

**Prepared Testimony**  
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**on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism**  
**“Assessing U.S. Policy Priorities in the Middle East”**  
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Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, members of the committee, it is my honor to testify before you. No party or president has a monopoly on wisdom or wishful thinking, on success or failure. It is in that spirit that I offer the below assessment.

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

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

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

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

## **Regional Trends**

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

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

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

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

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

## **Iraq and Eastern Syria: Mission Incomplete**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Regional Partnerships: Reassurance and Responsibility**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Iran: Choices Ahead**

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

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

## **Investing in Diplomacy and Development Tools and Championing Human Rights**

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

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

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

### **Policy Recommendations**

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

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

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