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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. WITTES: Good morning, everyone. Thank you for joining us. I'm Tamara Wittes. I'm the director of our Center for Middle East Policy here at The Brookings Institution, and really delighted to be here to convene what I think is going to be a fascinating and very timely conversation on the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

As you all know, I think, President Obama is in Riyadh today, yesterday and today, meeting with Saudi leaders as well as the collected leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council. And this is actually the culmination of a couple of years of forward and backward efforts to bring these leaders together in a summit. A number of them met with President Obama at Camp David about a year ago and now they are all gathered together in Riyadh for what I expect will be some complicated conversations. The region is in turmoil. The United States and its Arab partners do not necessarily see eye-to-eye on a number of the challenges facing regional stability. And yet, they are cooperating, quite intensively in some cases, in addressing a number of hotspots, whether it's diplomatic efforts to resolve the Syrian civil war or the military campaign against ISIS and a broader campaign against violent extremism, the United States has also been, as Bruce put it to me a few minutes ago, a silent partner in Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, which may be winding down.

We'll talk about all of that and more over the course of the next hour. And I really am delighted that we have the opportunity to have this conversation with Senator Chris Murphy, who's joining us this morning. Senator Murphy is, I think, one of the rising generation of foreign policy leaders in the U.S. Senate. He's been in since 2007, taking a seat held by Senator Joe Lieberman, who was another foreign policy leader in the Senate.

And Senator Murphy has been very active in his role as ranking member of the Middle East Subcommittee on Senate Foreign Relations, really digging into America's relationships around the region, traveling and meeting with leaders and developing the basis for what he's laid out as a progressive foreign policy. And I think that we'll be hearing from him today on the specific proposals that he's developed around how to shift to the U.S.-Saudi relationship, including a new legislative proposal that he's introduced in the Senate to establish some conditions for U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia.

And to join him in a conversation on this topic we have our own Bruce Riedel, senior

SAUDI-2016/04/21

fellow and head of our Intelligence Project and someone with deep experience and expertise on Saudi Arabia, the U.S.-Saudi relationship, and the security and policy issues at stake in that relationship. So I'm really glad, Bruce, that you could bring us together today.

I'm going to turn the floor over to Senator Murphy to offer some opening comments, ask Bruce to give some thoughts in response. We'll have a bit of a conversation up here and then open it up to all of you to join that conversation.

So with that, Senator Murphy, thank you so much for being here.

SENATOR MURPHY: Well, thank you very much for having me and for that kind introduction. And thank you to Brookings for once again hosting me here. Always great to be back and be with you. Intimidating to be sitting next to someone who knows 95 percent more than I do about the subject on which we're about to spend the next hour, but great to be here with Bruce, as well. And thanks to all of you for joining us here today.

So things have not been going well for the United States in the Middle East over the last 15 years. And you could argue that we have been doing it wrong and yet when there have been major strategic shifts on American policy in the Middle East proposed by or discussed by this president, the reaction is such that you would believe that there is a reason to defend the status quo. The reaction suggests that as long as we stay the course with respect to our strategy, with our relationships with named friends and named enemies, that everything will just self correct. And, of course, the president's nuclear agreement with Iran is at the top of the list of strategic shifts that have, you know, caused great revulsion from those who apparently see benefit in the status quo continuing.

My thesis that I've been presenting over the course -- certainly with intensity over the last month or so is that one of the underlying foundations of American policy in the Middle East are resolutions, partnership and alliances with the Saudis, is one of those policies that needs to be revisited as we seek to try to reshape our interests in the region.

Now, at the outset, there's no question, as you said, that this is an important alliance that has accrued to the benefit of the United States in many ways. Certainly we're cooperating in very important ways on counterterrorism missions throughout the region and throughout the world. Certainly the Saudis have been a coolant on many of the great animosities towards Israel to the extent that there's

SAUDI-2016/04/21

a relative détente between the Sunni Middle East and Israel. Saudi Arabia has a lot to do with that. Clearly, there's a longstanding energy relationship there that maybe isn't as impactful today as it was 10 or 15 or 20 years ago, but it's still important and Saudis are important to the global economy and to the U.S. economy.

But I think as time goes on it's harder and harder to ignore the holes in the relationship. One of the biggest, and we've known about it for a very long time, is the Saudi family's support for the Wahhabi movement, which continues to this day to fund and export a rather intolerant brand of Islam that often forms the foundation, the building blocks for the very extremist movements that we say is our top priority to fight in the region. We received testimony in the Foreign Relations Committee just last week that the recruiting materials of many of the named extremist groups that we're finding are literally often carbon copies of Wahhabi text and Wahhabi textbooks.

Now, we've raised this issue over and over again, but it seems as if given our lack of success in trying to tamp down on the recruitment of young men into these extremist organizations, that this conversation should be elevated in the context of our relationship with Saudi Arabia.

And second, one of my great concerns, and I think I reflect concerns of others in the Senate, is that the Iran nuclear agreement gets rewritten as a new military alliance with the Saudis to back their play unconditionally and unquestioningly in the growing proxy war with Iran throughout the region. There is nothing in the Iran nuclear agreement that commits the United States to support Saudi Arabia in contests with Iran that aren't in concert with our national security interests.

And I think the war in Yemen is Example A of a military objective by the Saudis that does not run in accordance with U.S. national security interests. And I would argue that our participation in the war is only silent here in the United States Congress and in Washington, D.C. In the region it's not silent at all. Yemenis will tell you that this isn't a Saudi bombing campaign. This is a U.S.-Saudi bombing campaign. We are overt in our support for this engagement given that its U.S. munitions that are being dropped, it's U.S. refueling planes that are allowing for the missions to continue, and its U.S. intelligence that is providing the information for the targeting.

And yet, the result of this conflict has been the death of thousands of civilians, many of them reportedly targeted by Saudi bombers; has been the creation of enormous space for the growth of

SAUDI-2016/04/21

AQAP, which grows uncontested in Yemen today because of the refusal of the coalition to go after AQAP given their preference to go after Houthi targets; and, of course, the growth of ISIS in the region, in country, as well. And so I think the Yemen case provides us with the opportunity to, frankly, reset this relationship because I think it's very hard, if not impossible, to argue that the way in which this war is being conducted today is in the best interest of the United States.

And so part of the reason that I was eager to come here today is because Senator Paul and I have introduced a resolution which I can say is getting a lot of interest from my colleagues in the Senate, which would allow for the next military sale of U.S. air-to-ground munitions to move forward with the Saudis so long as they satisfy some pretty low-bar conditions: that they commit to not targeting civilians inside the civil war in Yemen; that they allow for humanitarian relief to move through to try to address the crises in the country; and they rejoin the fight against ISIS and al Qaeda in a way that they aren't today.

And if the President can certify those three conditions, then the sale would move forward. It's not too much to ask, but I think it would allow us to create a new middle ground in this relationship in which we continue to understand it as a bedrock of our foreign policy in the Middle East, but that we start to expect a little bit more of the Saudis in order to continue to receive the high level of military support that we give.

Another quiet trend line in the region is this. Over the last four years, U.S. military sales in the Middle East have increased by about 40 to 50 percent. And so the danger here is that as the Saudis get much more bold in their military conduct in the region, that the United States simply writes a blank check for that activity. Now, there may be places in which we want to go hand-in-hand with the Saudis or with the GCC coalition in a particular military objective, but it has to come with some expectations that the Saudis are going to act differently when it comes to the continued flow of money into the movements that seed intolerant Isla and that when they do conduct military activities in the region, that they're going to be just as, if not more, interested in going after extremism, after ISIL, and after al Qaeda, as they are in going after Iran and Iranian-backed organizations.

For a long time our relationship with Saudi Arabia has kind of been a relationship in which we say at the end of the conversation we know they're funding extremism and we know the Wahhabis

SAUDI-2016/04/21

aren't doing good things in the region, but. I think that sort of early part of the sentence has to be elevated in the context of the relationship and I think that Yemen provides us with an opportunity to do that. And I'm glad to have the opportunity to come here and talk about it today.

MS. WITTES: Thank you, Senator Murphy. A lot of great issues that we'll discuss in just a moment. Let me turn it over to my colleague, Bruce Riedel, whom I neglected to mention earlier is not only our deep expert on U.S.-Saudi relations and he's working on a book on that subject right now, he also has a book just recently out on South Asia, on JFK's forgotten crisis, a barely averted war between India and Pakistan. And that's another area of the world where the United States has had fraught relations with strategic partners and attempted to use military assistance conditions as a way of moderating behavior. So welcome your thoughts.

MR. RIEDEL: Thank you. Well, thank you, Tamara, for the very nice introduction. I want to comment you, senator, for your bill and for initiating this conversation.

Let's start with the war in Yemen. This is a war that's been going on for a year now. According to the United Nations, Doctors Without Frontiers, and numerous other NGOs, somewhere over 20 million Yemenis are now facing a humanitarian catastrophe. Ten million or so are facing severe malnutrition, especially many, many children.

Now, there are a lot of reasons why this war has become a humanitarian catastrophe. The Houthi rebels are not without responsibility for this. They've engaged in a siege of Yemen's third-largest city for the last year and haven't allowed humanitarian supplies in there.

But I think when you look at it from some perspective the much more responsible party is Saudi Arabia and Saudi Arabia's allies in this war, in Yemen. They have blockaded the country, not allowed humanitarian supplies in. They have repeatedly been involved in attacks on civilian targets, including hospitals, schools, and things like that.

And the United States is a partner in this war. It is a partner every day, as you laid out, refueling aircraft, providing additional ordinance, providing intelligence, providing logistics. If the United States of America and the United Kingdom tonight told King Salman this war has to end, it would end tomorrow. Because the Royal Saudi Air Force cannot operate without American and British support.

We've not done that. At the same time, the President has yet to explain to the American

SAUDI-2016/04/21

people why we are engaged in a war in Yemen against the Houthi, Zaidi Shia people. I seriously doubt that there are very many people in the United States who know what a Houthi is and I seriously doubt there are many people on the Congress of the United States who could explain the differences between a Zaidi Shia and a Twelver Shia. And don't worry, I'm not going to try to explain it to you either. (Laughter)

The point is we're engaged in a conflict that is having a humanitarian catastrophe and an administration that has never explained what the American angle is in that war. And I think this bill for the first time starts to move that conversation forward in an important way at a very, very important time because for the first in the war, the two parties are now going to sit down in Kuwait, we hope, in the next few days and begin to resolve their differences.

I would hope at the top of President Obama's agenda in Riyadh today is the message to the king we really need to find a way to end this war and bring it to an end today, not in six months, not after a bloody battle for the control of the capital of Sana'a, but as quickly as possible. I think that's a doable feature and I think your legislation gives the President ammunition moving forward. Sorry for the pun there.

This all comes, of course, as both the Senator and Tammy have indicated, at a time when the relationship is under question in a way it really has never been before. We have never had prominent journals, like The Economist or The New York Times, seriously calling for a reexamination of the U.S.-Saudi relationship. And it's not just only on this side of the Atlantic. If you read the Saudi newspapers there's a lot of call on Saudi Arabia for reexamination of the relationship. And the President himself, whether he did it deliberately or not deliberately, in The Atlantic called for, in effect, a reexamination of the relationship himself when he said that they were free riders in a relationship in confronting the real threats in the region: Islamic State, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and others.

So the door is open. This is the propitious time for this conversation to go forward. And I think that you've done us all a service in putting this legislation forward.

There is, of course, other legislation up there, and I'm sure we'll come to it later on, that raises the whole question of Saudi Arabia's role in September 11. I think that legislation definitely needs a hearing and a discussion, but I think we need to separate these two conversations because what we're talking about in regards to the legislation conditioning arms sales is about looking forward. It's about how

SAUDI-2016/04/21

do we move forward in this relationship and how do we set some boundaries in this relationship? Whereas the other conversation is an important conversation, but it's mostly looking backward as to what happened 15, 16 years ago.

With that, I'll stop.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. So I think, Senator Murphy, as you've laid out there are two sort of driving issues behind your work on this legislative proposal. One is the extent to which Saudi Arabia as a society, but also as a government, contributes to the spread of violent extremism and/or contributes to the fight against violent extremism. And the other is the war in Yemen and its strategic and humanitarian consequences. I want to discuss both, but let's start, if we can, with Yemen.

The U.S. has laws on the books that are designed to address the ways in which the arms we sell abroad are used, specifically with regard to human rights and humanitarian concerns, the Leahy law, for example. And there are those who would argue that not only do we have such tools, but that the American involvement in the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen actually has the effect of tempering what might otherwise be less well-targeted attacks with greater civilian consequences.

How would you respond to those who say actually the way we're doing things now is the best way to achieve the ends you seek?

SENATOR MURPHY: So, you know, that is certainly a central premise of the administration's argument, that if we were not providing intelligence and we were not providing U.S.-made munitions, that the carnage would be worse; that there wouldn't be 3,000 civilians that had been killed; that there would be 10,000 civilians that would be killed. Well, let's accept that that premise is true from the outset and, of course, Bruce's premise is the opposite, that if we weren't providing the assistance, they couldn't conduct the bombing campaign to begin with, but let's accept that they would do it anyway and it would be worse. Well, then, of course, that's an argument to be involved in every single military conflict on every side, right? Because we can make your lethality much more targeted and much more precise because we have the best technology in the world.

And, of course, that's the way in which we interact with conflicts around the world. We make a values decision about whether it's in our strategic interest to get involved in the conflict. And then one of the byproducts of that involvement is, yes, there are less civilians killed and that there are perhaps

SAUDI-2016/04/21

more bad guys killed. So I certainly don't buy that as an argument.

And many of the other arguments that have been used don't wash either in that to the extent that our named number one enemy in the region is al Qaeda and ISIS, then why aren't we demanding that part of this campaign be dedicated towards talking out those interests in-theater? And the reason is that right now the coalition, of which we are named partner, sees it in the strategic interest of the anti-Houthi campaign to allow for AQAP to continue because AQAP is fighting the Houthis, as well. And so AQAP's region of control expands, arguably that runs to the detriment of the Houthis, but we have never seen AQAP have control of as much territory and as much now income as they do because of their control of this major port city. And not a lot of conversation about why we have allowed that reality to persist.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. Bruce, as a student of this region and student of Saudi Arabia you know well just how intensive the Saudi role in Yemen has been over a long period of time. It's Saudi's backyard. And to the extent that Yemeni politics has allowed functional, unified government, it's been, in large part, because of Saudi facilitation.

Is it possible -- is it conceivable that an American ultimatum on this conflict would actually change Saudi Arabia's attitude toward its backyard?

MR. RIEDEL: I think a good way to think about Saudi Arabia's relationship with Yemen is to say it is comparable to the United States' relationship with Cuba. (Laughter) We're both next to each other, we both should understand each other very well, but just like the Saudis have a hard time thinking straight about Yemen, up until very recently America's had a hard time thinking straight about Cuba. And, in fact, half of the American political process is still having a hard time thinking about Cuba. (Laughter)

Saudis tend to see Yemen in existential terms when it's really not that grave a threat to the survival of the richest country in the Arab world. Saudis also like Yemen so much they would like to prefer, I think, to have two or three Yemens to deal with rather than a single, united Yemen. They were never comfortable with the unity of North and South Yemen.

And you can see it reflected in their policy today. As the Senator indicated, they are at war with the Houthis, but, at the same time tolerating the creation of an al Qaeda emirate in much of Southern Yemen. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula today controls more territory than it has ever

SAUDI-2016/04/21

controlled before. It has an income, according to a recent study by Reuters, between \$2 million and \$5 million a day because it's in the process of smuggling oil and other things out of its emirate in the southeastern part of the country. Trying to rope this thing back in in the future is going to be very difficult to do.

So what the Saudis have effectively done with their allies is create three Yemens now. We have the Zaidi, Houthi, President Saleh, Yemen, controls the capital and the main port. We have the Hadi government controlling the second-largest port in Aden and a little bit of the interior around that and some other parts of the frontiers. And then we have a third Yemen that is controlled by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

That is, in the long term, a very, very dangerous situation to be in because one thing we know about Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is it is determined to attack the American homeland. This isn't a question like ISIS, maybe they will attack the American homeland someday. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has attempted to attack the American homeland over and over again. We were lucky on Christmas Day 2009 that they did not successfully detonate a bomb on an airplane over Detroit and kill hundreds of Americans. We were lucky in 2011 when their attempt to put a bomb on another airplane was foiled as it was going to come into Chicago O'Hare Airport.

We need to get back to focusing on that problem. We need to get the Saudis focusing on that problem. We need to get the United Arab Emirates and the others focusing on that problem.

One other point I just want to make very briefly. The United States has been selling arms to Saudi Arabia for a very, very long time. And sale of American arms to Saudi Arabia has often been very controversial. In the past there have been some huge congressional battles over the sale of AWACS, F-15s, and others. But we're in an order of magnitude now which is substantially different.

The numbers vary, but the best numbers that I've seen is that the Obama administration has now sold somewhere around \$90 billion worth of arms to Saudi Arabia in 7 years. The low-end estimates are around 65-, \$70 billion in arms. Take the low-end estimates, that's three times more than George W. Bush sold to Saudi Arabia and George W. Bush was the biggest arms seller to Saudi Arabia in Saudi history. We've gotten into an arms relationship with Saudi Arabia which is really enormous and which, therefore, ought to be under the scrutiny of the American Congress and the American people.

SAUDI-2016/04/21

SENATOR MURPHY: And they're using them, right, so that's the other difference here, is that, you know, for a long scope of our history of arms sales, these were defensive weapons that, frankly, the Saudis didn't know how to use and how they're learning how to use them and they are using them.

Tammy, I just want to make -- I want to just back this up for one minute to give the counterargument which there's real credit to. There is an argument to suggest that given that this is the first major incursion by the Iranians into a Middle Eastern theater after the Iran nuclear agreement, that there is a U.S. national security interest in sending a message to the Iranians that we are not going to allow them to continue to grow their control or influence over vast swaths of the Middle East. And to the extent that they are arguably using some of the dollars that were released as part of the nuclear agreement to fund that, that that is a line we are not willing to allow them to cross. But that is not mutually exclusive with doing our utmost to limit the civilian casualties that are associated with sending that message to Iran or fighting terrorist groups at the same time that we are also providing pushback.

And so I just want to be clear what I'm proposing here. I am proposing conditions on this arms sale, right, because I can still see the logic in making sure that the United States is participating in a campaign to make sure that Iran doesn't perceive a clear road not only into Yemen, but into Lebanon, into Damascus, et cetera, et cetera.

MS. WITTES: Although you did say --

SENATOR MURPHY: And so I think that there's a -- I acknowledge the other side of this argument. I would argue that the way in which we're conducting the engagement now does not make sense strategically for the United States.

MS. WITTES: Okay. So in your opening comments you mentioned your concern that the Iranian nuclear agreement might be rewritten as essentially a blank check to Saudi Arabia and other Sunni states in their proxy wars with Iran.

SENATOR MURPHY: Right.

MS. WITTES: And you just acknowledged that, in fact, we do have a strategic interest in pushing back on Iran around the region, but we need to do it in a more conditional way, in a more transactional way?

SAUDI-2016/04/21

SENATOR MURPHY: Yes. So I'm acknowledging that that's a security interest of the United States, but I am not suggesting that I acknowledge it in the context of the campaign in Yemen. I'm just suggesting that it's not an illegitimate aim and there may be places where the United States wants to support a Saudi or GCC-like coalition in a campaign against Iranian interests.

Here, I mean, there are a couple things you need to talk about. First, the corresponding civilian casualties and benefit to extremist groups certainly counteract, as it stands now, the message that we're sending to Iran.

Second, there's this outstanding question as to how much influence Iran actually has with the Houthis, right? They are certainly not exerting command and control. They are not going to be running this country should the Houthis be successful in gaining long-term control of the capital. They are certainly sending arms. They're certainly providing military support, but this isn't a client state in the way that I think some on the other side of this fight would have us believe.

MS. WITTES: Okay. Some might say it's not a client state yet.

SENATOR MURPHY: Yes.

MS. WITTES: I think that in many ways the comments that both of you have made have brought us to the crux of the gap between the United States and Saudi Arabia right now, which is not an argument about what is in our interest, but it is an argument about what should be the top priority. You're both making the argument that for the United States, ISIS, al Qaeda, Sunni extremist groups have to be the top priority because they present the major threat to the American homeland and to American interests. And for the Gulf States, Iran and its efforts to subvert, to destabilize politics, to gain wider influence around the region, that is their priority.

And so it raises the question of whether we can enforce our priorities on one another or whether we need to find some other way, some other quid pro quo, to bridge that gap.

I do want to turn, though, before we open it up to the audience, to the other concern you raised, Senator Murphy, which is the roots of violent extremism in ideologies, including the sort of strain of Wahhabi Islam that is propagated by Saudi Arabia. Now, this is a marriage between religion and politics that is at the heart of the Saudi state. It is core to the national identity and to the role that Saudi Arabia plays in the broader Muslim world as the custodian of the two Holy Mosques with a particular

SAUDI-2016/04/21

interpretation of Islam.

So, again, I have to ask is it conceivable to push the Saudis to change their stance on something that's so fundamental?

SENATOR MURPHY: So that's the \$64,000 question. And I think I know the answer, which is that, as you suggest, this is so fundamental to the structure of Saudi society and Saudi governance that the U.S. pushing prodding to unwind that alliance is not going to be persuasive. And so I think we have to accept this long-term marriage that predates anyone that's working on these policies today.

I only suggest that it be a relevant topic as to whether we want to deepen the alliance and deepen Saudi control and influence within the region. So I'm not suggesting that the question of U.S. air-to-ground munitions is going to change their disposition. I just think it's a relevant consideration when we're deciding to get further into bed with a country that, you know, is fairly unapologetic about the continued outflow of this strain of Islam into the region and into the world.

So I'm not suggesting that U.S. policy is going to be able to turn that reality around. I'm just suggesting it should be more relevant as to whether we want to broaden our alliance, certainly our military alliance, with the country.

And listen, who knows? I mean, who knows what would happen if we were to apply more conditionality on that subject to our military funding? The scope of the support is absolutely interrelated to their ability to continue this fight against Iranian influence in the region. And so if we were to elevate it as a concern, I doubt that it would be impactful in a meaningful way, but I would argue that we haven't tried.

MS. WITTES: Bruce, counterterrorism cooperation with Saudi Arabia is something that you have a lot of personal engagement with over the course of your career. Ideology aside, they've been an important counterterrorism partner, including against Sunni extremist groups.

Is there more that we could be asking them to do, should be asking them to do, that doesn't sort of cut at the heart of this ideological issue?

MR. RIEDEL: Well, let me begin by reiterating the point you made. Yes, Saudi Arabia is a critical counterterrorism partner. I mentioned the attempt by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to put a bomb on a flight to Chicago. That bomb attempt was foiled because the head of Saudi intelligence, now

SAUDI-2016/04/21

Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, called up John Brennan and said here's the tracking number on the package and you should be able to find that package now that you have the tracking number. And, in fact, yeah, that's right. If you can't foil a terrorist plot when you have the tracking number on the bomb, you really ought to get out of the counterterrorism business because it ain't going to get easier than that.

(Laughter)

But they've done a lot of other things. Just last summer, the Saudis brought to Saudi Arabia the mastermind of the attack on the U.S. Air Force facility in Khobar back in 1995. We haven't heard very much about what intelligence has produced from that so far. I hope we will hear in the future, but that was a major coup not only in the struggle against Sunni Islamic terrorism, but in this case in the struggle against Iranian-sponsored, Iranian-funded terrorist groups attacking Americans.

Is there more? There's always more that can be done. There's always more cooperation. There's always more ways for intelligence services to work together and it's no accident that John Brennan is with the President on this trip pushing and probably probing for where those areas for increased cooperation can be.

I just want to say a word about the Saudi Wahhabi and the Saudi Iran issue. Yes, the alliance between the Wahhabi faith -- no Saudi calls it the Wahhabi faith, they call it Islam -- and the House of Saud dates back to 1744. It is the fundamental bedrock upon which this relationship exists. And we shouldn't expect that Saudis' theological beliefs are going to change in the future. They are not going to see Shias as an acceptable part of the Islamic community because they don't believe in the fundamental argument that lies at the core of Wahhabi beliefs, which is the oneness of God and a relationship with the oneness of God.

But we don't need to engage in a theological debate with the Saudis. Saudi Arabia has in the past, on many occasions, had a relatively muted, hostile relationship with Iran. That is to say there are large periods of time since the Iranian revolution in which Saudi Arabia and Iran had normal diplomatic relations, they engaged in high-level conversations. The period we're seeing now is, in fact, a break from the past.

I'm not saying that they ever loved each other. They've never loved each other. That's pretty clear. We know that from an awful lot of material. But King Abdullah, for example, tried very hard

SAUDI-2016/04/21

after the Khobar attacks in 1995 to avoid the conflict coming to an open war between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. on one hand and Iran on the other.

What we're seeing today is largely the result of the change in leadership in Saudi Arabia that occurred a year ago when King Salman ascended to the throne and then removed Crown Prince Muqrin and moved Prince Muhammad bin Nayef up into the crown prince job and, most importantly, moved his son into the deputy crown prince job. The war in Yemen is the son's war. He is the instigator of this war. He is the person who pushed Saudi Arabia into this war. You don't have to take my word for it. Many of the Arab and Muslim allies fighting with Saudi Arabia in this war all say that Mohammad bin Salman is the architect of this war.

Mohammad bin Salman may be the next king of Saudi Arabia. There's a very good chance he will. And the United States should have a relationship with him. But we should also have a relationship in which we are prepared to say to our friends don't drive drunk. And what Saudi Arabia has been doing for the last year in Yemen is effectively driving drunk. It's time for the United States to get out of the backseat and tell the Saudis let's find a way to end this war, which is in our mutual interest.

If the problem is Iranian presence in Yemen, you don't have to bomb Yemeni cities for more than a year to resolve that problem. We can come up with a formula to ensure that Iranian military assistance does not go to the Houthis or President Saleh or anyone else. That's a relatively easy and doable thing to do and I hope the President and the king will focus on that today.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. One last short question for you, Senator Murphy, before I open it up to the audience. There is also legislation in the Senate and in the House right now to open up the possibility of Americans engaging in private lawsuits against the Saudi government and other governments who are not on the State Sponsors of Terrorism list for their potential liability in acts of terrorism on American soil.

Some would say that's a free market solution to the problems that you're citing. How do you feel about that proposal?

SENATOR MURPHY: So, it's funny, I think about it and have thought about it exactly the same way that Bruce put it, which is that my focus is on the future of the relationship. This is an important question about past aspects of this relationship, but they also involve very complicated questions of

SAUDI-2016/04/21

sovereign immunity that may not be helpful to the United States down the line. Once we have crossed that bridge it's sort of difficult to come back from it and suggesting that foreign governments can be sued for certain activities.

And second, to the extent that we don't want to blow up this relationship, I don't, to the extent that we don't want a complete disruption, then I would argue we have to pick our fights. And I think that resetting the relationship moving forward so that we assure that the Saudis are fighting extremism, fighting AQAP, who we know has designs to attack the United States, is probably more important, as much sympathy as I have for the families who are trying to bring these suits for the question of settling those claims. So I haven't weighed in one way or the other. I just am much more focused on this question of what happens in the future with this relationship?

MS. WITTES: Thank you. Okay, I'm going to open it up to all of you at this point. We have about 10 to 15 minutes for questions and, therefore, I am going to be ruthless in enforcing two basic rules. Number one, identify yourself when you get the microphone. Number two, ask one brief question. And if you would like to direct it to one of our speakers, please go ahead and do so.

Yes, sir, you can start. Just wait for the microphone, if you would.

SENATOR MURPHY: We'll be quick in our responses, as well.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. And we'll take a few before we come back up to you.

MR. EMMONS: Yeah, hi. I'm Alex Emmons with The Intercept. My question is that, Senator Murphy, you said that we have to pick our battles in redefining the relationship, but one battle that hasn't been talked about is U.S. criticism of domestic Saudi human rights violations, including beheadings. And when the Saudi authorities behead a prominent Shia dissident, the muted criticism is essentially only criticizing them for inflaming sectarian tensions. And, at the same time, in the past year, a State Department spokesman indicated --

MS. WITTES: There's a question there?

MR. EMMONS: Yeah, indicated that we supported their leadership in the Human Rights Council. So do you think that -- you said we have to pick our battles. Is that a battle we should be picking?

MS. WITTES: Thank you. And we'll take a second question here from Ambassador

SAUDI-2016/04/21

Smith, right here in the second row.

AMBASSADOR SMITH: Jim Smith. I was a U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia from 2009 to 2013. Senator Murphy, I really commend you for challenging the status quo. While you're at it, I would ask you to challenge the status quo of the current foreign policy architecture in the region because it takes us down the path of always supporting the status quo.

We have no inject point into any multilateral organization in the region. There is no economic development structure, like the APEC structure in Asia that drives us in a direction of bringing people together. Everything is bilateral. When you do everything bilateral it drives us into a status quo situation.

We have 14 years to change the dynamic with Iran or we're back to square one. If we don't think about a new architecture for the region, we're never going to get past the status quo as it is.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. So go bigger. Senator Murphy?

SENATOR MURPHY: So a simple answer to your question is, yes, it should be a priority. People notice our hypocrisy in the relationship and around the world we talk a certain way about our values and then it seems as if they fall at the bottom list of priorities in our bilateral engagements. So the answer to that question is certainly yes.

And to the extent that I'm arguing for a re-think on our relationship it's in part because, you know, I think we have largely shelved these questions of the disconnect between our human rights values and the conduct of Saudi activity with dissidents.

And, Ambassador, thank you very much for the question and the suggestion. I would hope, folks, you know, you might take a look at a piece that I wrote with two other senators, Senator Heinrich and Senator Schatz, making this case for a broader progressive foreign policy. Part of our pitch is that we are just miserably resourced to try to gain influence in the world. And the only way in which we are largely able to do that today is with our military and with military sales. And so we are selling hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of military equipment in the region and have no comparative ability to try to help reset the economic agenda in the region because we have a pittance of dollars when it comes to ways in which to be helpful on the projects that our allies, maybe in a multilateral way, want to engage in economic development.

SAUDI-2016/04/21

So I just think that as a broader question of American foreign policy we've got to understand that maybe a 20-to-1 balance in terms of military spending to foreign aid spending is not the right way to try to win friends and punish adversaries and enemies in the world, especially when almost every other country that's trying to grow influence has figured out that asymmetric influence is the way to go. We're kind of an apple in a world full of oranges these days, so that's a broader conversation, but a worthy one.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. Bruce?

MR. RIEDEL: Why don't we take some more questions?

MS. WITTES: Okay, great. We're going to start in the middle right here, the gentleman in the blue shirt. Yes.

DR. CHOUDRY: Thank you very much. I am Dr. Nassad Choudry with (inaudible). My question is that when you sell arms to any country don't you put certain conditions how they will be used exactly? And the second part is that when the nuclear deal was being negotiated with Iran, was Saudi Arabia as an ally always called to be an ally? Our partner was taken into confidence at that time? Thank you.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. And this lady in the white shirt here on the aisle. Thank you.

MS. CARNEGIE: Georgina Carnegie, The Sentient Group. I'm Australian visiting Washington, and I'm about to go to Saudi on my 16th visit.

You haven't mentioned the generational impact that's happening right through the Middle East, particularly in Saudi; utilization of Facebook by younger members of Saudi; the change and issues related to women, or slow pace in some case, but still King Abdullah there. And more importantly, Bruce, you alluded to the fact Mohammad bin Salman might be the next king, which jumps two generations rather than a long-term ally of the United States, the current crown prince, who's gone missing in action in terms of current public relations, but he's certainly there behind the scenes.

SENATOR MURPHY: I'll take the first, you can take the second. So I think it's a very good point to make and a good reason for me to remind that we do place conditions upon these sales, and that's a big part of the conversation that happens between the administration. Often the Foreign Relations Committee helps tighten those conditions. So, for instance, the recent sale to Pakistan that we

SAUDI-2016/04/21

voted on, there was a motion by Senator Paul to disapprove of that sale. The Foreign Relations Committee, before it ever came to the floor, had helped tighten some of those conditions.

And, of course, the conditions that I've put into the sale of weapons to the Saudis with respect to the Yemeni campaign are no different than the conditions that the administration has already been working on and negotiating on. And I don't think the administration would disagree with anything I'm suggesting. And they would argue that there has been progress, that there has been progress made in the number of civilians that have been killed; there's been progress made in humanitarian relief.

So what I'm suggesting is certainly not out of step with the conditionality that the administration is arguing for. I just think it would be helpful for Congress to weigh in on this, as well.

And yes, we did consult with the Saudis on the Iran nuclear deal. I don't think anybody is shocked that they're not excited about it. And my worry is that as a means of trying to make them feel better about the nuclear agreement, we are going to be less conditional than we should in our support of their military engagements. That's the central point, I think, of much of the conversation that I've tried to start.

MS. WITTES: Okay, Bruce, we have a country that's 50 percent kids, the highest Twitter penetration in the world, and potentially the next king being in his 30s. Maybe Saudi Arabia is changing faster than our policy.

MR. RIEDEL: Well, Saudi Arabia is changing very quickly and it is particularly changing in the question of leadership. For the last 60 years, leadership in the kingdom transitioned from one brother to the next, all sons of the founder King Ibn Saud. King Faisal created this current system back in 1963, and it provided a very stable and a very predictable line of succession. You just had to see who was older and the eldest capable person, male, became the next in line to be king.

It was a great system, but it had a built-in sell-by date. Sooner or later we were going to run out of the sons of Ibn Saud and King Salman actually advanced that process by removing Prince Muqrin, with no explanation and there still is no explanation a year later, from the line of succession and created an unprecedented situation in which a sitting crown prince could be deposed with no explanation either from the king or, in this case, even from the deposed crown prince.

MS. WITTES: I think the news reports in Saudi Arabia were that he requested to be

SAUDI-2016/04/21

relieved, isn't that right?

MR. RIEDEL: Yes, right, right. Well, we didn't even get the fiction, though, that he wanted to spend more time with his family as our politicians do. (Laughter)

This is a very dynamic process. In an absolute monarchy the question of the line of succession is the Achilles' heel of the legitimacy of a monarchy. It's been an Achilles' heel of Saudi Arabia in the past. King Faisal spent 10 years struggling with his brother, King Saud, to determine who was going to be the first successor to Ibn Saud.

It is important that we're seeing this generational change. It's important that the United States have good relations with all of the players in this thing. In the end, we don't get a vote in this process, but it matters enormously to the United States how it plays out.

And I think it's very helpful that we're now starting to see through social media and a few other places a little more transparency in the kingdom, but let's not kid ourselves. Most of the people who are on Twitter in Saudi Arabia don't know what's going on in the royal family any more than anyone else does. This is an extraordinarily non-transparent society and particularly the royal family is non-transparent. And a few social media outlets is not going to fundamentally change that. It will tell us a little bit more about what the Saudi man and woman on the street thinks, and that's a very useful thing to have.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. We are going to do a last lightning round, so I'm going to ask for your stellar cooperation. We're going to go back to front and the gentleman on the far side.

MR. KATANUS: Thank you. Taul Katanus with (inaudible). I had a follow-up question for the preconditions that you mentioned in terms of the special weapons transfers made to Syria. Do you think that there is any likelihood of their violation of agreements already made with Saudis in terms of (inaudible), for example, transfer to Syria while there is clear provisions in the agreement prohibiting Saudis to give these weapon systems to the third party without permission of U.S.? If so, (inaudible) your Senate?

Second, really quickly, Bruce, how do you see the Saudis' relations with the other regional players in the area in terms of just examining U.S.-Saudi relations vis-à-vis Turkey-Saudi rapprochement?

SAUDI-2016/04/21

MS. WITTES: Thank you. And if you can just bring the mic up this way we're going to take two questions from the lady in the blue sweater in the second row and then from the gentleman right in front of her.

SPEAKER: So a piece of legislation that does exist is the Freedom of Religion Act. And the State Department has been giving indefinite waivers to Saudi Arabia. How can we get that lifted? And if we did, what sanctions might be appropriate?

MS. WITTES: Okay, and Odah, in front of you, Odah.

MR. HUDENE: It's a comment. Bruce --

MS. WITTES: But introduce yourself.

MR. HUDENE: Odah Hudene. If you look today at the Saudi media they're the most visible media in the whole Arab region and the largest one is Al Arabiya, the most important paper (inaudible). And if you look at the other Arab media, which is owned by Saudis, they're all very liberal, they're very secular. I don't see Wahhabism on the most important Arab news channels. I don't know.

MS. WITTES: So maybe that's important, you're suggesting?

MR. HUDENE: Yes, because if Arabs watch these channels.

MS. WITTES: Okay, thank you. Bruce, why don't you start and we'll give Senator Murphy the last word?

MR. RIEDEL: Al Arabiya is on my app site right now. I read it every morning. You're absolutely right. But I don't think that that reflects the entirety of the conversation in Saudi Arabia where the voices of the clerical establishment are very, very powerful.

And an important point here, the clerical establishment is pushing the king and the royal family to be harsher on Iran, not to be less harsh on Iran. And that's a voice that they have to listen to.

You know, this conversation is a very important one to have. The United States and Saudi Arabia have been allies since 1943. We ought to examine all of our relationships. You're absolutely right, only in the last year have the weapons we've been providing Saudi Arabia actually been used by the Saudis. That isn't an excuse for not having had this conversation before, but it is definitely a wake-up call that this conversation needs to happen now.

We're not calling for breaking. The Senator said it, I'm reiterating it. We're not calling for

SAUDI-2016/04/21

breaking the American-Saudi relationship. This is an alliance that's very useful to both sides. We're not getting divorced from Saudi Arabia. We're having a little bit of a grumpy session in the marriage, but we're not going to go to court and file suit. (Laughter) Unless the 9-11 legislation comes through, then we will be in a very serious situation.

But we need to make sure that as we have this alliance, we have some particular understandings about how American weapons are going to be used. And I think that's, at this time, a critical conversation for the United States to be having.

MS. WITTES: Thank you.

SENATOR MURPHY: I think the first two comments especially, but all three, speak to the complexity of this relationship. I don't know the details of the transfer to Syria, but I do know that we are likely imposing conditions upon them to not transfer weapons at the same time that we're asking them to be more participatory in the engagement on behalf of our allies inside Syria.

On the question of religious freedom, clearly this is a priority for us around the globe, but it always ranks number six or number seven in our conversations because we have all of these very intricate security relationships that layer on top.

To me it's all a reminder as to one of the reasons why we have been rather unsuccessful in the region trying to ply local actors to our ends. This is a complicated place that we fundamentally don't understand. And I think the lesson of all of the lessons over the last 15 years is to have a bit more humility about what the United States can and what the United States can't accomplish in the Middle East.

I don't know that I sort of consider myself a fatalist, right, which is a new word that we now use to think about American policy in the Middle East, I still think we have a role to play there. But, you know, we tend to dream up these grand plans as to how we are going to try to affect the political reality on the ground. And in the end, I think history is going to suggest that we had a fairly minor role in the trajectory of the Middle East. This a long-term sort as they try to figure out what they are going to be after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, a story that is likely going to take hundreds of years to tell.

The United States can affect that, but we should be mindful of the mistakes of hubris. And while we try to intersect with some of these broad questions of regional hegemony, order our

SAUDI-2016/04/21

priorities. In the case of Yemen, our priority has to be clear: the only true, present, existential threat to the United States comes from a terrorist group that becomes powerful enough to find its way to a weapon of mass destruction that can threaten the United States. Thus, if we're going to participate in these engagements, we've got to make sure that we are all on the same page with our allies that those groups come first and other considerations come second.

This is a complicated relationship. And when you get inaugurated into the United States Senate you aren't taught about the complexity. You're taught that there are named enemies in the region and there are named friends. I'm not suggesting that we blow up that dichotomy, that we just understand that there's a little bit more gray.

MS. WITTES: Thank you. Ladies and gentleman, please join me in thanking these fantastic panelists. (Applause) And we will look forward to hearing more on this subject in time to come. Thank you.

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