security through other means, and it also probably gave them some sense that they had more money to spend.

But I think the solution is not to drop the nuclear deal but to engage in a wider push back and diplomacy with Iran, which could then add some sunset issues or missile clauses as well as pushing Iran to abide by international law.

Mr. DONOVAN. I thank you, Madam Chair. My time has expired.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you, Mr. Donovan. Good questions.

Mr. Schneider of Illinois is recognized.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you, Madam Chairman, and thank you again for having this hearing. Witnesses, thank you for your insight and comments today.

Mr. Abrams, you noted you have enough material for five hearings. I have enough questions for at least those five hearings and so I will try to squeeze a little bit into these 5 minutes.

I am going to glance over these, but these are very important issues, you know, you all talked about Iran's regional goals and their multifaceted strategy within that region but in particular Hezbollah and their use of Hezbollah—how they are using them particularly in Lebanon and Syria, but also around the region and we have talked a lot about that. I think we need to address that.

I wish we could talk and maybe suggest for a future hearing about United Nations Security Council 1701, and I can't even use the word effectiveness on that but the fact that Hezbollah has 150,000 rockets, give or take—it doesn't matter what that margin of error is—threatening Israel and now Hezbollah and Iran using the same strategies you highlighted in Yemen is of grave concern.

But what I really want to focus on in the few minutes I have is—Dr. Wittes, you used the term what's our maximum leverage and I think you have to think of the image of a lever. There are four aspects to that lever.

There is the load—what are we trying to effect, what are we trying to move, what are our goals specifically. There is the beam, and by analogy the beam is what resources do we bring to this with U.S. resources but also our allies. The fulcrum—where do you put the fulcrum, what opportunities there are to place and get the leverage we need to have.

And the last piece—and this may be the most concerning in the context we have talked about the cuts at the State Department—is the effort. This isn't going to be one push and we are done.

We are going to have to work the levers to get that maximum leverage over a period of time and how do we do that—how do we maintain that attention.

So that is a brief introduction, using 2 minutes. I apologize. I will open it up to the panel and say help, where do we go from here.

Ms. WITTES. Well, if I may—sorry, guys—Congressman Schneider, thank you. I think that is a wonderfully drawn out picture for us and I think part of the challenge that we face in getting grips on this problem is that we and our partners in the region share a sense of threat but we—but there are very divergent priorities amongst our partners.

So for the Saudis, as we have discussed the missile threat from Yemen and Hezbollah's role there, is priority number one.

For the Israelis, the threat that Hezbollah or the IRGC would be able to set up permanent bases near its border or to establish weapons factories that would further exacerbate the precision missile threat from Hezbollah onto Israel's civilian population, that is priority number one.

But, you know, if you are—if you are talking about Egypt or Jordan or other American partners, you're going to have different priorities as well.

This is where American leadership comes in is looking across the region, seeing how these pieces fit together and saying where—where do we begin to have the maximum effect.

Now, we haven't talked a lot about Iraq or the slow wind down of the war in Syria so far in this hearing but it seems to me that Iraq and Syria are the place where we actually have maximum leverage.

Not only because we still have forces on the ground—as Paul said, forces are not a strategy. We need a strategy that combines our tools, and I think that one of the—one of the most troubling signals that the current administration has sent with respect to the war in ISIS is its consistent message that it wants to get the military job done of taking territory back from ISIS and then he wants to get out and go home—where what we need to do is stay engaged in Syria in order to have leverage on a political settlement with the Russians and the Iranians.

We need to not betray our allies who fought beside us so that our other allies stay on side and we need to look ahead in Iraq where yes, we have made a lot of progress. The Saudi outreach to Iraq is helpful there as well and they have elections next year and that matters very much.

So, you know, I don't think of push back and diplomacy as opposing means. I think that diplomacy is actually a very important part

of pushing back and I think that we need to start in Syria and Iraq.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Mr. Abrams?

Mr. ABRAMS. I think we are all agreeing on this. To put it a different way, we are never going to win at the negotiating table what we have not won on the ground in Syria.

This has been the problem, I think, in the years of Secretary Kerry's negotiations in Geneva. So push back is part of this but, you know, I am struck—we are talking about Iran's rise over the last 5 years. We are talking about what Hezbollah has been doing over the last few years.

They pay no price, and one way of thinking about this is how and where could we impose a price on Iran and its proxies.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Right. I think that is a good point. There has been a lot of evidence of big gains for little loss for Iran in the area.

Dr. Salem, anything you want to add?

Mr. SALEM. Well, no. I mean, I agree with my colleagues. Maybe I will say a couple things. On the question of what you gain from diplomacy if you haven't won on the ground, that is true; although in some cases you might be imposing a cost in one arena and you're trying to get a concession in something else.

I think the end point that we would like to get to and we are not going to get to anytime soon—is an Iran that abides by international law. Now, that is extremely long term.

If we get more practical, I think we do have a path forward in Iraq. It has been a rocky road but I think the defeat of ISIS by the central government, the rebuilding of much of the army, and the outreach by the Saudis as well creates conditions for a reasonable way forward. Iran will have influence but it won't dominate and won't dictate.

In Yemen there is an Iran presence, it is quite minor still, and I think efforts to end the Yemeni civil war almost succeeded in Kuwait a few months ago. There is a lot going on behind the scenes.

It is not an impossible conflict to negotiate an end to, and the Iranians don't dominate as they do in other arenas. So I think there is a way forward in Yemen. And there is certainly a way forward in Libya where Iran doesn't have a major presence.

The real "Chernobyl" of the region is Syria. That is where Hezbollah reemerged from Lebanon to have a major deployment and from there to Iraq and Yemen, and that is a sort of a meltdown that is in a very bad place and that is going in the wrong direction, particularly with U.S. policy effectively leaning toward the Russian option and so on.

The fight against ISIS went very well but there doesn't seem to be any long-term plan. So a practical approach might be to focus our efforts on finding a better resolution for Syria that would involve a settlement that doesn't include Assad but is workable and that leads to a pathway where Iranian influence can be reduced.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you.

I have far exceeded my time. If we had five before the questions, we are now at 10 hearings, going forward.

Thank you very much.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much, Mr. Schneider.

And I am very proud to yield to our good friend from Florida, Mr. Mast.

Mr. MAST. Thank you, Chairwoman. I appreciate that.

My line of questioning is certainly in the aim of historical understanding. I think Iran has done a very good job of being tactical and strategic in working toward long-term goals, and so I'd love to hear a few responses from you on where historical context might lead us.

How long has Hezbollah been operating in Lebanon? Mr. Abrams, if you want to answer—Doctor, anyone.

Mr. ABRAMS. I think the real turning point comes when the Syrian troops leave Lebanon because Syria dominated Lebanon and held in check a number of domestic forces, some democratic but also Hezbollah.

Once the Syrian army was out, fairly quickly, I would say, Hezbollah became the dominant military force and they used that power to increasingly dominate the political structures of the country as well.

So I would say, roughly, the first half of the previous decade.

Mr. SALEM. I would give you a bit more context. To go back to the 1980s when Hezbollah first started, obviously emanating from the Iranian Revolution, particularly in the aftermath in Lebanon of the '82 invasion and the removal of the PLO from Lebanon.

The PLO used to dominate south Lebanon. And a key turning point there that is often missed is the 1983 withdrawal agreement, which the Lebanese and Israelis, under American auspices, negotiated and in which Israeli troops were to withdraw from Lebanon.

This is something that the Syrians opposed extremely—you know, the Syrians opposed it effectively because they wanted any negotiations with Israel to be in tandem—Lebanon and Syria on one side and Israel on the other—so that they could get the occupied Golan back.

They opposed the agreement. They scuttled the agreement and, moving forward, as the PLO had been removed, they backed Iran to arm and grow Hezbollah in Lebanon partly to serve Syrian interests.

Syria controlled Lebanon all the way up to 2005 and I mean completely governed Lebanon effectively. And for them—for Syria—Hezbollah was a main tool to pressure Israel over issues relating to the Golan.

For Iran, obviously, it was, first, an ideological issue, it was the first place they could export their Islamic revolution to and show what they could do; but on national security issues, since they considered themselves to be at war both with Israel and the United States, they created a kind of "aircraft carrier," which they parked north of Israel, which is Hezbollah, as an attack force or a deterrent.

So over 25 years Syria helped Iran build this massive army at a time when there was no Lebanese say in any of it. The important turning point of 2005 is very significant and I would say a couple of things.

I agree with Mr. Abrams that when Syria withdrew, Hezbollah stepped up and did its own dirty work itself rather than the Syrians doing the dirty work.

But after 2005, it is fair to say that about half of the Lebanese parties, voters, leaders, its political system was now free.

Not free not to be assassinated, but they were no longer under Syrian diktat or Hezbollah. They struggled. And that is what we have now.

We have a semi-free country and a semi-occupied country struggling with a problem that was created by Syria and Iran and which, you know, regional countries and the U.S. were okay with, until the shift in the Bush era in 2004 and the aftermath of the Iraq invasion changed those calculations.

Mr. MAST. The word model and tool has been used by several on this panel to describe Hezbollah. Would you say that this is a model in the historical context that you just gave?

Would we say that that is something that is being layered upon Yemen? Would you say that this is a model that they are looking to play out over another 25 to 30 years—that is a long-term goal for Yemen so they would be on now, you know, multiple directions of Saudi Arabia?

Mr. SALEM. Yes, it is a model that they sort of apply in Iran itself. The Revolutionary Guards is not the national army. It is an ideological force. That model “succeeded” for them in Lebanon.

They are certainly trying to reproduce it in Iraq but the central government, I think, is trying to fight back. They are—have already or trying to make it a part of the future in Syria, although Russia might not be terribly comfortable with that.

Certainly, we shouldn’t be comfortable with that. And they would—the Houthis are asking, effectively, to be like—in the negotiations the Houthis are saying, “Okay, we will agree, but we need to be able to maintain our own private army.”

So yes, they are trying to create that model. It must not be allowed to be recreated.

Mr. MAST. My time has expired. Do you mind if I ask one last question?

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Please, go right ahead.

Mr. MAST. You know, you used the term “an ideological force.” Do you see them whatsoever as a colonizing force? [Laughter.]

Ms. WITTES. Thank you. I don’t know that I would say colonizing. I think that the Revolutionary—the aim of the Islamic Republic has been to export revolution and to gain influence.

What we have seen with Hezbollah is that it wants to exercise veto power. It doesn’t want to exercise absolute control. It is certainly not colonizing in the sense that it is extracting resources and bringing them back to the metropol.

So I wouldn’t say colonization is the model. I think it is really about a power that understands—Iran understands that in the majority Sunni region of the Middle East there are some natural limits on its ideological reach and its political reach. But it is trying to maximize its ability to shape events by exercising vetoes where it can.

Mr. SALEM. But if I may, I think there is a little element of it in their sort of sectarianization and looking at the region in sectarian terms and finding ways that that links to their projection of power—that in Iraq look at Shiites and Lebanon look at Shiites.

In Syria, with the Assad regime they are actually trying to do ethnic cleansing and rejiggering the sort of sectarian geography of the country so that they have a solid core.

In Yemen as well, the group there didn't consider themselves Shiites in the same way that the Iranians do but they are being moved in that direction and that is where the link to the collapse of nation states and civil war is the real problem—that once the state collapses people revert to their sectarian or communal identities and Iran steps in, says, “Okay, your state isn't working—I can help you.”

So that is why I emphasize ending civil wars and standing up states even if they are rickety and imperfect and what not but they are very significant—that is a very important goal.

Secondly, I am extremely heartened that Saudi Arabia, hopefully—I mean, since 1979, as was mentioned, Saudi Arabia fell into that game—that “oh, the Iranians are backing Shiites—maybe we should back Sunnis and maybe that is a good way to do it.”

I think the new leadership in Saudi Arabia is realizing that is bad for them, it is bad for their own societies, and it is bad for the region. It is not good domestic policy. It is not good foreign policy.

And I think if MBS succeeds in some of the things that he's doing, particularly to reverse that decision that was made in 1979 to finance and export a pretty virulent form of sort of Wahabbi Islam I think that is being recognized, that is of historic importance for the kingdom, for the Middle East, and for the world in ratcheting back that and helping reinforce nation-state identities.

And I would also say that what he is doing in Saudi Arabia in terms of pushing back against radical Islam, empowering women, trying to build an open society, is something that many Iranians want and that their government is not delivering.

So I think progress in Saudi Arabia might even cause some worries for the Iranians domestically whose population wants something quite similar to that.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much, Mr. Mast.

Mr. Lieu of California is recognized.

Mr. LIEU. Thank you, Madam Chair, for calling this hearing on Saudi Arabia and Lebanon. I want to thank the witnesses for your expertise and coming here today.

As you know, the President has put Jared Kushner in charge of Middle East policy. So I have some questions for Dr. Wittes. Am I pronouncing that correctly?

Are you aware if Jared Kushner has any foreign policy credentials?

Ms. WITTES. He has no formal academic credentials in that regard, although I think some of us—yes, no formal academic credentials, no previous professional experience.

Mr. LIEU. When you served in the Obama administration, did the President ever put someone in charge of Middle East policy that had no foreign policy experience or foreign policy credentials?

Ms. WITTES. Not to my recollection, no, and I think that as all of us have been describing the intricacies of the relationships and history in this region, our essential background for effective American diplomacy, which is why it is so valuable to have professional

diplomats with that long experience in the region engaged in the policy.

Mr. LIEU. Thank you.

Now, as you know, there are reports—actually, it is not even disputed by Kushner companies—that they own 666 Building in Manhattan and that they have a \$1.2 billion debt on it, of which they own over half of.

Kushner companies also does not dispute that they have been trying to seek cash infusions. So I am going to read you the first paragraph from this Bloomberg article earlier this year.

It says, “A few months before President Donald Trump encouraged Saudi Arabia and others to blockade Qatar, the real estate business owned by the family of his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, sought a substantial investment from one of the Gulf State countries’ wealthiest and most politically influential figures, according to a spokesman for Kushner companies.”

Is it your view that the Trump administration gave Saudi Arabia the green light to impose the economic blockade on Qatar?

Ms. WITTES. I don’t have any specific information on that, Congressman Lieu, and, frankly, I—in my experience, it would be surprising for the kingdom to explicitly, you know, ask for a green light or seek approval.

I think what I would say is that President Trump’s visit there in which he made crystal clear that he’s not interested in local disputes or criticism.

He is interested in an uncritical embrace. That sent a strong signal that I think affected decision-making and calculations across the region.

Mr. LIEU. Thank you.

As you know, last month Jared Kushner took an unannounced trip to Saudi Arabia. Is that unusual for a senior White House official to make an unannounced trip like that?

Ms. WITTES. I wouldn’t say it is at all unprecedented actually and in the context of the significant reporting around preparation of a U.S. proposal on Middle East peace, it would be a reasonable step to take.

Mr. LIEU. So shortly after that, media reports that Chief of Staff Kelly was none too happy with that trip, partly because Saudi Arabia then started engaging in actions such as rounding up various folks in Saudi Arabia, recalling the prime minister of Lebanon, and so on.

Again, do you have any sense of whether Jared Kushner or the Trump administration gave a green light or sent signals to Saudi Arabia to say that that was okay?

Ms. WITTES. I have no specific information on that.

Mr. LIEU. Do you have any knowledge of whether Jared Kushner asked anyone in Saudi Arabia for financing for the 666 Building?

Ms. WITTES. I certainly have no information on that, no.

Mr. LIEU. Thank you.

I would like to now move to Yemen. As you know, in Yemen the Saudi-led coalition has engaged in a number of air strikes.

Reporting from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other organizations suggest that a number of these air strikes struck civilians nowhere near military targets. When I served on

active duty in the Air Force one of my duties was to teach the law on conflict.

These look like war crimes to me. Do you have any indication of whether there have been less war crime like strikes in Yemen or has the situation remained the same?

Ms. WITTES. The question of Saudi targeting is not one I have followed closely. The civilian casualties from bombings have been significant.

The greater threat to civilian life in Yemen today is starvation and disease, which is the result of the conflicts—the inability to end this conflict.

What I would say about the air campaign is that as far as I can tell it is unlikely that the Saudis are going to achieve much more territorially through an aerial campaign. The targets that they are bombing today are targets that they have bombed before.

And so to achieve more gains on the ground would require very bloody ground warfare that I don't think the Saudis or their coalition partners are interested in right now.

The way to solve this conflict is at the negotiating table. It is not going to be done militarily.

Mr. LIEU. Thank you, and I yield back.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you very much, Mr. Lieu.

Mr. Suozzi. Did I do it right now?

Mr. SUOZZI. You did it right. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you, sir.

Mr. SUOZZI. One of my colleagues earlier made reference to—thank you so much for being here today. We appreciate all your expertise and your contributions to our country.

The—one of my colleagues earlier today referenced Thomas Friedman's column in the New York Times on November 3rd and it talked about, you know, this—this version of the Arab Spring going on under the Saudi Arabian prince and the actions he's taking with the detainments and the women driving in their cars and everything else that is going on.

What is your opinion of what's going on and did you—did you read the article—the op-ed piece by Thomas Friedman? What is your opinion?

Is he—is he accurate? Is he—or is he being Pollyannaish? Do you have as positive a view as he does of what's going on in Saudi Arabia?

Mr. ABRAMS. Well, I don't have as positive a view as he does. That situation—I thought he missed a critical point, which is that the Arab Spring came from the bottom up. The Arab Spring was in—you know, in places like Tunisia and Egypt—the people overthrowing—

Mr. SUOZZI. Syria also.

Mr. ABRAMS. Yes. Rising up against a tyrant. That is not what is happening in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is top down.

It may get substantial popular support but I think—I think it was Dr. Wittes who said a few minutes ago that's a question. This is not going to be a 1- or 2-year program.

The crown prince calls it Saudi 2030. We are talking about decades here. I think they are going to need popular support and I

think that is something that Friedman really missed. How do they get that popular support and maintain it over time?

Mr. SALEM. Yes, I wouldn't compare it. As Mr. Abrams said, the Arab Spring gets into different models of how things happened or succeeded or failed.

My reading of what is happening in Saudi Arabia is that it is a very, very profound change. It is a top-down attempt at revolution—social revolution, cultural revolution, and economic revolution and, in a sense, political revolution as well.

I think the economic side as, I think, Mr. Abrams said in his opening statement, had to be done and was way overdue.

The numbers in the economy would not add up because of oil prices and consumption and so on. So Vision 2030 was the heart of trying to sort of privatize and get away from energy.

I think on the issue of corruption that the Crown Prince is absolutely right in having to tackle it in a major way. Corruption—it would be even hard to have called it corruption was sort of a way of life—that money sort of flows up and is shared among royals in all kinds of deals. That was the way business was done, and his attempt to go from that to an economy where that is no longer the norm is absolutely necessary.

Now, how he did it and in what ways, can be debated. In the cultural side, his stand against extremists or politicized Islam is incredibly necessary and incredibly important for Saudi Arabia and for the entire region and the world, and I think he has taken an incredibly bold position on that and extremely valuable.

On the empowerment of women, it is not just driving—that is a big move and other things as well—it is that that direction is at least the right direction to be going in.

And I think if this succeeds he might, at the end of the day, have a problem of how to empower these people he's empowered politically. We haven't figured that out yet.

But I think we should be hoping that a lot of what he does succeeds—that yes, it is done in a regularized way and is not that—in a way that could eventually also encourage growth and investment and so on. But I think what is going on is very historic.

Ms. WITTES. I will just add two quick points. One is I don't think that revolutionary is the appropriate word to apply. This is about consolidating and sustaining the Saudi kingdom, and in fact, the transformation that is underway is shifting the political base of the monarchy from this patronage network of royals and elites to a more populist base in the younger generation.

This swift decision making, these bold moves, are popular and the fact that the crown prince is of this generation is popular. But he is—he is doing this by centralizing power in his own hands.

He is doing this by marginalizing and discrediting rival members of the royal family and he is doing this by making a lot of promises to that young Saudi population that it is not clear he is going to be able to deliver economically, socially, and certainly, as Mr. Abrams pointed out, politically.

So this is a very risky play that is about consolidation of power. I also think, as Dr. Salem said, it is about strengthening the nation-state in the face of these transnational forces in the region.

The second point I'd make is about the cultural liberalization and the empowerment of women, and I understand that the driving issue is extremely symbolic and there are dozens of Saudi women who worked for years demanding their right to drive.

But at the end of the day, the ability to drive a car has economic consequences. It cannot—it has important personal consequences but it is not transformational.

This is a country with guardianship laws that allow Saudi males to treat their wives, daughters, and sisters as subordinate property, and until the guardianship system is tackled in this reform process, I, for one, am going to remain a bit skeptical about the reach of this liberalization.

Mr. SUOZZI. Thank you.

So I am more than used up my time. I have a lot more to ask you but I enjoyed your answers and your perspective on this. I mean, I think it is a very positive development. There is just always more to be done, obviously.

Thank you very much, Madam Chairwoman.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Very good questions and thank you for your answers.

And now my good friend, Ms. Frankel from Florida. Go get them, tiger.

Ms. FRANKEL. Thank you.

Doctor—well, you know, I know it will be that—it will be the two of us here. First off, thank you all so much for being here.

Well, we will see. I don't know if Mr. Suozzi is going to stay. Oh, Mr.—oh, Mr. Connolly.

Mr. SUOZZI. I know—I am—

Ms. FRANKEL. That's right. Mr. Connolly, welcome. Thank you for being here. Usually I am the last one here. That's due to seniority or lack—there lack of.

So thank you. You know, it is interesting because I know we are trying to have a very sincere intellectually discussion here this morning and, you know, we don't always agree but we do have serious discussions.

But, you know, my chairlady and I, we are from Florida and, you know, there is this expression—NASA, we have a problem.

Guess what? DC, we have a problem, and I think it is in the White House, I think. I think a lot of people agree. I mean, we have our own Cabinet members reportedly calling our President—one called him, allegedly, a moron.

One allegedly called him an idiot. I have seen reports on TV by mental health experts who think that the President has a serious mental health problem. In my opinion, he is a looney tune. I don't know. I have never—it is hard—it is hard to keep track.

But I bring this—and I want to add one other thing, which is not apt to this conversation, but what his policies are doing to the women of the world are disgraceful. In cutting off the health to the women of the world, that is going to come back, I think, in so many negative ways. But I am going to not ruminate on that.

One of you said today that, you know, lack of policy, a lack of strategy, a lack of personnel is part of the problem in trying to develop this Mideast or try to deal with this chaos that is going on.

So I have—I do have questions from this. Today, I think it is, the President tweeted or retweeted the most bigoted anti-Muslim—how do I say it politely?

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Video.

Ms. FRANKEL. Video venom—I was going to call it fake video—which has been apparently—I don't even think I should say what it is.

But it supposedly emanates from Great Britain, where even their leaders there—one of them just said the President of the United States is promoting a fascist racist extremist hate group whose leaders have been arrested and convicted and he's no ally or friend of ours.

I mean, so one question is, is the President's own behavior and his bullying tweets and crazy things he says, do you—do you think it has any effect at all in terms of trying to have some rational policy or strategy or whatever.

That's number one. Number two, now, give me some hope. Is there anyone behind the scenes that is doing anything meaningful and rational that can overcome this President?

And then my third question, which is a little bit off subject but I am really—since it is us girls and Gerry over here and Tom, you know, there has been a lot of chatter about this “forced peace agreement” between Israel and the Palestinians and Jared Kushner going to Saudi Arabia and Saudi Arabia getting the Palestinian leader Abbas and threatening him to accept the peace agreement.

And I am just wondering if you have an opinion on any of that, whether it is real or possible. So those are my questions. Who wants to give it a shot?

Ms. WITTES. Well—

Ms. FRANKEL. Start with the tweets. [Laughter.]

Ms. WITTES. Congresswoman Frankel, maybe I will start, if I may, with a question about the Middle East peace process and I suspect that my colleagues will have some things to say on that as well.

But I think that in—as our partners in the region have confronted this common threats from Iran we have seen a lot of tentative outreach in different directions and the possibility for some new rapprochement. And so that offers hope for cooperation on Middle East peace.

I would say that the agreements on Gaza to return the Palestinian Authority and particularly to return PA personnel to the borders of Gaza is an extremely significant development if in fact it is implemented as agreed.

What I worry about, as I said earlier, is that our partners in the region have different priorities that pull them in different directions and so when push comes to shove, I am not sure we have the ingredients we need for a big Middle East peace deal that would enable this kind of open Arab-Israeli rapprochement.

The Egyptians, who have been crucial to brokering the agreement on Gaza are, as you know, struggling with a fierce insurgency in Sinai.

This massive terrorist attack I think will compel them to rethink what an open border from Gaza means for them and, certainly, it

takes their attention away from this broader Middle East peace effort.

The Jordanians and the Palestinians have their own concerns about preference—the Gulf's preferences with regard to Middle East peace and the future of the—of leadership in the Palestinian Authority.

So I think that all of these tensions are coming into play before we even get to the question of Iran and Hamas and that kind of thing.

So I just don't think that our expectations should be too high. I don't think that this package is an easy thing to put together.

Mr. ABRAMS. I agree with that. I am a pessimist about the chances for a comprehensive peace deal. I don't appear today as an administration spokesman. I have done that many times in hearings that the chairman has held over the years.

But I would say I think if you ask a number of governments in the region—Saudi, Emirati, Israeli, Egyptian—they are actually happier with American foreign policy than 1, 2, 3 years ago—the previous 8 years. So I think that has to be part of record as well.

Mr. SALEM. Yes, I think I would agree with that, that they had other serious disagreements with the Obama administration, particularly, obviously, over Iran, but also over Egypt and some other things as well.

I think, again, dealing with governments in the region, gauging the effects of this administration, I don't think it is so much the President's personality—whatever you want to describe it, as in a tweet here and a tweet there. I think there are two more structural things. One, I think they are happy with a lot of the elements that they have seen: Strong position against Iran, strong position against extremist Islam and so on.

But a year into the administration I don't think they see the clarity of a full strategy—a lot of talk on Iran but no real teeth; not clear about Russia—is Russia partner of the Trump administration or not? A few fundamentals that are not clear as well: An administration where it is not clear who is in charge and who do you talk to.

Secretary Tillerson doesn't seem to be on the same page with the President or his son-in-law on many issues. I find when I go to the region there is a problem of personnel—should we talk to Jared Kushner, should we talk to the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense?

There is confusion about who is managing America's foreign policy in the Middle East and that can't be good.

Ms. FRANKEL. Madam Chair, just one follow-up. On the question of Russia, we had a hearing I think maybe a couple weeks ago on some of the issues related to Russia and one of the experts I remember—I forget who it was—said make sure you just—so be cautious that you differentiate between cooperation and, what was it, sharing? Wait. A staff question. Between cooperation and coordination.

And, basically, they said to us, you know, don't tell them any secrets. Don't give them anything that they might use against us but that—that doesn't mean you shouldn't try in the right times to have some cooperation.

So I wanted to ask you this in regards to Russia. Do you see a role of Russia at all in how in this whole Middle East chaos what should—what do you think their involvement or our involvement should be with them, given, obviously, what's going on with the interference with the elections and so forth?

Mr. SALEM. Well, when it comes to the Middle East, the area we are talking about today, I think there are two modes of thinking about this.

Some think that maybe we could work with the Russians and that will be separate from Iran and what Iran wants to do and try to create some space between Russia and Iran. In Syria, for example, the idea that if Russia is empowered in Syria they might remove Assad. They might build the army rather than the militias. They might help us get the Iranian proxy forces out.

But on the other hand, the pattern that I see developing is that Russia has jumped on an opportunity to ally effectively with Iran. Both of them are anti-American forces.

They have different colors, different ideologies, but on that they agree. On those, you know, they agree on that in a strategic way and Iran has secured dominance in the Levant.

I mean, a lot of influence in Iraq, victory in Syria, a lot of influence in Lebanon, and that is a core area. And Russia has jumped into that in Syria, providing air cover there and support in the Security Council.

So what I fear is happening is not necessarily that Russia is a problem for the U.S. in the Middle East because they could be partners in the Middle East peace and other things, but they have chosen to enter the Middle East with this alliance with Iran.

They can't really separate from Iran. They would lose what they gained in Syria. So that is where our problem lies and hence, yes, it is really a big problem to think that the U.S. can work with Russia blindly in Syria or the Middle East.

We have to be tough with them but also diplomatic and, you know, use all the levers to get a result that we want.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much, Ms. Frankel.

And now I am so pleased to yield to one of my favorite Members of Congress, Mr. Connolly of Virginia. Many people don't know that—weren't you part of the Senate staff of this equivalent committee on the—

Mr. CONNOLLY. I am impressed you know that—

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Yes, I know that.

Mr. CONNOLLY [continuing]. And remember that. Thank you.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. And he is recognized for such time as he may consume.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Well, the feelings are mutual, Madam Chairman, and I wish you would change your mind about leaving.

Anyway, I can't help but observe, since Mr. Abrams decided to opine about unpopular Trump—I mean, Obama is with certain countries and how much more popular Trump is.

Well, of course they are, because we are not pressing human rights. We are not holding them to account. We have seen authoritarian regimes rise in Egypt and in other parts of the region and they now know that no one's going to hold them to account.

And, of course, you know, our policies with the Netanyahu government in Israel remain the subject of great debate and controversy about what's in U.S. interest and Netanyahu, of course, would prefer Trump over Obama.

We will see. There is an old expression—be careful what you wish for. We will see how that plays out.

But if I were those countries, as I think, Dr. Salem, you were just indicating, I would be worried a little bit about some of the policies of this administration.

Ceding, frankly, Syria to Russia and letting the Russians lead the negotiations for what comes next—you're worried about Iranian influence? You are worried about the role of Hezbollah?

I don't think that is a positive step for Iran or for Egypt and, of course, the administration compounds its problem by—well, some senior diplomats have called dismantling the Foreign Service and, I think, Dr. Wittes, you talked about that in your testimony as well.

Madam Chairman, I would ask unanimous consent to enter into the record the op-ed piece by Ryan Crocker and Nicholas Burns.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Without objection.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I thank the chair.

Mr. Abrams, you and I go back a long way. Let me ask, I hope, a nonpolitical question. How serious do you think it is that we are, as some have said, dismantling or hollowing out? And, for the record, Secretary Tillerson takes great exception to that.

But when I look at, you know, some data, so he proposes to cut the Foreign Service 8,000 officers by 8 percent. He has—well, the President has proposed a budget cut at State and USAID of 31 percent.

We know that one of the results of all of that this year is that the number of Americans who have applied for Foreign Service has declined by one third—33 percent.

We also know lots of people are headed for the exits who can retire. We are losing a lot of senior diplomats—a lot of collective wisdom about various and sundry regions of the world.

Is this, from your point of view, something that is just a downsizing that will make us leaner and meaner and more effective or is this something that actually we ought to be concerned about in terms of our capability to project ourselves diplomatically, especially in this region?

Mr. ABRAMS. I think it is a great concern. I would just take 10 seconds to say I do think there was no American human rights pressure on Saudi Arabia and the UAE and their preference for Trump over Obama does not have to do with American human rights pressure, and in Israel the preference is not just Netanyahu's. Obama had lost the confidence of the people of Israel left, right, and center.

So I don't think—I don't think the—I would not associate myself with your opening remarks. But I would associate myself on these remarks.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I did not assume you would—

Mr. ABRAMS. Yes.

Mr. CONNOLLY [continuing]. Because since I took direct issue with you, and I don't think that is true that we never talked about human rights with Saudi Arabia.

I take your point, though. Perhaps what they really objected to was the agreement with Iran and I happen to think Obama has been proved right in that regard, not wrong. But——

Mr. ABRAMS. On the State Department, I think, of course, Secretary Tillerson objects if you, you know, say to him, you are destroying the Foreign Service—you are deliberately undermining the ability to conduct diplomacy.

But I think top-down is the wrong way to look at it. It should be looked at in a sense, from the point of view of the Department, of the Foreign Service, of the morale of the building because the morale of the building can be judged, not by the intention of those on the top but rather what is actually happening.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Yes.

Mr. ABRAMS. And you have described, I think, what's actually happening. I have played the game almost of saying with a number of friends, okay, who would you choose for Ambassador here or Ambassador there or Assistant Secretary for this.

Very often the answer is, well, so and so, but she is gone—so and so, but he just retired. So you are getting a depletion of the top ranks and we are not starting to refill at the bottom because of these decisions not to have entering classes.

Sure, the impact of that next year is not great. But we need to plan for the future. We need an absolutely first rate global power foreign ministry 10 years from now and 25 years from now when those entering classes are going to be assuming position of responsibility.

So I think it is—it is happening if you ask people in the Foreign Service, and I think it is very unfortunate.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Yes. If the chair would allow—Dr. Wittes, you looked like you were chomping at the bit to comment as well, and I know—I know you actually said the most important tool in the American policy toolbox—to contain Iran and restore stability in a disordered region is the tool the Trump administration seems most committed to destroying—our diplomacy. Do you want to elaborate?

Ms. WITTES. Thank you, Congressman.

First, I will associate myself with Elliott's comments in that regard entirely, and I will note that I think it is now more than half of our posts—our Embassies in the Middle East do not have a permanent Ambassador in place.

It is—including Saudi Arabia, by the way—and although we have a very able team and very able charges and deputies in those places, it is impossible to substitute for somebody who is given the charge by the President of being his representative.

And so in addition to the long-term institutional damage to our foreign ministry that Elliott was describing, I think we have to look at the near term problem of empty chairs and nobody on the other end of the phone.

And so it is almost impossible to imagine even if the White House could construct a comprehensive strategy to contain Iran and push back this influence that we would be able to implement

on that strategy effectively, given the range and breadth of vacancies that we see.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Yes, and I think one of the things that those empty chairs and phones not answered creates a vacuum that our adversaries know how to fill.

The Iranians are quite aggressive. The Chinese are quite aggressive. The Russians, we know, are quite aggressive. And this is just the wrong time to have a whole bunch of empty chairs and phones not answered.

But I thank you all for being here. I wish we had a little more time. Madam Chair, thank you so much for having the hearing and, Ms. Frankel, thanking—thank you for letting a guy ask some questions. [Laughter.]

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much, Mr. Connolly.

Thank you to our excellent witnesses and thank you for the audience as well for being with us, and members of the press.

And with that, the subcommittee is adjourned as we fly out.

[Whereupon, at 11:50 a.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

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

**Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa
Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), Chairman**

November 22, 2017

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 and North Africa in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building (and available live on the Committee website at <http://www.ForeignAffairs.house.gov>).

DATE: Wednesday, November 29, 2017

TIME: 10:00 a.m.

SUBJECT: Examining Latest Developments in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon

WITNESSES: Mr. Elliot Abrams
Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies
Council on Foreign Relations

Dr. Paul Salem
Vice President for Policy Analysis
Middle East Institute

Dr. Tamara Cofman Wittes
Senior Fellow, Center for Middle East Policy
The Brookings Institution

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 and North Africa HEARING

Day Wednesday Date 11/29/17 Room 2172

Starting Time 10:06 AM Ending Time 11:49 AM

Recesses ☐ (to) (to) (to) (to) (to) (to)

Presiding Member(s)

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session ☒ Electronicall y Recorded (taped) ☒
Executive (closed) Session ☐ Stenographic Record ☒
Televised ☒

TITLE OF HEARING:

The Latest Developments in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

*GOP- Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Reps. Chabot, Meadows, Kinzinger, Zeldin, Donovan, Mast, Fitzpatrick
Dem- Ranking Member Deutch, Reps. Connolly, Frankel, Gabbard, Boyle, Schneider, Suozzi, Lieu*

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

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.)

*Representative Connolly's article for the record
Representative Connolly's Statement for the record*

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____

or

TIME ADJOURNED 11:49 AM


Subcommittee Staff Associate

Statement for the Record
Submitted by Mr. Connolly of Virginia

Over the last month, Saudi Arabia has taken a series of internal and external steps that have alarmed its partners, including Lebanon and the United States. While Saudi Arabia has sought to provide a necessary counterweight to Iran's malign activities, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's ham-handed efforts are backfiring and contributing to greater instability in the region. Consistent with the Trump Administration's unilateral retreat from U.S. global leadership, the President is asleep at the wheel and blindly endorsing the Crown Prince's foreign policies, even where they might diverge from U.S. interests.

During a visit to Saudi Arabia on November 4, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri abruptly resigned his post and condemned Iran and Hezbollah's "destruction and chaos" in the region. Many observers argue that bin Salman likely pressured Hariri to resign in order to isolate Hezbollah in Lebanon. That same day, Saudi Arabia intercepted a Houthi-fired missile outside Riyadh, after which the Saudis obstructed all air and sea access to Yemen. The blockade was designed to prevent Iranian arms transfers, but has also impeded the delivery of humanitarian assistance to a Yemeni population with 7 million people living on the brink of famine. These events also coincided with a so-called anti-corruption purge in which the Crown Prince has detained approximately 500 people, including 11 Saudi princes.

Prime Minister Hariri has since returned to Lebanon and suspended his resignation amid consultations. Just this week, the Saudis allowed the first humanitarian aid ship and plane to access rebel-controlled territories in Yemen since initiating the country-wide blockade. However, aid agencies warn that Yemen is still at risk of a large-scale famine. According to World Food Program estimates, the latest blockade may have pushed an additional 3.2 million people into hunger. Yemen is now home to the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, with 20 million people, including more than 11 million children, in need of urgent humanitarian assistance.

Following a Saudi airstrike on a funeral hall that killed more than 140 people in October 2016, the Obama Administration initiated a review of security assistance to Saudi Arabia. According to the Guardian, more than a third of the Saudi-led coalition's airstrikes have hit civilian sites and more than 10,000 civilians have perished in the conflict. Despite these desperate circumstances, President Trump resumed arms sales to Saudi Arabia and proposed cutting U.S. aid to Yemen by 83 percent in his FY 2018 foreign assistance budget.

Saudi Arabia has also played a leading role in the diplomatic dispute between Qatar and many of its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) neighbors, citing Doha's close ties with Iran and support for terrorism. However, the move to cut off diplomatic and economic relations with Qatar has sowed further chaos in the region and only pushed Doha closer to Iran. Rather than brokering a deal with our varied GCC partners to resolve the issue, President Trump exacerbated the situation by endorsing Saudi Arabia's actions.

President Trump has vowed to strengthen relations with Saudi Arabia, and visited Riyadh before any other city on his first foreign trip. However, his Administration has failed to outline a strategy to protect U.S. interests in several regional conflicts where they may diverge with Saudi policies. In the wake of these recent events, President Trump tweeted that he has “great confidence in King Salman and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, they know exactly what they are doing.” Such a blanket endorsement of the leadership in Riyadh, which has been at times throttled and reversed in a whiplash fashion, is not the way to protect U.S. interests in the region. The Trump Administration must learn the lesson that we cannot outsource U.S. global leadership.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses regarding how the United States can navigate our policy differences with Riyadh and seize opportunities to promote U.S. interests in our relationship with Saudi Arabia.

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD BY THE HONORABLE GERALD E. CONNOLLY,
A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA

11/26/2017

Dismantling the Foreign Service - The New York Times

The New York Times | <https://nyti.ms/2i9pSQ9>

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Opinion | OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

Dismantling the Foreign Service

By NICHOLAS BURNS and RYAN C. CROCKER NOV. 27, 2017

The Foreign Service, our country's irreplaceable asset for understanding and interacting with a complex and dangerous world, is facing perhaps its greatest crisis. President Trump's draconian budget cuts for the State Department and his dismissive attitude toward our diplomats and diplomacy itself threaten to dismantle a great foreign service just when we need it most.

The United States is facing an extraordinary set of national security challenges. While we count on our military ultimately to defend the country, our diplomats are with it on front lines and in dangerous places around the world. They are our lead negotiators as we work with our European allies in NATO to contain growing Russian power on the Continent. They are our lead negotiators seeking a peaceful end to the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. Our diplomats are assembling the coalition of countries in East Asia to counter the irresponsible regime of the North Korean dictator, Kim Jong-un.

Foreign Service officers in more than 280 embassies and consulates aid American citizens in trouble overseas, help American companies overcome unfair barriers to trade and investment, coordinate counterterrorism and narcotics programs and manage development and humanitarian aid to distressed countries.

Diplomats negotiate the landing and basing arrangements for American troops overseas, such as at Central Command's major Middle East base in Qatar. Our strongest and smartest presidents have known that integrating our diplomatic and military strategies is the most effective way to succeed in the world today.

Both of us served overseas and in Washington for decades as career diplomats. We were ambassadors during both Republican and Democratic administrations. We are proud of the nonpartisan culture of our brethren at the State Department. President Trump and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson can count on them to work tirelessly, loyally and with great skill for our country.

But we are concerned the Trump administration is weakening the Foreign Service by a series of misguided decisions since taking office. It has proposed a 31 percent budget reduction for the State Department that would cripple its global reach. It has failed to fill the majority of the most senior ambassadorial positions in Washington and overseas. It is on track to take the lowest number of new officers into the service in years.

It has even nominated a former officer with a scant eight years of experience to be the director general of the Foreign Service, the chief of its personnel system. The nonpartisan American Academy of Diplomacy (of which we both are members) advised Congress that this would be "like making a former Army captain the chief of staff of the Army."

As a result, many of our most experienced diplomats are leaving the department. Along with the senior diplomats who were summarily fired by the Trump team early this year, we are witnessing the most significant departure of diplomatic talent in generations. The drop in morale among those who remain behind is obvious to both of us. The number of young Americans who applied to take the Foreign Service officer entry test declined by 33 percent in the past year. This is particularly discouraging and will weaken the service for years.

We are not arguing that the State Department is a perfectly functioning agency that requires no improvements. We support creating a culture of reform and renewal at the department. The Trump administration is right to look for budget and operational inefficiencies to ensure the best use of taxpayers' money. We also agree

with the American academy's support for the elimination of more than 60 special envoy positions to save money and improve effectiveness. The Trump team should additionally consider shifting more positions from Washington to diplomatic posts overseas.

The recent decision by Mr. Tillerson to downsize the Foreign Service by up to 8 percent of the entire officer corps, however, is particularly dangerous. The Foreign Service, which has about 8,000 officers who do core diplomatic work, is a fraction of the size of the military. The service is already overwhelmed by the growing challenges to the United States on every continent. In our view, Mr. Tillerson has failed to make a convincing case as to why deep cuts will strengthen, rather than weaken, the service, and thus the nation. This is not about belt tightening. It is a deliberate effort to deconstruct the State Department and the Foreign Service.

That is why Congress must now exercise its constitutional responsibilities to overrule the most dangerous aspects of the administration's plans. House and Senate committees must continue to oppose the huge budget cuts. Congressional committee chairmen should block the appointments of Trump nominees clearly unqualified for service. And Congress should ensure that there are sufficient funds to entice patriotic young Americans to join the Foreign Service. Senators John McCain, Republican of Arizona, and Jeanne Shaheen, Democrat of New Hampshire, are leading the bipartisan questioning of Mr. Tillerson's hiring freeze and warning of its dire consequences.

We are ringing the village bell in alarm because Mr. Trump's neglect of the State Department will harm our country at an already dangerous time. The Foreign Service is a jewel of the American national security establishment, with the deepest and most effective diplomatic corps in the world. All that is now at risk.

Nicholas Burns, a former under secretary of state and ambassador to NATO, teaches diplomacy and international relations at Harvard. Ryan C. Crocker, a former ambassador to Iraq and Afghanistan, is a lecturer at Princeton.

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11/29/2017

Dismantling the Foreign Service - The New York Times

A version of this op-ed appears in print on November 28, 2017, on Page A23 of the New York edition with the headline: Dismantling the Foreign Service.

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