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“Challenges and Opportunities for the U.S. Saudi Relationship”  
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## **Introduction:**

The Middle East has never lacked for confusion and conflict but rarely if ever have its divisions run deeper or in more directions than today. Enormous uncertainties about the future of state borders, of outmoded rentier economies and of America's commitment to regional stability all are encouraging state and non-state actors to exploit power vacuums and raising the risks of even greater regional instability. Never in my 39 years of reporting in Saudi Arabia has the Kingdom faced such a daunting array of challenges.

## **Instability in Saudi Arabia benefits only Iran.**

Saudi Arabia is on the front lines of all these challenges. Never in my 39 years of reporting in Saudi Arabia has the Kingdom faced such a daunting array of challenges. Abroad, Saudi Arabia is surrounded by Iran-inspired chaos in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, and its Al Saud rulers targeted for extinction by both Iran and ISIS terrorists.

At home, the Al Saud face divisions within the ruling family and the herculean task of transforming a nation of 20 million citizens addicted for generations to government handouts into a populace willing and capable of earning its livelihood in private sector jobs. The risk that conservative Saudis balk, precipitating social instability in the Gulf's most strategic nation, must be a concern of the U.S. The regime launched its reform plan—Vision 2030—precisely because it fears the prolonged fall in oil revenues will lead to sharp declines in livelihoods of Saudis who with nothing left to lose, could destabilize this nearly three-century old monarchy. Pick your poison. Instability in Saudi Arabia is in no one's interest other than perhaps Iran's.

## **The Importance of Trump's Helping Hand to Riyadh**

The good news for Saudi Arabia—and the world—is that Donald Trump has signaled with his visit to Saudi last month (the first president ever to favor Riyadh with his inaugural foreign trip) that the U.S. is reversing eight years of favoring Iran at the price of greater regional instability and frayed relations with Saudi Arabia. The President's visit also gave Saudi Arabia a rare opportunity to present itself to its own citizens and beyond as the leader of the Sunni Arab world with 50 Muslim leaders attending the Saudi-American summit. Appearances matter and to the Saudis this one mattered a lot. Trump's message of support to Saudi so visibly delivered was quickly backed up this week when he endorsed the diplomatic and economic boycott by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states imposed on Qatar for its coziness with Iran and its financial and moral support of terrorist groups in the region.

## **Restoring Trust Will Require Action, Not Just Words**

It is still too early to say that trust in the U.S. has been restored. Eight years of President Obama's willingness to sacrifice Mideast allies' interests and the lives of thousands of Syrians in pursuit of a nuclear deal with Iran that he vainly saw as his legacy, won't quickly be forgotten nor its damages soon repaired—if ever. So, it is imperative that the U.S. take concrete action to support allies in the region with deeds, not just words, against adversaries like Iran and ISIS to change their calculus that the Mideast is now an unruly schoolyard with no teacher on duty so power goes to the most ruthless bullies.

Taking action in the region is both difficult and dangerous. But the Saudis clearly want more U.S. help in their stalemated efforts to defeat Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen. It appears the Trump administration is willing to provide expanded support but it is hard to imagine a direct U.S. military role in Yemen, a sparsely populated, mountainous nation unheard of by most Americans. Similarly, the Saudis view their primary enemy in Syria as Bashir Assad whereas the U.S. seems to lean more toward viewing ISIS as the primary enemy there. However, where the U.S. and the Saudis are on the same page is in viewing Iran as the most dangerous force in the region. That marks the most significant departure from the Obama administration which dismissively and publicly told the Saudis to “learn to share the neighborhood with Iran.”

## **The U.S. and Saudi Confront a Common Adversary: Iran**

While there are many fault lines running through the region, surely including a Sunni-Shia one, the most important divide is rivalry for regional leadership between two nation states—Iran and Saudi Arabia. In this struggle for regional leadership Iran sadly continues to win through effective support for its proxies in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. It thus is incumbent upon the U.S. to strengthen the Saudis in any way we can, not just selling them more weapons, but teaching them how to be a more effective fighting force; not just imposing mild sanctions on Iran but imposing the severest ones possible; and by encouraging Saudi Arabia and Israel to deepen their quiet contacts with more intelligence sharing and other cooperation. Riyadh is not a threat to Israel. Moreover, the U.S. should fully support the domestic economic and social reform efforts of Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The key point here is that the U.S. and Saudi have a common adversary in Iran.

Buoyed by President Trump's visit, the Saudi government actively is seeking to secure concrete U.S. actions in support of its anti-Iran policies. Exhibit One is Qatar.

Long tired of Qatar's friendship with Iran and its refusal to support fully Saudi priorities in the region, the Kingdom seized the Trump embrace to organize a diplomatic and economic embargo of the tiny sheikdom, dependent on a land border with Saudi for 40% of its foodstuffs. During Trump's visit, Riyadh cleverly laid the groundwork for securing U.S. support of this move by assuring Washington the Kingdom is prepared to welcome back America's major Mideast airbase moved to Qatar from Saudi in 2003 to reduce security risks to Americans living in the Kingdom from Saudis opposed to the U.S. war in Iraq. Not surprisingly the departments of defense and state, eager to avoid the disruption and expense of leaving Qatar, are advocating dialogue to repair the rupture. Qatar likely will eventually escape the embargo but only after paying some price that the Saudis and others, including Egypt, can say amounts to a reduction in Qatar's support for Iran and disruptive regional forces like the Muslim Brotherhood.

### **Saudi Arabia is Changing**

Saudi Arabia's enemies in the U.S. portray the Kingdom as a supporter of terror and a violator of human rights. Undeniably, Saudi Arabia represses political critics. And its human rights record is one the U.S. should oppose and quietly press to change, especially in allowing some greater freedom of expression. But we should not be fooled that Iran is any better simply because it holds elections in which the candidates allowed to stand must be approved by the Guardian Council, essentially a creature of the ruling Ayatollah Khamenei. Political prisoners abound in both Saudi and Iran. And executions are more prevalent in Iran than in Saudi. Amnesty International says Iran, second only to China in the number of citizens it executes annually, put to death 977 people in 2015 while Saudi executed 158. Even though Iran's population is nearly three times that of Saudi, the Kingdom is still trailing Tehran in this grim statistic. (Drugs are said to be the leading reason for execution in both nations.)

Americans should understand Saudi Arabia is changing—slowly but very visibly. The government not only has promised in its new Vision 2030 reform program a more moderate Islam, but actually taken bold steps to loosen social restrictions it allowed conservative Wahhabi clerics to impose on Saudis for the past several decades. Specifically, the so-called religious police, long free to roam streets enforcing veiling of women and gender segregation, have been banned from arresting people. Entertainment events like music concerts, wrestling or dance performances, once banned by religious leaders as a frivolous distraction from devotion to Allah, now are promoted by government and enjoyed by a growing number of citizens. Sports, too, are now encouraged, not banned, for Saudi women. Music pervades most restaurants, increasingly patronized by growing numbers of young women who are entering the work force and have their own money to spend. More women let their headscarves loosen to reveal their hair, and the long black abayas used to hide a woman's body are increasingly being replaced by colorful ones often fitted at the waist to highlight the figure. While none of this may sound significant to Americans accustomed to near total social

freedom, these are significant steps bringing this restricted society closer to normal human interactions.

As significant, the government also has at long last begun a concerted effort to confront extremist ideology. President Trump toured the new Global Center for Combatting Extremist Ideology while in Riyadh. This state of the art center seeks to track extremist groups and defeat their ideology with moderate Islamic messages. The effort will be shared among the 40-nation coalition of Islamic nations Saudi Arabia organized two years ago to present a coordinated front both militarily and ideologically against extremism. Some 16 years after the World Trade Center bombing, in which 15 or the 19 hijackers were Saudi, Riyadh seems truly to understand extremists like ISIS are as great a threat to the Al Saud as to the West. Much remains to be done to diminish the appeal of jihadism to young Muslim men—and some women. But the kingdom's pledge to punish individual Saudis who finance terrorists and its efforts to coordinate a more moderate and tolerant Islam at home and among its Islamic partners, are steps in the right direction. Revamping education in the Kingdom to remove from the classroom both texts and teachers who preach hatred of Jews, Christians and Shia Muslims would be another important step. Some retraining of Saudi teachers is underway in Canada and elsewhere, but as of yet this is a tiny handful of the Kingdom's tens of thousands of teachers.

### **U.S. Should Support Saudi Vision 2030 Reforms**

Supporting the Kingdom's sweeping reform plan is one way to encourage a more moderate Saudi Arabia, something surely in U.S. interest. It is true that previous promises to wean the Kingdom's economy from oil dependence came to nothing. But, this time, prolonged oil prices seem unlikely to allow the Kingdom to slip back into comfortable lethargy. If, as promised, the economy is privatized Saudi companies to compete globally and survive will need to be nimble and efficient. This suggests the elimination of religious constraints like closing shops for 45 minutes multiple times a day for prayer. It also suggests the creation of an educated Saudi work force suitable for employment, not one where 70% of students study soft subjects like Islam or Arab history and aren't qualified for the world of work.

In conclusion, Saudi faces a plethora of problems: sustained lower oil prices threatening the Saudi economy and social contract; increased regional turmoil and an expansionist Iran; a generational change in the ruling family replete with princely power rivalries, just to name a few. But the good news is that President Trump has begun to repair U.S.-Saudi relations so deeply frayed by eight years of the administration of Barak Obama. Now begins the hard work for both Washington--and Riyadh--to translate expressions of friendship--and promises of domestic reform—into concrete actions to enhance economic change inside Saudi Arabia and reduce threats of even

greater instability in the region that unchecked could engulf the Mideast's most strategic Arab nation.

Thank you for this opportunity. I look forward to responding to questions on these or any other issues the subcommittee wishes to pursue.

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