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**Testimony to the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa,
and Global Counterterrorism**

**“Examining the U.S. Interest in Regional Security Cooperation in the Middle East
and North Africa: Opportunities, Obstacles, and Objectives”**

September 21, 2022

Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, thank you for another opportunity to testify before your committee. Over the past several years, I have come to admire members of this committee – on both sides of the aisle – as well as the sober way in which this committee approaches its work. And that is why I was so distressed to learn that Chairman Deutch would be retiring at the end of this congress.

Chairman Deutch, I will not repeat the expletives I uttered to the committee staff when I learned about your retirement. Instead, I will just say that you have been a remarkable servant of the American people, and I wish you all the best as you take the helm at the American Jewish Committee. Long before I served as deputy assistant secretary of defense for Middle East Policy, I traveled to Israel on a trip sponsored by the AJC, and I have been an admirer of the organization ever since. Your appointment is an inspired choice by the AJC’s board, and I know Ranking Member Wilson and the rest of this committee will miss you.

When this hearing was originally scheduled, President Biden was about to visit the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The president’s visit was a controversial one following the brutal murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi as well as increasing concerns about Saudi Arabia’s record on human rights and closer relationships with both Russia and China. Speaking candidly, I think the administration struggled to coherently explain the logic behind the president’s trip. But even the best of us sometimes get tongue-tied trying to explain our interests and objectives in the region.

I want to speak to you today, in what you will hopefully consider to be plain English, about our interests in the region – and some opportunities we have before us. I’ll pay special attention to the security environment in the Gulf given the hearing’s focus. (I should add that I am speaking in my capacity as a former senior U.S. government official here – and not in my current role.)

Successive administrations have, perhaps to their own surprise, repeatedly affirmed in various speeches and white papers what they view as the core U.S. interests in the region.¹

¹ One such affirmation can be found in President Obama’s 2011 remarks on the Arab Spring: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa>

They are:

1. The Security of the Arabian Peninsula. The Arabian Peninsula remains one of the most resource-rich regions on Planet Earth. As the events of this year have reminded us all, access to the hydrocarbon resources of the Peninsula is still, unfortunately, very important for the global economy. It's great that we are more or less energy independent here in America, but that independence means less when oil is a global commodity, and you remain committed to the free market.
2. The Security of the State of Israel. There is, still, a strong bipartisan commitment to ensuring Israel is able to defend itself against any hostile neighbors. The \$3.8 billion in annual military aid we negotiated during the Obama Administration is tangible evidence of this commitment. So too is the congressional prohibition on any administration undermining Israel's qualitative military edge.
3. Countering Terrorism and Weapons of Mass Destruction. This is an interest for which, sadly, thousands of Americans have died in the past two decades since the attacks on September 11, 2001. One can question the wisdom of that sacrifice, but one cannot question the commitment itself.

People always think I am crazy when I say this, but the United States has done a pretty good job defending these interests over the past 50 years. We have done that by ruthlessly prioritizing – in our actions, if not in our words – those three core interests over other objectives in the region.

Whether we have done so in a cost-effective manner, by contrast, is another question entirely. I have always said that if folks back home in East Tennessee knew how many troops we have in the region, or how much money we spend in the region, they would revolt. But both Democratic and Republican administrations have been very cautious about changing anything, despite a steady drumbeat of misleading accusations from our Gulf partners that the United States is “abandoning” the region. The reality is that American policymakers have always feared the unknown risks of disruption more than the known risks of the status quo, and as a result, our force posture in the region remains robust.

And this is where I think the Trump Administration's legacy is somewhat interesting and perhaps creates opportunities for the Biden Administration and other successor administrations.

First, the Trump Administration has created the conditions to allow this administration and its successors to “right size” our presence in the region. The former president, I need not remind you, is not a man who carefully guards either his emotions or his language. He was a stark contrast to President Obama in this regard. Both men came to resent the American commitment to the war in

Afghanistan, for example, but only President Trump openly voiced his resentment. That created rhetorical space, I would argue, for President Biden to actually follow through with something President Trump surely also desired: the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the country.

In the same way, I believe the way in which President Trump voiced the “Everyman’s” frustration with our presence elsewhere in the Middle East has allowed this administration and others to devote far less time to its problems – which do, we might admit, seem a little less serious than those of Ukraine.

Second, the Trump Administration deserves credit for brokering normalized relations between Israel and both the UAE and Bahrain. Although the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people seem to have been forgotten in the process, the economic and security opportunities presented by closer ties between Israel and her Gulf neighbors should be cause for celebration. If we truly care about both the security of the State of Israel as well as the free flow of commerce in and around the Arabian Peninsula, a partnership between Israel and the UAE – two of the most dynamic economies in the region, and arguably the two most capable militaries – is a good thing for U.S. interests.

Going forward, the Biden Administration should build on the positive momentum created during the Trump years. The administration should build pressure on those Gulf states that have not yet normalized relations with Israel, pointing out that Bahrain and the UAE will now benefit from closer commercial ties that other countries are missing out on.

But I also think that the UAE, especially, will benefit from closer *security* ties with Israel. I have spoken to this committee before about the way in which our efforts to develop the region’s various militaries have not been very successful. Despite roughly three decades of effort since the end of the Persian Gulf War, most of our would-be partners in the Middle East still struggle to stand on their own militarily.

The Saudi-led war in Yemen has been a tragedy for both the people of Yemen and southern Saudi Arabia, but it has also cast a harsh spotlight on our Gulf partners as military actors. Bluntly speaking, despite billions of dollars having been spent – mostly, I should add, by the Gulf states themselves – most of our partners cannot make a meaningful contribution to even a U.S.-led military coalition.

This is unfortunate, obviously, because our Gulf partners can and should be able to defend themselves. The Islamic Republic of Iran is not ten-feet tall – and neither was Saddam Hussein’s Iraq for that matter. You should not need 35,000 U.S. troops in the Gulf to defend sea lanes that our regional partners have a greater economic interest in defending than we do.

Yet, for the most part, our Gulf partners have not made a serious effort to build effective military services within their own countries, and they have shown little

interest in working together in the way they would need to do to deter Iran on their own.

But here the UAE stands out. Under Mohamed bin Zayed, the UAE has built some very effective air and special operations forces. The Emirati military is very much like Israel's own military in this regard. Israel's military – which, let me remind you, is a largely conscript force – also isn't good at everything. But Israel has invested, with considerable U.S. assistance, in those areas – missile defense, air forces, special operations forces – that give it a decisive advantage over both its neighboring states and Iran's proxies in the region.

The UAE and Israel have a lot in common, and I would reckon their leaders are going to make a good faith effort to quickly deepen the security ties between the two countries. (I myself was moved to see the Emirati foreign minister at Yad Vashem – Israel's museum and memorial to the Holocaust – in Jerusalem last week.)

These deepening ties create an opportunity for the United States, and a dilemma. Clearly, the United States would love to see a competent military partnership emerge between two of our closest partners in the region. But I always say that the danger of creating independent military capacity in your partners is that you create independent military capacity in your partners: I have no idea which direction Israel and the UAE might choose to take their new partnership. Will their interests be aligned with U.S. interests in the region? Most of the time, probably. All of the time? I doubt it. Both Israel and the UAE have a history of what we would call “military adventurism” and what they would surely call looking out for their own interests – regardless of what their most important partner might think.

Not only the Biden Administration but future administrations would do well to stay tightly lashed up with both Israeli and Emirati leaders. A closer partnership between our three nations would allow for greater burden sharing in the region, allowing the United States to devote more hard resources elsewhere. But at the very least, we need advance warning when our partners head off in more “entrepreneurial” directions, and we'll only get that if we take the time to walk alongside both states as they develop closer ties.

I'll now pause for questions.