

Joseph W. Westphal, Ph.D.
Senior Global Fellow, Joseph H. Lauder Institute of Management and International Studies
Wharton School, The University of Pennsylvania

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Chairman, Ileana Ross-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Theodore Deutch, Distinguished Members of
the Subcommittee on Middle East and North Africa

Thank you for the opportunity to join my distinguished colleagues at this hearing on the
“Challenges and Opportunities for the U.S. – Saudi Relationship.”

The National interest of the United States and its security interests extend to every corner of the globe. Our country’s economic, military, trade, security and commercial relationships are vast and deep as we are the world’s most significant economy and military power. Yet in the last two decades, a significant amount of our resources has been focused and expended in the Middle East in a disproportionate amount to the rest of the world. In addition, the Israeli – Palestinian conflict that dates back to the 1940’s and the Iranian Revolution continue to have significant impact in a region facing growing instability, terrorism and political conflict.

President Trump chose to make Saudi Arabia his first stop in his first international trip. The effort to bring unity to the fight against terrorism lasted only a short while as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and several other countries broke relations with Qatar over its support for Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood and other terrorist organizations. Once again, the Middle East and in particular the Gulf region is in turmoil and President Trump has put the United States in the middle of the crisis.

Saudi Arabia has been playing a key role in bringing greater unity and advancing dialogue among Arab and Muslim countries. The recent events concerning Qatar are very troubling since we have been very supportive of these efforts for greater unity and stability in the Gulf. For

these and many other reasons, we must work to reduce these tensions and work to encourage greater dialogue and negotiation rather than a break in relations and punitive measures that ultimately will not resolve the issues among Arab countries.

U.S. – Saudi Relationship

In my view, the country that plays the most important role in the Muslim world and is a key player in the future growth and development of the region, is Saudi Arabia. It's size, economy, population demographics and military strength make Saudi Arabia a dominant force in the region. Also, Saudi Arabia is the world's largest exporter of oil and possesses about 16% of the world's proven petroleum reserves. Saudi Arabia is also a key player in the battle against terrorism. We should not ignore Saudi Arabia's past role in spreading conservative Islamic fundamentalism. However, this is not the Saudi Arabia of today. Saudi Arabia has been committed to stopping violent extremism and has been one of our strongest partners in this ongoing struggle. For example, working with our Departments of the Treasury, Justice, Homeland Security and our intelligence community they have made significant progress stopping the flow of funds to aid terrorist organizations. Under the leadership of Crown Prince and Minister of Interior, Muhammed bin Nayef, a very close and mutually beneficial relationship has been developed with us using all the tools available to fight terrorism.

There are other reasons I believe this relationship is important.

First, Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam. It is the home of Islam's holiest shrines, the two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina. There are 1.6 billion Muslims in the world today with 3.3 million in the US. This compares with about 2.2 billion Christians. The King of Saudi Arabia is the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques giving the Saud family and the Kingdom tremendous influence in the Muslim world

Second, Saudi Arabia has a population of 28 million. The largest population in the Arabian Gulf. Egypt and Iraq are the only other Arab countries with bigger populations. It is important to note that about 60% to 65% of the population are under the age of 35 and they are among the biggest users of social media in the world. The future development of Saudi Arabia is dependent on the future opportunities of its youth. King Salman's National Transformation Plan and the vision behind it (Vision 2030) are aimed directly at meeting this challenge. It's architect and leader is the Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman who has challenged the established order and cultural constraints for this important priority.

Third, Saudi Arabia is an important entity in the future growth and development in the Arab world. If the most conservative Muslim country in the world, a country and its citizens that have been continually criticized for fostering a strict and conservative form of Islam, Wahhabism, denying women their rights, violating human rights, etc., can advance a social and economic transformation that supports reform and modernization, it will be a positive example to the Arab world.

Saudi Arabia is a young country, founded in 1932. In our more than 240 years as a nation, we have continually worked to transform our nation, from slavery and civil war, from corruption and discrimination, from significant economic depressions and recessions, from wars on poverty, segregation to terrorism. Today with technological advancements outpacing our rules of engagement and challenges to the environment, education and even to the character of our nation and its place in the world, we continually adapt and change. Saudi Arabia must also meet these challenges if it is to grow and develop stable and enduring.

Saudi Arabia is an indispensable partner for the United States and we must do what we can to support its transformation. We can be a great resource through public and private organizations in advising reforms of their educational system and their administration of Justice under Sharia Law. In my view, these two areas should be our top priority.

We can shape a positive bilateral relationship despite the many challenges in the region posed by the war in Syria, the actions of Iran and Russia, the war in Yemen and the historical rivalries in the Arab world. We should continue to engage in these complex and difficult problems. We have the capacity and capability to strengthen our partnership with Saudi Arabia and through that relationship, help shape a better future in the region.

I continue to place great faith in the power of youth to transform society. But that power must be nurtured, protected and educated. President Obama spoke to this in his speech in Cairo in June of 2009.

“There need not be contradiction between development and tradition. Countries like Japan and South Korea grew their economies while maintaining distinct cultures. The same is true for the astonishing progress within Muslim-majority countries from Kuala Lumpur to Dubai. In ancient times and in our times, Muslim communities have been at the forefront of innovation and education. This is important because no development strategy can be based only upon what comes out of the ground, nor can it be sustained while young people are out of work. Many Gulf States have enjoyed great wealth as a consequence of oil, and some are beginning to focus it on broader development. But all of us must recognize that education and innovation will be the currency of the 21st century, and in too many Muslim communities there remains underinvestment in these areas.”

I believe that the strength of our engagement will depend on how well Saudi Arabia can invest in education and innovation along with good governance and the expansion of opportunity for women and youth. But there are reasons to worry about our ability to make a difference as Simeon Kerr recently showed in his article in the Financial Times on May 3, 2017, [Arab youth turns to Russia as US influence wanes](#). He writes about an opinion survey of Arab youth where 3500 18-24-year-olds from 16 countries were interviewed this last March. He writes that **“Russia has replaced the US as young Arabs most valued international ally...that unemployment was regarded as the biggest obstacle facing young Arabs, along with Isis... and the threat from terrorism. Reflecting the generational divide, more than 80 per cent of**

respondents agreed overwhelmingly that governments need to do more to address the needs of young people.”

In my view, without a Saudi Arabia that is stable, investing in education and teacher development, encouraging its governmental, business and commercial sectors through strong and enhanced participation by women, modernizing its administrative and judicial processes and opening opportunities for youth through innovation, the Middle East will see more dark days ahead. King Salman has outlined a Vision that speaks to all of this.

We must be engaged but we must also understand the complexity and differences that exist in this region. Domestic policies dealing with immigration, legal actions on behalf of victims of 9/11, human rights concerns, energy policy, etc., give rise to divisions and tensions between us. The significant on-going clash with its arch enemy, Iran, will continue to make progress difficult. What happens in Syria and how Iraq is able to negotiate the Sunni – Shia divisions will also have significant consequences in the future as will the fight to defeat ISIS and other terrorist groups. As for the United States, we will continue to spend a disproportionate share of resources in this region for the foreseeable future. Thus, we should look to make that investment on what will produce real change.