

Testimony

Before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and  
International Terrorism

Opportunities and Challenges in U.S. Relations with the Gulf States

Statement of

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Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify on this important issue. As you know, the Middle East is a critical region and the Arabian Peninsula remains a key focus of our foreign policy. As Secretary Pompeo said earlier this year in Cairo, “a strong, secure, and economically vibrant Middle East is in our national interest.” It’s clear that the United States has considerable interests in the region’s stability.

The greatest emergency facing the region and one of the greatest threats to our national security is Iran’s destabilizing activities in the region. Iran is the world’s leading state sponsor of terror and spends billions of dollars supporting terrorist groups and proxy organizations that threaten our interests in the region and stoke deadly conflict. Iranian malign activity in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, and its continued support for designated terrorist groups such as Lebanese Hizballah, threatens Israel and prolongs regional conflicts that radiate instability throughout the region. Iran is pursuing dangerous ballistic missile technology that will potentially threaten our security, and the security of our partners in the region.

This Administration is engaged in a powerful pressure campaign to cut off the revenues the Iranian regime uses to spread terror and destruction throughout the world. And that pressure campaign is working. Our oil sanctions have taken approximately 1.5 million barrels of Iranian oil exports off the market since May 2018. In addition, 23 entities have reduced their purchases of Iranian crude to zero. These actions deny critical revenue for Iran’s malign activities. We have designated the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a foreign terrorist organization.

The Trump Administration is focused on protecting America's homeland and America's national security interests. We work actively with our partners to counter the threat from terrorist groups and states that sponsor terrorism. We work to ensure natural resources and international commerce flow freely, preserving a vital lynchpin of the global economy, and we continue to maintain our steadfast commitment to the protection of our strongest partners, including Israel.

We continue to face challenges and opportunities that help us to face common threats and meet our mutual goals. We believe firmly these mandate continued U.S. engagement in a region juxtaposed with both opportunity and risk.

One clear challenge we face in the region is human rights. At the highest levels, we regularly raise with all of our partners in the region the importance of human rights and respect for international obligations and commitments, to include freedom from arbitrary or unlawful detentions, respect for fair trial guarantees including access to legal counsel, and respect for the rule law. We emphasize the importance of the humane treatment of detainees and thorough investigation of, and accountability for, allegations of abuse. I know this Subcommittee shares our concerns, and we have spoken out publicly about them and continue to do so in our private diplomatic engagements.

We believe our action and advocacy continue to guide our Gulf partners in the right direction. Our policy in Bahrain is to encourage reform, reconciliation, and respect for rights of freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association; these issues are at the center of the Administration's engagement with the government and people of Bahrain. We regularly engage the Bahraini government on these challenges, calling attention to Bahrain's restrictions on political societies,

undue restrictions on freedom of expression, and lack of due process in its legal system. Despite a ban on the highest-profile opposition parties, we were pleased to see that Bahrain's elections in 2018 saw a record turnout and unrivaled progress for women. Six women were elected to parliament, one of whom was elected Speaker of the Council of Representatives, the first ever female speaker of an elected parliament in the Arab World. This progress was just one step on the road to advance reform efforts for the benefit of Bahrain's long-term security and our mutual interests in regional stability. We acknowledge Bahrain has a long way to go.

While progress is being made in some areas, we are also clear-eyed about the very real human rights challenges that persist. We were all horrified by the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. It was a heinous act, and I want to be clear that full accountability for those responsible has not yet been achieved. We have been clear with Saudi leadership that there must be honest, credible justice for Mr. Khashoggi, and the U.S. government will continue to deploy all the tools at our disposal to advance accountability. We also continue to press Riyadh on its detention of several U.S. citizens and numerous human rights advocates as well as its support for proselytization that risks the spread of intolerant rhetoric and contributes to sectarianism. We are fortunate to have Ambassador John Abizaid in Riyadh to convey these concerns in a relationship that shares interests in combating terrorism, expanding economic cooperation, and countering Iran's malign behavior.

The burgeoning economic influence of China in the Gulf is another challenge. To ensure a fair playing field for U.S. companies, we continue to stress the importance of market principles and consistent and transparent market access requirements –

for government procurement, customs procedures, and protecting intellectual property rights. We have been candid in sharing our concerns with governments in the region. This includes the telecommunications sector and the rollout of 5G in particular. We are particularly concerned about reliance on equipment from vendors that are subject to unchecked or extrajudicial control by a foreign power. These vendors could be ordered to undermine network security – to disrupt service, skim personal information, or even conduct espionage. We have asserted to senior policy makers in the region that a diversified 5G architecture that excludes untrusted vendors will be more resilient and offer greater security for the region’s communication and data sharing. By maintaining and increasing the commercial and economic ties between the United States and our Gulf partners, we have supported and will continue to increase the prosperity of American businesses and investments.

A third challenge is the internecine dispute among some members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, or GCC. As you know, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt – the Quartet – severed diplomatic relations with and imposed restrictions on Qatar in 2017, in response to what these countries allege is Qatar’s support for terrorism. We’ve listened to the Quartet’s concerns, but we fundamentally disagree. As Secretary Pompeo has said, “we need the Gulf countries working together on the complex set of challenges that face each of them.” Not only do we view a resolution to the dispute as in the best interests of the countries involved, but it is in our national security interests, as well. The continued stability of the GCC is inherently tied to the stability of the region and the interests of the United States. Many of our initiatives on counter terrorism, terrorism finance, and defense cooperation are regionally based. For example, we

have a shared Terrorist Finance Targeting Center based in Riyadh. Kuwait hosts NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative regional center.

Our cooperation is broad and we are constantly looking for ways to increase cooperation with our Gulf partners in order to bring security and stability to the region. One of the ways we are doing this is through a proposed initiative called the Middle East Strategic Alliance, or MESA. MESA is a proposed joint initiative of the United States, Jordan, and the six GCC countries – Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, and Qatar. As the Subcommittee is aware, Egypt was initially a partner in MESA but has, for now, withdrawn its participation. The remaining MESA members, including the United States, have all expressed a wish for Egypt to return to MESA and we are optimistic they will change their minds in the future.

Our goal for MESA is to enhance multilateral cooperation in the political, economic, energy, and security spheres. Not only will MESA build a strong foundation for countering Iran's malign influence, but it will enhance our partners' capacity to be positive contributors to regional security. We continue to have detailed discussions with interested countries as we move forward to shape the initiative together. As Secretary Pompeo acknowledged last month, "It'll take us a bit, it won't be straightforward." Our shared interests provide an opportunity to bring our partners together.

We also rely on our Gulf partners to work with us to resolve regional crises like Libya, Sudan, and Lebanon. We are asking the GCC countries to do more in de-escalating these conflicts, and to do it in concert with us. Kuwait, for example, is a worldwide leader in humanitarian support to refugees around the Middle East. We

need the Gulf countries to work together to confront Iran's destabilizing proxies, such as Hizballah. As we ask Gulf countries to take more responsibility for their own security, we are also pushing them to take coordinated and concerted actions that preserve security and well-being throughout the broader Middle East.

We stand ready to work with all our partners to address the challenges we face, in order to ensure regional stability, international peace, and security. Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. I welcome the opportunity answer your questions.