

UNDER SECRETARY DAVID HALE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE
U.S. POLICY IN A CHANGING MIDDLE EAST
SEPTEMBER 24, 2020

Good morning Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Menendez, and distinguished members of the Committee. It's an honor to appear before you with Special Representative Abrams to discuss the Middle East and Iran's malign influence. America is a force for good throughout the region, and we are the partner of choice for those who seek security, stability, and prosperity. It is in our national security interests to strengthen those partnerships. As we have seen in recent weeks, our partners are moving away from conflicts and taboos of the past and are committed to cooperation across a broad range of fields. We are working hard to deepen this cooperation.

Nothing has done more to demonstrate a commitment to cooperation than the signing of the Abraham Accords Declaration and related instruments on September 15. As President Trump observed, these agreements "mark dawn of a new Middle East" and send a strong message to malign actors like Iran that their influence is waning.

Ending Iran's malign influence is the Administration's top regional priority. Success will provide vulnerable religious minorities, including Christians and Yezidis, the chance to thrive again. It will mean a sovereign Iraq that can defend its national interests and hold credible elections, fulfilling a key demand of protesters who want to end Iranian influence. It will mean Gulf states that no longer live in fear of Iranian threats and violence. It will prevent famine in Yemen and enable a political solution to the conflict. It will mean a more secure Israel, reaping the benefits of regional cooperation and integration. And it will mean an independent and sovereign Lebanon. To this end, our maximum pressure campaign has constrained Iran by depriving the regime of over \$70 billion in revenue, which otherwise would have funded Iran's destabilizing activities. . But sanctions are not an end unto themselves. They are merely one of a broad range of tools that we will deploy until the Iranian regime changes its behavior.

The historic signing of the Abraham Accords Declaration on September 15, brokered by President Trump, normalizes relations between both the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain with Israel – the first such agreements between Israel and an Arab country since 1994. As President Trump observed, "In Israel's entire history, there have previously been only two such agreements. Now we have achieved two in a single month..." Together, with America as a strong and committed partner, we can advance regional peace and continue to counter Iran's malign influence. And we remain committed to helping Israel maintain its qualitative military edge, consistent with the law and longstanding policy.

These agreements are historic. After decades of division and conflict, normalization of relations and peaceful diplomacy will promote greater peace and security in the region and widen opportunities for expanded economic growth and productivity. As President Trump noted, these agreements represent a major stride toward a future in which people of all faiths and backgrounds live together in peace and prosperity.

The UAE's Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed echoed the President, noting that we are "witnessing a change in the heart of the Middle East, a change that will send hope around the world." Bahrain's Foreign Minister Al Zayani declared that these agreements represent a "historic step on the road to genuine and lasting peace, security and prosperity across the region, and for all who live there regardless of religion, sect, ethnicity, or ideology."

Affirmation of the Abraham Accords Declaration bolsters the Administration's Vision for Peace, announced in January 2020. Israel will suspend declaring sovereignty over areas outlined in the Vision for Peace and focus its efforts on expanding ties with other countries in the Arab and Muslim world. We urge the Palestinians to come to the negotiating table. Refusal to engage with Israel only delays fulfillment of the potential of the Palestinian people. We have repeatedly said that the only realistic path to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is through negotiations aimed at achieving a comprehensive and lasting peace.

Lebanon faces political gridlock and economic instability, exacerbated by the August 4 explosion at the Port of Beirut, which killed 180, wounded 6,500, and destroyed a wide swath of Beirut, Lebanon's economic and commercial center. America has thus far provided over \$19 million in essential food, shelter, and medical relief, and we will continue to stand with the Lebanese people as they recover and rebuild from the devastation.

The tragic explosion is a symptom of the systemic problems in Lebanon which have persisted for far too long: decades of mismanagement, corruption, and the repeated failure of Lebanese leaders to put aside their parochial interests and undertake meaningful, sustained reforms. The Lebanese people deserve better, and their demands for change could not be clearer. America stands in solidarity with those who have long called for tangible reforms and a government that respond to their longstanding and legitimate demands. When we see Lebanese leaders committed to real change in word and deed, America and its international partners will be ready to help with assistance needed to accomplish true reform.

Hizballah cultivates and exploits Lebanon's corrupt, "anything goes" environment and undermines the interests of the Lebanese people through the accumulation of arms and destabilizing activities across the region. Hizballah has proven that the group answers to Tehran, not the Lebanese state and people. Before the maximum pressure campaign, Iran provided Hizballah over \$700 million of its approximately \$1 billion budget. Our ability to constrain that funding is having an effect. Hassan Nasrallah has publicly called for financial contributions to make up the shortfall.

America will use all available tools to hold accountable those who facilitate Hizballah's activities. This month, we sanctioned two former Lebanese ministers for corruptly directing political and financial favors to Hizballah, at the expense of the state. We also continue to press our partners across the region and the world to acknowledge reality and designate Hizballah in its entirety as a terrorist organization and use their legal authorities to restrict the group from operating on their soil.

The Gulf states are critical partners in our fight against terrorism and efforts to blunt Iranian influence. We are stronger when we stand together, and we have consistently pressed our partners – in parallel with similar calls from Congress – to end the Gulf rift. We are hopeful that they will resolve their differences and work with us to address our shared concerns.

Our relationship with Saudi Arabia is rooted in robust bilateral security cooperation. It is a critical component of our strategy to counter Iran's destabilizing actions in the Gulf and deter, disrupt, and defeat ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and other dangerous actors. Our security cooperation helps to protect over 160,000 Americans in Saudi Arabia and UAE from attacks by the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen. We are working closely with Riyadh on de-escalating violence in Yemen and welcome the Saudis' attempts to reconcile the Yemeni parties.

We continue to have frank conversations with Riyadh on human rights. This includes calling for the lifting of a travel ban on Dr. Walid Fitaihi and his family and the release of Salah Al-Haider and Badr Al-Ibrahim, all three of whom have been unjustly detained and whose cases undermine our otherwise strong partnership. We fully support the nation's reform initiatives, as articulated in Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, to diversify the economy, reduce its reliance on oil revenues, and broaden Saudi women's economic and social engagement. But we have also consistently told the Saudi leadership that success will require protection of human and women's rights.

Earlier this month, Secretary Pompeo hosted his Qatari counterpart for the U.S.-Qatar Strategic Dialogue. We signed 11 significant agreements across a wide range of sectors, including: health security preparedness; Fulbright programs and academic exchanges; agreements with NASA and the Smithsonian Institution; and the 2021 U.S.-Qatar Year of Culture, which declares the U.S. and Qatari governments' intention to cooperate to enhance cultural and art exchanges and people-to-people connections. We are also excited about an MOU signed by Secretary Mnuchin and his Qatari counterpart to conduct an economic roadshow in the United States in 2021, which will target investment in more diverse sectors to maximize mutual economic benefit. In the coming months, we look forward to holding additional strategic dialogues with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait to each deepen our ties with our Gulf partners.

In Yemen, we continue to support the diplomacy of UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths as he works to bring the Republic of Yemen Government and the Houthis together to establish a lasting peace. The Houthis, armed by Iran, continue to threaten regional security and stability through attacks against civilian targets in Saudi Arabia.

We also work closely with the Republic of Yemen Government, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia to achieve further progress on the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement. We are deeply concerned about the humanitarian situation in Yemen and are working to get much-needed assistance to the Yemeni people. Nearly 80 percent of Yemenis rely on humanitarian aid to meet their basic needs. Houthi obstructionism and refusal to adhere to international principles have forced us to curtail some of our aid, though we try to ensure that life-saving and critical assistance still meets those in need. America is the largest humanitarian donor to Yemen this year, and we have provided more than \$1.1 billion in humanitarian assistance since October

2018. With Congress's support, we have also provided nearly \$18.7 million in funding to support COVID-19 response efforts to help refugees, vulnerable migrants, internally displaced persons, and host communities in Yemen. We continue to call on the Houthis to allow this humanitarian aid to flow to those in need.

In Iraq, Iran-backed elements of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) are an immediate challenge to Iraq's prosperity and long-term stability. Iran-backed elements of the PMF routinely engage in widespread theft of state resources, targeted killings, and sectarian violence. They conduct attacks on Iraqi government facilities and were responsible for the bulk of the violence against peaceful protesters and political activists over the last year.

The Iraqi people are turning against Iran's interference in Iraqi internal affairs; against the Iran-backed militias and the politicians who enable them; and against the rampant corruption that Iran's influence promotes. The protest movement demonstrated the Iraqi people's aspiration for democratic, responsive governance that works on behalf of the interests of Iraqis, not Tehran, and it led to the designation of a former human rights activist, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, as Iraq's new prime minister. Kadhimi has already begun to take necessary steps to restore Iraq's sovereignty and re-establish rule-of-law. We welcome his commitment to ensure that Iraq's future is determined in Baghdad, Erbil, Basrah, and Ramadi, and not in Tehran.

Our regular engagements with the Kadhimi government are paying dividends. After two successful rounds of the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue, on June 11 and August 19, and a meeting between Prime Minister Kadhimi and President Trump, we are preparing for a series of meetings to further define the details of our relationship. We will focus on humanitarian issues, internally displaced persons, the return of Yezidis and other minority groups, economic reforms, security sector reforms, and broadening our educational and cultural programming. These engagements have strengthened the Prime Minister's position within Iraq; reminded the Iraqi people that America is a force for good and our relations serve their interests; and put Iran on notice that the U.S.-Iraq relationship cannot be broken.

In Syria, our leadership of the Global Coalition and work with increasingly capable local partners will ensure ISIS's lasting defeat. Using the tools Congress provided in the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, the U.S. Government has imposed over 55 sanctions on those facilitating for the Assad regime to deny the regime the resources it uses to commit mass atrocities against the Syrian people and encourage a peaceful, political resolution of the Syrian conflict as outlined in UN Security Council Resolution 2254. In Libya, we are supporting the UN as it shepherds the intra-Libyan dialogue toward a potential cease-fire that holds the potential jumpstart the political process and reopen the oil sector. These efforts will be more effective now that the recently adopted UN mandate for the Libya mission includes our proposed language to create a UN Special Envoy position to focus exclusively on negotiations while leaving management of the UN mission in Libya to a special coordinator.

In surveying the region today, we have tangible opportunities to advance our objectives of peace, prosperity, and security. Our presence and relationships serve as a bulwark against efforts by Russia and China to extend their malign influence into the Middle East.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.