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**Written Testimony of
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**To the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism,
Nonproliferation & Trade
Under the House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Hearing: “The U.S.-Saudi Arabia Counterterrorism Relationship”**

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Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, and Members of the Subcommittee: thank you for this opportunity to address the Subcommittee on the U.S-Saudi Counterterrorism Relationship.

Throughout the history of our engagement with the Kingdom, our relationship with Saudi Arabia has been strategically crucial, yet a challenging one and at times a very demanding one. Saudi Arabia sits at the crossroads of so many critical issues for American foreign policy interests: terrorism, Iran, Middle East stability, Energy and human rights.

Serving on the 9/11 Commission, we noted that the U.S-Saudi relationship had been in the dark for too long. Both countries' governments recognized the value in working closely together but neither was willing to make the case for the relationship in public, to argue its merits and identify its shortcomings. The 9/11 Commission recommended over 10 years ago, “The problems in the US- Saudi relationship must be confronted, openly. ... It should include a shared interest in greater tolerance and cultural respect, translating into a commitment to fight the violent extremists who foment hatred.”

Today, we still struggle to talk directly about our relationship with the Kingdom. In light of this fact, I would like to thank this committee for holding a hearing on this subject and bringing greater transparency and clarity to American diplomacy.

The Saudis pose a number of challenges for the United States and its foreign policy. Saudi society still continues to produce a disturbing number of recruits and supporters for terrorist groups around the world. Domestically, the Saudi government still continues to have a poor record on human rights. The Saudis are fighting a war in Yemen with different goals than the United States.

These are signs that the United States and Saudi Arabia still have much work to do. I believe that our relationship with the Kingdom is crucial to our interests in the Middle East. Addressing our concerns diplomatically and privately is often the appropriate path. However, sometimes we must honestly and openly confront our differences. Friends and allies cannot bury their disagreements; they must honestly address them.

Counterterrorism

After 9/11, the news that 15 of the 19 hijackers involved in the attack had come from Saudi Arabia led many Americans to question whether the Saudis were the ally we thought them to be. Furthermore we found that Saudi Arabia was fertile ground for fundraising and support for Al Qaeda. In the 9/11 Commission Report, we did not discover high-level and direct Saudi government involvement in the plot. We wrote that Saudi Arabia had been a "problematic ally" in the fight against terrorism. **There is a contrast between** high-level official Saudi cooperation against terrorist plots directly conflicting with a society and culture exporting extremism and intolerance.

Since then, we have seen some improvements from the Kingdom on a number of fronts. It has created a de-radicalization program aimed at helping to reintegrate extremists back into society. Saudi intelligence agencies have also worked closely with their American counterparts to share information about threats from extremist groups — most notably providing a tipoff in 2010 which reportedly led to the disruption of a plot to bomb U.S.-bound cargo planes. They have also briefly participated in the air war over Syria led by the U.S.-supported anti-Islamic State coalition. According to the most recent State Department Country Report on Terrorism, the Saudis have instituted a number of legal reforms to strengthen the prohibitions on supporting terrorism.

These are crucial tools in fighting terrorism, but they are not sufficiently strategic ones. Saudi Arabia has outlawed terrorist groups like the Islamic State and banned its citizens from providing financial support to them. Yet despite these official acts, studies on the backgrounds of Islamic State foreign fighters continue to show that Saudi recruits are among the most numerous within the group's ranks.

The threat of extremism cannot be countered by police, intelligence, and military actions alone. The Saudi government needs to address the threat of radicalization and extremism within its own society. It needs to stop supporting religious leaders who promote messages of hate, intolerance, and violence against different religions. Deeper structural reforms are also needed.

In all of this, we should be cognizant that the Saudis themselves are threatened by extremism and have suffered greatly from it. In 2003, Saudi al-Qaeda terrorists unleashed a campaign of attacks in the country which shocked the Kingdom. The Saudis took resolute and immediate steps to address this. In the years following those attacks, Saudi and Yemeni terrorists have spawned a formidable and deadly regional affiliate, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. This is a lethal and menacing threat to the United States.

Iran

Iran's support for terrorism is a serious threat to Middle East stability, American interests and American allies in the Middle East. It not only promotes terrorism, but also tries to subvert and destabilize governments in the region and continues to work on a ballistic missile program that threatens the Gulf States, Israel and our European allies.

In the face of these threats, we must make sure that Saudi Arabia, the focus of so much of Iran's attention and ambitions, is able to strongly resist and appropriately confront Tehran's attempts to dominate the region. How we manage this makes a vital difference to our friends and allies in the Middle East. We cannot allow Saudi Arabia's justified fears of its neighbor to lead it to deeper disagreements with the United States. While we work together to counter Iran's nefarious efforts to stoke instability in the region, this must not distract from the fight against terrorist threats like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action which placed a number of restrictions on Iran's nuclear program was an important step in potentially containing the threat from Tehran but it cannot be the final one. The Saudis look across the Gulf and see a growing ballistic missile program pointed at them. They look north to Iraq and see Iranian-backed militias and terrorist groups weakening the Iraqi state and carrying out sectarian attacks against Sunni civilians under the guise of fighting the Islamic State. They look to Syria and see Iranian-backed militias, Hezbollah terrorists and Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps officers supporting the Assad regime in its brutal war against Syrian civilians.

In the face of these threats, the Saudis and other Gulf states are understandably nervous and anxious. It is the responsibility of American foreign policy to provide steady reassurance that the United States has the current capability and direct will to provide security in the region, particularly in the event of a crisis.

We also need to make sure that the U.S.-Saudi relationship can address both the threat from Iran and the threat of terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State simultaneously, without detracting from each other. Saudi Arabia made an initially important contribution to the military campaign against the Islamic State in Syria but it has since grown distracted by a lengthy and seemingly stalled war against Iranian-backed proxies in Yemen. The chaos, civilian casualties, and the collateral damage to schools and hospitals, have been catastrophic.

Energy

As we know, the downturn in the price of oil will pose challenges for Saudi Arabia both economically and politically. These changes hold both promise and peril for the Kingdom. Change is difficult and sometimes painful. But the pressures that Saudi Arabia now faces could also be an opportunity for them to modernize Saudi society, reform their government and further promote moderation and tolerance.

The price of oil has dipped and peaked before and the Saudis have weathered these ups and downs without severe consequences for their political stability. In the short term, there is little cause to believe this will change dramatically.

However, the availability of new sources of oil production in the United States adds greater competition in energy markets and may constrain the ability of oil

producers to bring oil prices back up to their previous heights over the longer term.

Consequently, the constraints on oil markets mean Saudi Arabia will have to prepare its people, economy and government for a world where oil revenue can no longer completely insulate them from the global marketplace. The Saudis have realized they need to diversify their economy to include new sectors aside from energy. To accomplish that, the Saudis will have to reform their educational institutions to focus more on broader skill development. They will need to address the current model of attracting hundreds of foreign workers to low-wage jobs.

In the face of greater competition in energy markets and lower prices over the long term creating significant budget issues, the Saudi government has launched a new initiative called Saudi Vision 2030. This might lead to renegotiating the social contract that has governed the country for so long. Saudi citizens may demand more of a say in their own governance, in their education system, and in their economic opportunities.

Human Rights

The section on Saudi Arabia in the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2015 put out by the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, stated the following: "The most important human rights problems reported included citizens' lack of the ability and legal means to choose their government; restriction on universal rights, such as freedom of expression, including on the Internet, and the freedom of assembly, association, movement, and religion; and pervasive gender discrimination and lack of equal rights that affected all aspects of women's lives." This makes a rather grim and challenging environment for Saudi Arabia.

Congress helped create the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom in 1998 in order to promote the fundamental human right of people to worship and observe their faith in peace. Since its creation, the Commission, at the urging of Congress, has done valuable work uncovering examples of intolerance, anti-Semitism and incitement to violence in Saudi textbooks provided to schools in developing countries around the world. The Islamic State has

discovered and utilized the material in some of these textbooks to reflect its world view. One scholar has noted the use of this material in schools under the Islamic State's control in Raqqa, Syria.¹ While the Kingdom has made some progress in revising its textbooks and curtailing extremist material, this Commission notes that the Saudi government still includes highly offensive references in their high school text books.²

Conclusion

Having served in both the legislative and executive branches of American government, I have seen the important role that Congressional oversight and counsel play in shaping American foreign policy for the better. The U.S.-Saudi relationship is an area where Congress must continue to play a role with the executive branch and for the American people.

The U.S. Intelligence Community gives credit to Saudi Arabia for cooperating on counter-intelligence and helping stop specific attacks. While this is true, we must see more consistent results on preventing the export of intolerance and extremism around the world; we must work together to further prevent financial support for al Qaeda and terrorists groups; and we must work towards reducing the Saudi supply of high numbers of foreign fighters in Syria. Resetting and rebuilding this decades-long partnership and strategic relationship will be a foreign policy priority in 2017.

¹ William McCants, "The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Domsday Vision of the Islamic State," St. Martin's Press, September 22, 2015

² U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report, 2016 and 2014 Report on International Religious Freedom, State Department, October 14, 2015.

<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2014/nea/238476.htm>

