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Chapter 5 -- 5.3. Collaboration with Saudi Arabia

Steps to Institutionalize and Make More Transparent Government-to-Government Relations

The United States-Saudi Strategic Dialogue, inaugurated in November 2005 by Secretary Rice and Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, and reporting to President Bush and King Abdullah, remains the highest level institutionalized forum for coordinating U.S. and Saudi interests. The Strategic Dialogue consists of six working groups focusing on human development, economy, energy, consular affairs, military cooperation, and counterterrorism. These Strategic Dialogue working groups meet periodically to address issues such as making government more accountable and participatory, human rights, visas, child custody cases, and security cooperation. Ministerial-level meetings, dealing with bilateral issues of strategic importance, are held as part of the Strategic Dialogue.

Intelligence and Security Cooperation in the Fight against Islamic Terrorism

The United States and Saudi Arabia have an ongoing dialogue on a full range of counterterrorism issues, which include regular high-level discussions and close working-level collaboration. Saudi cooperation in this area is significant, and U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies have benefited and continue to benefit from Saudi information and intelligence on individuals and organizations. U.S. law enforcement agencies have provided counterterrorism training to Saudi security services in both Saudi Arabia and in the United States.

Since May 2003, the Saudi government has killed or captured al-Qa'ida's (AQ's) operational Saudi-based senior leadership, as well as most of the network's key operatives and many of the Kingdom's most wanted individuals. This effort has disrupted AQ's efforts to prosecute its terrorist campaign against the government. During 2007, Saudi security forces continued to target terrorists and their supporters, and the Saudi government announced the arrest of more than 400 terrorists and their supporters, including terrorist financiers and those advocating extremist ideology over the Internet. Saudi officials claimed these arrests disrupted major attacks that were planned against Saudi government and economic targets. During an address to the Shura Council on July 1, Interior Minister Prince Nayif bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, stated that more than 9,000 suspected terrorists and their supporters have been arrested since 2003 and more than 3,100 remained in custody.

Recognizing that financiers of terrorism are key actors that allow terrorist groups to operate, the Saudi government continued to target such individuals and announced the arrest of more than 30 terrorist financiers in 2007. The United States continued to urge Saudi Arabia to take action against additional key terrorist financiers and facilitators in the Kingdom. While the government has not yet made operational a National Committee to oversee overseas charitable contributions, the government has prohibited Saudi charities from sending funds abroad until the Committee is established. Saudi Arabia took action against suspected terrorist financiers by freezing their accounts and confiscating their assets. In October, the Saudi government froze assets and accounts belonging to three Saudis who were designated by the 1267 committee, and also imposed the required travel ban on these individuals.

Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdulaziz al-Sheikh, Saudi Arabia's preeminent religious figure, made strong statements warning Saudis to be cautious when making charitable contributions, and the government continued to closely monitor charitable giving by Saudis. The government also implemented new customs regulations that restrict the free flow of money, precious metals, and gems across its borders.

Saudi Contributions to Stability in the Middle East and Islamic World, Including the Middle East Peace Process, by Eliminating Support for Extremist Groups

Saudi Arabia has strengthened its border controls and security and, in particular, its border with Iraq to address travel by Saudis to Iraq to join terrorist groups fighting against Coalition Forces and the travel of non-Saudis through Saudi Arabia. The government announced a project to secure its border with Iraq as part of its larger border modernization program. The project will increase physical barriers and electronic surveillance of the northern border. In the interim, the Ministry of the Interior has deployed additional forces to the border area and has been successful in interdicting illicit movement of persons and equipment across the Saudi-Iraq border. The Saudi government announced the arrest of several hundred individuals who were planning to travel to Iraq or were actually en route, and increased its security cooperation with the Government of Iraq.

Senior Saudi leaders, including King Abdullah and Interior Minister Nayif, made strong statements against Saudis traveling to Iraq to join terrorist groups. On October 1, Grand Mufti Abdulaziz al-Sheikh issued a religious edict urging Saudi youth not to travel to Iraq to join terrorist organizations. This edict was repeated by other senior Saudi religious leaders as well.

The Saudi government continued its aggressive campaign to undercut the extremist ideologies that underpin support for terrorism and terrorist groups. Its publicity campaign includes using print media ads, billboards, text messages, and the Internet to oppose extremist thought. The government continues to monitor speeches and writings of religious leaders closely to ensure they do not advocate extremism and to conduct re-education training for religious leaders. Those who violate government decrees and regulations are fired or reassigned. In an effort to prevent unauthorized preaching, the Saudi government has recently taken steps to issue identification cards to imams authorized to speak in mosques. The government has stepped up its efforts to de-legitimize the extremist ideologies that glorify terrorism and undercut the so-called Islamic underpinnings of these beliefs. Senior Saudi leaders have made strong statements criticizing the extremist ideology espoused by many terrorists as evil and "un-Islamic".

The government also operates a counter-radicalization/de-radicalization program designed to re-educate those arrested for supporting extremism or terrorism, including Saudis formerly held at the Guantanamo Bay detention facility. The program is designed to reintegrate individuals into society and includes educational, social, and religious components to undermine extremist messages and foster a more tolerant attitude. The program builds on family and tribal relations to reinforce the message and speed the reintegration process. Those who complete the program and show evidence of having been rehabilitated are eligible for consideration for release from custody, though not before they have served any prison sentence for their previous crimes. Employment, coupled with tribal and family re-integration, including marriage, in some cases, are important components of the post-release program, as are monitoring and follow-up by both extended families and the Saudi government. More than 1,000 Saudis have completed the program and the Saudi government states that the recidivism rate is very low. The USG is following the progress of this program closely, both to understand the program and monitor rates of recidivism, and will not hesitate to raise any concerns with the Saudi government.

The USG continued to urge the Saudis to make progress on revising their textbooks to remove hateful and intolerant references and to reform its educational system. Senior Saudi officials have acknowledged the need to combat extremism by addressing comprehensive education reform. In November 2006, the King Abdul Aziz Center for National Dialogue held the Sixth National Dialogue Forum in Al-Jawf called "Education: Reality and Promises." The Dialogue produced a "road map" for educational reform that included revision of textbooks, curricula, and teaching methods to promote tolerance. The government continued its National Campaign to Counter Terrorism, which includes publications, lectures, and workshops intended to educate school-age girls and boys about the evils of terrorism. Additionally, the Ministry of Education recently issued a new regulation that allows only Ministry-approved summer camps to operate.

Political and Economic Reform in Saudi Arabia and Throughout the Islamic World

King Abdullah continued to pursue an incremental reform policy that aims to achieve a more tolerant society. Saudi Arabia is a conservative country and some societal elements are wary of this policy. The undercurrent against reform remains strong, albeit muted, and the government continued to move slowly in easing many social restrictions. The United States has encouraged the Government of Saudi Arabia to make legal, economic, political, and social reforms, with progress in such areas as local governance, economic reform, and religious and social freedoms.

The Saudi government has taken some steps to devolve power. In 2007, King Abdullah granted increased authority to the Majlis al-Shura, the Consultative Council, which can now offer some oversight on government actions and has the authority not only to review laws proposed by the Council of Ministers but to propose laws. King Abdullah also established a Succession Council that will guide the selection of future Crown Princes, a move to institutionalize the process more formally. The United States will continue to urge the Government of Saudi Arabia to promote political participation, increased transparency, and accountability in government.

Recognizing the need to better prepare Saudis for the challenges of the 21st century and to address some of the root causes of extremism, King Abdullah has directed a major overhaul of the Saudi education system. Saudi Arabia is now in the second year of a six-year \$2.4 billion program to reform its educational system, which includes incorporating an updated and modernized curriculum, updated teacher training, and new textbooks. The government is expanding the number of colleges and universities and is examining possibilities for partial privatization of primary and secondary schools.

While Saudi Arabia continues to have a society strictly segregated by gender, women's rights and opportunities have increased. Saudi women are joining the workforce in larger numbers and there have been efforts to rein in the Mutawwa'in (religious police) and apply official sanctions for extremist acts. Recent government initiatives to allow women to stay alone at hotels and comments about granting women the right to drive have generated a strong backlash among religious conservatives, but demonstrate the King's commitment to moving forward slowly on women's rights. In October, the King announced a sweeping judicial reform including specialized criminal, commercial, labor, and family courts, which has the potential to modernize and improve the Saudi judicial system.

The United States sponsors a variety of initiatives focused on increasing freedom and opportunity for Saudi citizens. These include the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), support to the Middle East Democracy Assistance Dialogue, the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) Civil Society Dialogue, and a variety of public diplomacy educational, exchange, and outreach programs of the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and International Information Programs. With MEPI support, Junior Achievement International, a program to educate youth on the benefits of free enterprise, business, and economics will focus on opening a new chapter in Saudi Arabia this summer. MEPI is supporting the creation of a women's business hub in the Kingdom to expand economic opportunities for women.

Higher oil prices bolstered the Saudi economy in 2007, resulting in a budget surplus of roughly \$47.6 billion. In addition to reducing the national debt, Saudi Arabia is re-investing much of the surplus revenue in social development and large infrastructure projects and also has supported investments to diversify the economy away from petroleum and the petrochemical industry. The Kingdom announced plans to establish six Economic Cities to provide regional anchors to spur economic diversification and to move into greater value-added manufacturing. The King Abdullah Economic City in Rabigh will be the site for the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, Saudi Arabia's flagship effort to establish a world-class university.

Ways to Promote Greater Tolerance and Respect for Cultural and Religious Diversity in Saudi Arabia and Throughout the Islamic World

In November 2007, the Secretary of State re-designated Saudi Arabia a "Country of Particular Concern" pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act. This is an important element of our bilateral dialogue with the Saudi government. The United States is working to promote religious and cultural tolerance in Saudi Arabia and to counter the spread of extremist ideology through high-level engagement and exchange programs aimed at reaching key population groups. In 2007, 25 Saudis traveled to the United States on International Visitor programs designed for religious leaders in an effort to expose Saudis to American ideas of religious tolerance and civil society.

On April 25, 2005, following the visit of then-Crown Prince Abdullah to Crawford, Texas, the United States and Saudi Arabia issued a joint declaration noting that "future relations must rest on a foundation of broad cooperation. We must work to expand dialogue, understanding, and interactions between our citizens." The declaration noted that such cooperation would include programs designed to:

- Increase the number of young Saudi students traveling and studying in the United States;
- Increase military exchange programs so that more Saudi officers visit the United States for military training and education; and
- Increase the number of Americans traveling to work and study in Saudi Arabia.

In 2005, Saudi Arabia initiated a scholarship program to increase the number of young Saudi men and women pursuing undergraduate and graduate studies in the United States. By 2007, more than 15,000 Saudis were studying in the United States on Saudi government scholarships.

Ways to Assist Saudi Arabia in Reversing the Impact of Financial, Moral, Intellectual, or Other Support to Extremist Groups in Saudi Arabia and Other Countries, and to Prevent this Support from Continuing in the Future

The United States and Saudi Arabia worked closely together to combat terrorism in Saudi Arabia and abroad. The United States continued to urge the Saudi government to more vigorously pursue and prosecute terrorist financiers, and offered training to the Government of Saudi Arabia to help increase its capacity to detect and disrupt terrorist financing efforts.

While the Saudis have not yet made operational a High Commission for Charities to oversee all charities in Saudi Arabia, the government has imposed a ban on domestic charities sending money overseas except through this Commission. All international charitable work is carried out through the Saudi government agencies such as the Saudi Fund for Development or the Red Crescent Society.

The United States and Saudi Arabia have worked together to designate individuals and entities jointly to the UNSC 1267 Committee. More needs to be done in terms of reducing the flow of money and foreign fighters to Iraq. To combat terrorist financing, Saudi Arabia has instituted new anti-money laundering and counterterrorism finance laws and regulations including removing charity boxes from mosques, restricting the amount of cash that can be carried into or out of the Kingdom, and establishing a Financial Investigations Unit (FIU) in the Ministry of Interior to investigate money-laundering cases and to consolidate all counterterrorism financing operations, both analysis and investigations.

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