

Testimony of Tom Malinowski
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“Challenges and Opportunities for the U.S. Saudi Relationship”
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa
June 13, 2017

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, members of the committee:
Thank you for holding this hearing and for inviting me to testify.

I believe that we need to maintain a correct relationship with Saudi Arabia. We have many interests in common with the Saudi kingdom and its GCC allies: from countering destabilizing actions by Iran, to fighting terrorism, to maintaining the security of energy routes, to stopping the carnage in Syria. Over the last eight years, we have intensified our military and economic partnership with the Saudis to promote these shared interests -- on anti-terrorism through the counter-ISIS coalition, on ballistic missile defense, military preparedness and training, cyber security, climate change and humanitarian assistance. As I'm sure you know, most of the proposed military sales announced during President Trump's visit were negotiated during the Obama administration.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia has pursued a number of policies over the years that are harmful to the interests and ideals America advances in the world. Because it is a close security and economic partner, we may speak about our disagreements in more diplomatic terms than if it were an adversary. But we need to be honest with ourselves about these problems, recognizing that Saudi Arabia's agenda in the Middle East is not identical to our own. Where there is overlap, we should cooperate; where there is not, we must be guided by our interests and values.

How we engage with Saudi Arabia also has great symbolic significance – it says a great deal, to people all over the world, about what America stands for and whom we stand with. I'm not a Saudi specialist. But as someone whose responsibilities in the US government extended to the whole world, I don't think we can talk about our current approach Saudi Arabia without connecting it to America's broader strategic aims and to the rather extraordinary changes the Trump administration is making to those aims. With your permission, that's where I'd like to start. I will then discuss a few immediate challenges we face in our relationship with the Kingdom.

First, I trust we will agree that the United States has an interest in promoting human rights and democratic freedoms around the world. One would have to be blind to believe that autocratic governance in the Middle East and elsewhere has produced anything resembling stability. On the contrary, when dictatorships deny their citizens the ability to advance legitimate aims by peaceful means, the result is precisely the conflict and terrorism we are confronting in the region. Defending

basic human rights is thus critical to our security. Keeping moral aims at the heart of our foreign policy also aligns us with billions of people in other countries who share those aims. It is the glue that holds our most enduring alliances together.

I am realistic about Saudi Arabia. It is not going to become a democracy any time soon. Its economic and political reforms, if they happen, will be driven mostly by domestic needs and demands (and I hope that Mohammed Bin Salman's Vision 2030 initiative will prove a successful example of internally driven reform). Reasonable people can disagree about the best way for us to encourage these changes from the outside.

But as someone who has led our government's efforts to promote our values around the world, let me stress this as strongly as I can: we cannot have a credible global human rights policy unless we also apply it to Saudi Arabia. I was challenged about our Saudi policy by just about every country I dealt with as Assistant Secretary of State. "Do you criticize your Saudi allies the way you criticize us?" – they would ask me, assuming that the answer was no. Fortunately, I could say that while we've never been perfectly consistent, while we may not speak as loudly in Saudi Arabia as we do in some other countries, we have pressed the Saudis on everything from the detention and torture of dissidents, to women's and migrant rights, to religious freedom, to their conduct in Yemen. I would not have had a leg to stand on with Russia or China or Cuba or Iran if I couldn't have said that. Sadly, we no longer can.

President Trump's message to the Saudis and other Gulf states that we will no longer press them on these issues was heard around the world and means we cannot have a credible global human rights policy. Secretary Tillerson's subsequent criticism of the Iranian elections while standing in Saudi Arabia and refusing to comment on the Kingdom's own total suppression of democratic rights and freedoms badly undermines our efforts to hold Iran accountable for its horrific human rights abuses. It was a gift to Iran and to all who want to portray American advocacy for human rights as weapon we use to beat up our enemies, rather than a principled policy we apply to everyone. To divorce American foreign policy from its moral aims in this way makes us look like just another cynical great power out for ourselves rather than a leader working for the common good. It irresponsibly and unnecessarily cedes America's biggest comparative advantage in the world.

The problem is compounded by the contrast between how the administration has engaged with Saudi Arabia and other Middle East autocracies and its treatment of our democratic allies in Europe and elsewhere. It is one thing to go to Saudi Arabia with the legitimate aim of improving our relationship with the Kingdom, and to speak diplomatically about its shortcomings. But it was dispiriting and disgraceful for the President to declare in Riyadh that we will not "lecture" our Gulf partners, and then to deliver a contemptuous lecture in Brussels, to allies that elect their leaders, respect women's rights, fund our global priorities, and fight and bleed with us to protect our security, about what they allegedly owe the United States. After all,

German, British and French troops are sharing our sacrifices in Afghanistan, where Saudi money still supports extremists and extremism.

Working with Saudi Arabia to pursue common aims makes sense. But we are witnessing something that goes far beyond a reset with Riyadh – it is a foreign policy rebalance away from democracies that share our values towards autocracies that flatter our president. This is not in our interest. I hope that the Congress will apply a corrective.

In the meantime, our approach to Saudi Arabia should be based on a realistic assessment of where our aims and interests do and do not coincide.

With respect to the current crisis over Qatar, for example, there is a legitimate concern about funding emanating from that country to terrorist groups. But it would be a mistake to think that this is the principal reason why Saudi Arabia acted against Qatar. Both countries support the same armed Islamist groups in Syria; both embrace the same ultraconservative school of Islam. Saudi funding for the spread of the most narrow-minded interpretations of that school, which has done incalculable harm from the Balkans to Africa to Southeast Asia, remains a problem, even if Saudi leaders have recognized the need to address it.

We need to be brutally honest about this: while all our partners in the Persian Gulf are with us against ISIS and al Qaeda, none treat this fight as their highest priority. Their quarrel with Qatar is as much about their determination to squash the dying embers of the Arab Spring, which they accuse Qatar of fueling through its sponsorship of Islamist political parties and hosting of al Jazeera, about differing approaches to Iran, and, frankly, about more childish rivalries over leadership of the GCC and the region. Our interest lies in seeing this dispute resolved peacefully as soon as possible, with legitimate concerns about terrorist financing addressed by all sides, rather than encouraging a split among our partners.

With respect to Iran, the United States and Saudi Arabia share an interest and must stand united in enforcing compliance with the nuclear agreement, and opposing Tehran's malign influence in the region. But this is about countering the policies of current the government of Iran. It is not in our interest to be seen as supporting Saudi Arabia and opposing Iran per se in a zero sum fight for dominance of the Middle East. It is absolutely not in our interest to be viewed as aligned with Sunnis in an existential struggle with Shia Muslims, or to encourage the formation of an alliance that is defined in sectarian religious terms. We have many Shia friends in the region, from Iraqis courageously fighting ISIS, to Bahrainis advocating democracy while resisting Iranian interference. A sectarian alliance would betray them, and benefit the extremists on both sides who profit from division.

There also many ordinary people in Iran who are positively inclined towards the US. They like Americans. They admire our democratic values. They don't like being oppressed by a clerical dictatorship. They understand why we are at odds with

their leaders on specific issues like nuclear weapons. But they are also Iranians who love their country, and Shia Muslims who cherish their faith. If they think we are aligning with Saudi Arabia against their country and their faith, they will back their government to the hilt, instead of working to change their country from within.

Finally, with respect to Yemen: The United States and Saudi Arabia have a common interest in combating Iranian influence, denying safe haven to terrorists, and protecting sea lanes. We do not have an interest in giving the Saudis a blank check to make bad decisions, for which the United States will then share responsibility.

We have provided significant support to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, and continue to do so, both in terms of weapons we sell and the generous military and intelligence support package we give. But their intervention has not achieved the intended strategic benefits – the Houthis have not been pushed back, and Iran has taken advantage of the situation to deepen its involvement. At the same time, the Saudis have used US-provided weapons in ways that have caused excessive and avoidable harm to civilians, and exacerbated a terrible humanitarian crisis. My bureau at the State Department took part in an intensive effort to improve the Saudis' performance, and while I think we made some very modest progress, it was not good enough. Among other things, the Saudis continued to hit targets on a humanitarian no-strike list, suggesting that they were making a conscious decision not to take our advice. As a result, the Obama administration decided to suspend sales of munitions that made us directly complicit in Saudi air strikes, while stepping up provision of other systems.

The precision guided munitions we were selling represented a small fraction of our military support to Saudi Arabia. While precision weapons are often helpful in avoiding civilian casualties, this was not the case in Yemen – precision does not protect civilians when one is deliberately aiming at the wrong targets. As we consider this issue, we must also remember that there is a famine in Yemen. This is not an abstraction. Over 3 million people are suffering acute malnutrition, largely because of the conflict. Saudi air strikes on bridges, roads and ports have kept humanitarian aid from those in need. If we believe that unconditionally supporting Saudi Arabia is worth that human cost, then we should honestly say so, and accept our share of responsibility for that cost. I personally believe it is not worth it and that we should therefore temper – not withdraw, but temper – our support to the Saudis to encourage an outcome more in keeping with our interests. We should prioritize defensive sales (i.e. border security items and missile defense) to reassure and defend our partners against Iranian threats, while working for a resolution of the conflict in Yemen on acceptable terms.

On all these issues, offering partnership where our interests align, and honesty where they do not, is the best way to build trust and a better relationship with Saudi Arabia. As we've seen in the last few weeks, an uncritical embrace of the Saudi agenda emboldens Riyadh to take actions that run counter to our aims, and, ironically, undermine trust.