

Opening Statement of the Honorable Ted Poe (R-TX), Chairman
Joint Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade and Middle East
and North Africa Hearing:
“Grading Counterterrorism Cooperation with the GCC States”
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(As prepared for delivery)

Our historic relationship with the Arab Gulf states is strategically crucial. The ties we maintain allow us to project power to contain threats like Iran and secure key shipping lanes for global commerce while also providing stability in a chaotic region. Our Gulf partners have made clear they value their strong alliance with the United States.

But our relationship has not always been perfect. The 9/11 attacks were a tragic wake-up call to a dangerous ideology that we had long ignored. Sunni extremism had established strong roots across the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. This intolerant and violent strain of Islam was largely able to spread so widely because it was funded and supported by some of our Gulf allies. Some would call this a betrayal: while GCC states were benefiting from security and stability provided by the U.S., they were fostering radical ideologies that sought to target and kill Americans. It is no coincidence that among the 19 hijackers who conducted the 9/11 attacks, 17 came from the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. In part, al-Qaeda did this deliberately to damage the GCC alliance with the U.S. But the high number of Saudi recruits and the fact that al-Qaeda was founded and led by a Saudi named Osama bin Laden, also showed that something was not quite right in the Kingdom. The Saudi monarchy’s embrace of the Wahhabi ideology produced generations of young Saudis who despised the West and held hateful views of other religions.

After 9/11, the Kingdom and the rest of the GCC states pledged cooperation with the U.S. to fight terrorism, but little was done. Wealthy financiers and hateful preachers continued to operate across the GCC. For years, many of our Gulf allies tried to play both sides of the War on Terror. They acted both as the arsonists and the firefighters. While the U.S. military launched airstrikes against terrorists in the region from Gulf air bases, money and recruits flowed to terrorist from the same Gulf countries. We were basically chasing our tails.

Ultimately, not George W. Bush, nor Barack Obama, nor Donald Trump can convince young Muslims that al-Qaeda or ISIS’s version of Islam is the wrong one. An American president, regardless of party affiliation, will never be able to effectively argue that jihad against the West is not the answer to the problems of the Middle East. It is only the leaders of the Muslim world who can make that argument.

In recent years, we have seen progress by the Gulf states towards tackling the sources of extremism within their borders. They have recognized that this is not just the U.S.’s fight: their own security is at stake. The Saudis have infiltrated terrorist groups to thwart attacks on the West and detained radical clerics who once incited thousands to join al-Qaeda or ISIS. The UAE is leading the region in developing messaging to counter violent extremism and has prioritized targeting al-Qaeda in Yemen. Bahrain now hosts the region’s Financial Action Task Force and amended its charity law to closely monitor terrorist financing and enact harsh penalties on violators. Kuwait has also intensified its charity monitoring and outlawed fundraising for

terrorist groups online. Meanwhile, Oman remains a haven for tolerance and moderate Islam, effectively preventing terrorists from using its territory for fundraising or recruitment. Even Qatar has signed a memorandum of understanding with the U.S. last summer to cooperate on counterterrorism and has created terrorist designation lists. Trust is finally being restored.

But there is still more work to be done. Many promises remain unfulfilled. Qatar still harbors Hamas operatives and al-Qaeda fundraisers. The Saudis still publish intolerant material in their textbooks that glorify jihad and incite hatred and violence. Additionally, Kuwait still has designated terrorists living freely in their borders. Oman remains suspiciously tied to the region's number one state sponsor of terrorism, Iran, and reports of arms smuggling through Oman to Yemen's Houthi rebels persist. No GCC member is contributing enough to prevent ISIS from reemerging in Syria and Iraq. And the Saudi-led coalition is overly focused on Iran's meddling in Yemen while al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula survives in the chaos.

We need our Gulf partners to aggressively and pro-actively combatting Sunni extremism across the region. Not to wait for the U.S. to take the lead or ask them nicely. All the drones and special forces in the world cannot destroy an ideology this deeply rooted. The fight against terrorism must start and end on the ideological battlefield. Treating the symptoms and not the underlying disease will ultimately not be enough.

And that's just the way it is.