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**SAUDI ARABIA AND SYRIA:
IMPROVING BILATERAL RELATIONS,
ADVANCING U.S. INTERESTS**

A MINORITY STAFF REPORT
PREPARED FOR THE USE OF THE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
UNITED STATES SENATE

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LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

UNITED STATES SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,
Washington, DC, July 21, 2010.

DEAR COLLEAGUE: In late May, I directed my senior professional staff member for the Middle East, Dorothy Shea, to visit Saudi Arabia and Syria to review bilateral relations as well as cooperation on regional issues. Although the circumstances facing Saudi Arabia and Syria differ greatly, U.S. foreign policy toward both countries warrant continued oversight, given the importance of U.S. interests at stake.

In Saudi Arabia, staff paid particular attention to a relatively new bilateral cooperation program on Critical Infrastructure Protection, a partnership that is important not only for stability in the Kingdom, but for the protection of energy security more broadly. It is too early to judge the success of the relatively new partnership. Looking forward, staff recommended the development of rigorous metrics to measure progress and ensure transparency. Staff also reviewed U.S.-Saudi efforts to promote greater stability in the region, finding a solid basis of shared interests and constructive collaboration to advance those goals. That said, there is room for greater cooperation.

Relations with Syria, meanwhile, remain quite strained. The Bush Administration decided to recall its Ambassador to Syria in the aftermath of the assassination of Rafik Hariri, who was then Prime Minister of Lebanon. After a five-year hiatus, the Obama Administration has nominated a U.S. Ambassador to Syria, making the case that a U.S. Ambassador on the ground would not be a reward to the regime in Syria, but rather would represent a tool to advance U.S. interests. Against the backdrop of Congressional debate about the nomination of Robert Ford as U.S. Ambassador to Syria, staff reviewed Embassy operations in the absence of an Ambassador. Staff found that the lack of an Ambassador in Damascus has rendered the Embassy extremely limited in its ability to conduct normal business. The Embassy's resultant lack of access has left it hampered in its ability to press for progress on a range of specific issues, some of which are of great importance to U.S. interests, such as obtaining a property for a new, more secure, Embassy compound. In addition, recent reports of Syrian transfers of ballistic missiles from Iran to Hizballah in Lebanon underscore the importance of ensuring that the U.S. message is heard and understood in Damascus. U.S. Embassy officials told staff that in the midst of this missile incident, they had experienced difficulties delivering an urgent demarche to the Syrian Government.

In the interest of contributing to Congressional deliberations on the prospects for advancing U.S. interests in the Middle East, I wanted to share with you the staff trip report, which I believe provides useful insight into key issues at play with respect to Saudi Arabia and Syria, as well as their respective roles in the region. I hope that you will find this information helpful.

I look forward to continuing to work with you on these issues and welcome any comments you may have on this report.

Sincerely,

RICHARD G. LUGAR,
Ranking Member.

SAUDI ARABIA AND SYRIA: IMPROVING BILATERAL RELATIONS, ADVANCING U.S. INTERESTS

I. INTRODUCTION

As part of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's oversight of the management of U.S. foreign policy, Senior Professional Staff Member for the Middle East Dorothy Shea visited Saudi Arabia and Syria May 28–June 2, 2010. In both countries, staff reviewed the state of bilateral relations as well as cooperation on regional issues. Despite the vastly different contexts, U.S. relations with both countries warrant continued oversight, albeit for different reasons. In Saudi Arabia, oversight was focused on the broader relationship; whereas in Syria, staff was particularly concerned with the question of the merits of having a U.S. Ambassador on the ground. Both the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia and that in Damascus, Syria have recently undergone internal reviews, having been inspected by the State Department's Office of the Inspector General (OIG).¹ The staff delegation followed up on several of the OIG's findings and recommendations with Embassy staffs in the respective countries.

II. STAFF FINDINGS

A. SAUDI ARABIA

The United States Government and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have long enjoyed strong relations. The relationship is built on mutual interests, including regional stability, energy security, and the fight against terrorism. Relations have not been without challenges, however, particularly in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, in which 15 of the hijackers were Saudi nationals. That said, the trajectory is positive, as the relationship has matured and strengthened over time. The purpose of this report is not to review the history of those relations—many documents available to the public do an excellent job in this regard.² Nor is the purpose to provide a comprehensive overview of U.S. policy vis-à-vis the Kingdom. Rather, staff looked into a couple of discrete areas where there might be opportunities to better advance U.S. interests vis-à-vis the Kingdom. Findings relate to both the substance and process of U.S.-Saudi relations.

¹See U.S. Department of State and the Broadcasting Board of Governors Office of Inspector General's Report of Inspection: Embassy Riyadh and Constituent Posts, Saudi Arabia, Report Number ISP-I-10-19A, March 2010; and Report of Inspection: Embassy Damascus, Syria, Report Number ISP-I-10-34A, March 2010.

²See, for example, Christopher M. Blanchard, "Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations," Congressional Research Service RL33533, December 16, 2009; and the Department of State's Background Note on Saudi Arabia (April 5, 2010); <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3584.htm>.

1. Substance

The U.S. Embassy Country Team has laid out several core objectives with respect to Saudi Arabia. These include working cooperatively to counter the threat of terrorism; working constructively to promote regional stability; improving U.S.-Saudi economic ties, including through increased diversification of the Saudi economy; building and improving ties between the Saudi and American people; and promoting good governance. The reality is that the United States has many, sometimes competing, interests, and staff found that the U.S. Embassy was aggressively pursuing progress on these fronts. Of paramount concern to U.S. national security interests are energy security, which is being addressed in Saudi Arabia, among other ways, through a new program on critical infrastructure protection; and regional stability, which the Kingdom is working to promote both domestically and abroad, both at the operational level, through counter-terrorism programs, and at the societal level, through counter-radicalization efforts. Staff focused on U.S.-Saudi cooperation on critical infrastructure protection and regional security.

a. Critical Infrastructure Protection

Saudi oil reserves are the largest in the world, estimated at 263 billion barrels, and over one million barrels of Saudi oil are supplied to the U.S. market on a daily basis. As the State Department Background Note puts it, “The continued availability of reliable sources of oil, particularly from Saudi Arabia, remains important to the prosperity of the United States.”³

Following the May 2006 attempted terrorist attack on the Abqaiq oil processing facility, the United States and Saudi Arabia stepped up their cooperation on the protection of the Kingdom’s energy resources. In May 2008, the United States and Saudi Arabia signed a Technical Cooperation Agreement on critical infrastructure protection. Meetings to set the agenda for the program and review progress will be held semi-annually and chaired on the U.S. side by Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Bill Burns, and on the Saudi side by Deputy Interior Minister Prince Mohammed Bin Nayef.

A key challenge to infrastructure protection is that energy infrastructure in Saudi Arabia is dispersed throughout the country. The goal of the technical assistance program is to establish and improve the Saudis’ capability to protect critical infrastructure via the transfer of technical knowledge, advice, and resources. The new bilateral program has begun execution through project-specific agreements, which are fully funded by the Saudi government. The value of agreements in place for the next three years is about \$800 million. In October 2008, then-U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Ford Fraker predicted that the value of contracts associated with the program could reach tens of billions of dollars.⁴ Key components include:

- *The Facilities Security Force.* Standing up a 35,000-strong force to defend critical sites. The Saudis will do the recruiting; the

³Department of State’s Background Note on Saudi Arabia (April 5, 2010).

⁴As quoted in above cited Congressional Research Service report on Saudi Arabia, RL3533.

U.S. will help provide basic training, English-language training, and specialized training;

- *Site Assessments.* Identification of priority sites, which are then visited for assessment of vulnerability;
- There is agreement in principle for future cooperation on Diplomatic Security; Maritime Security; and Cyber Security.

Staff had the opportunity to meet with members of the new team of U.S. experts in Riyadh, who are funded by the Saudi government. They are contractors employed under the banner of the new Office of Program Management—Ministry of Interior. Staff found the growing cooperation, of both a policy and technical nature, to be promising. While it is still too early to assess progress, the program is working from sound guiding principles, including:

- The need to be anticipatory and adaptable;
- The need for continuous planning and adaptation;
- The need for seamless inter-agency coordination on the part of both Saudi Arabia and the U.S. Government; and
- The need for independent evaluation and auditing.

Given the importance to U.S. interests of protecting critical infrastructure in Saudi Arabia, staff believes that this area of cooperation will merit continued oversight. Suggested areas of oversight include:

- *Measuring success.* Ultimately, the success of this program will be measured by the extent to which the security of Saudi energy infrastructure sites is enhanced. It is important that precursor metrics be developed, however. One can imagine metrics to gauge the effectiveness of the training of the 35,000 new recruits for the new Facilities Security Force, for example. Similarly, the ability of this new force to deter attacks could be tested by targeted drills. The point is not for the Legislative Branch of the U.S. Government to develop metrics, but to be sure that the U.S. Administration and Saudi overseers of this program do, and that they are used to make improvements where necessary as the program matures.
- *The degree to which seamless inter-agency cooperation is achieved and maintained.* This pertains to both the U.S. side (where the State Department, the Departments of Defense, Energy and Homeland Security, and the Intelligence Community are all stakeholders), and the Saudi side, which one observer described as “hopelessly stove-piped,” particularly in the security sphere.
- *Transparency in awarding contracts.* The prospect that the value of contracts that could be associated with this program may reach tens of billions of dollars underscores the need for vigilance in ensuring that contracts are awarded in a transparent, results-based manner. In addition, both sides must take pains to avoid potential perceptions of diplomatic payoff to buy American goodwill, and/or greed on the part of U.S. contractors. Under Secretary Burns and Prince Nayef can play an important role in this regard by setting a tone of professionalism and accountability in the bilateral oversight meetings.

b. Regional Stability

Staff had hoped to follow up on Washington-based discussions about regional dynamics, including Saudi views of Iran's role in the region, Saudi Arabia's role in Yemen, in Syria and Lebanon, as well as in promoting Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. Unfortunately, suitable interlocutors were not available in Riyadh to have a meaningful exchange. (See below section on Process issues.) Even so, based on conversations with State and Embassy officials in the field, staff would recommend continued oversight on the following areas:

- *Cooperation on Iran.* Saudi Arabia can play an important role in bolstering and helping preserve the integrity of the sanctions regime. Saudi views about Iran's nuclear program are also important and should be given serious consideration.
- *Cooperation on Yemen.* Saudi Arabia exercises far more leverage in Yemen than does the United States. As the United States seeks to prevent state failure in Yemen and to counter the threat of terrorism emanating from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, there is potential for improved cooperation. Indeed, considerable international cooperation, including with the Kingdom, is already in evidence through the Friends of Yemen Group. But to achieve lasting results, a closer alignment of the U.S. and Saudi approaches would be helpful. For example, job creation for the 40% of the Yemeni population that is estimated to be unemployed—especially youth—is critical. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council member states could play an important role in this regard. In addition, the distribution of cash payments to Yemeni President Saleh and the tribal leaders contributes to a lack of transparency in governance and is thus part of the problem, not the solution.
- *Syria/Lebanon.* Saudi-Syrian relations became quite strained after the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, since Hariri, who had acquired Saudi citizenship, was close to the royal family. October 2009 marked a turning point in relations, with a visit by King Abdullah to Damascus. Among other things, his visit is believed to have helped break the logjam in the formation of the Lebanese government. Relations have since continued to thaw, as evidenced by Syrian President Assad's reciprocal visit to Riyadh last January. Many observers perceive the King's overture to Damascus as motivated in part by a desire to displace Iranian influence in Damascus. Although the U.S. Administration shares this goal, it has been sensitive to the concern expressed by many Lebanese observers, particularly those sympathetic to the pro-Western March 14th Coalition, that any Saudi-Syrian rapprochement should not come at the expense of Lebanon. Indeed, Syria has been reasserting its influence in Lebanon, evidenced most recently by the visits to Damascus by Prime Minister Saad Hariri both before and after his May 25th visit to Washington. The degree to which there is room for closer U.S.-Saudi cooperation in Syrian-Lebanese dynamics is unclear but should nonetheless be explored.

- *Promoting Middle East Peace.* In the face of hard-lined resistance in the Arab League, Saudi Arabia has helped keep alive the Arab Peace Initiative, first put forward by then-Crown Prince Abdullah and later endorsed by the Arab League at the 2002 Beirut Summit. Similarly, the Kingdom has played a relatively positive role in the Arab League supporting Palestinian participation in Israeli-Palestinian proximity talks. Continued oversight can help underscore the importance of continued Saudi moderation.
- *Countering Terrorism.* Administration officials with whom staff met gave the Saudi government high marks for improved cooperation in countering terrorism. That said, the latest State Department report on money laundering noted that Saudi Arabia “continues to be a significant jurisdictional source for terrorist financing worldwide.”⁵ It goes on to state that the Kingdom “could do more to target Saudi-based support for extremism outside of Saudi’s borders” by, for example, holding terrorist financiers publicly accountable through prosecutions and full implementation of United Nations Security Council obligations” and establishing a “charities oversight mechanism.” Continued oversight in this area may help encourage more rigorous enforcement.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia deserves credit for the fatwa that was recently issued by Council of Senior Ulema denouncing terrorism, which it defines as “a crime aiming at destabilizing security” by attacking people or property, including by “blowing up dwellings, schools, hospitals, factories, bridges, airplanes (including hijacking), oil, and pipelines.” The fatwa also specifically disallows the financing of terrorism, which it specifies as “a form of complicity to those acts.”

- *Countering Radicalization.* The Kingdom has developed an innovative religious-based rehabilitation program to help deradicalize terrorists by discrediting the ideological and religious underpinnings of violent Islamic extremism. The program uses a combination of religious counseling, psychological treatment and family interventions, which, taken together, provide a foundation to promote reintegration and prevent recidivism.⁶ The results of the program are not perfect; there has been some recidivism, including on the part of several who have then gone on to leadership and membership in al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, based in Yemen. Even so, to the extent that the program has had some success, it is worthy of further study. Many observers caution, however, that lessons learned from the Saudi experience may not be applicable elsewhere, given that the Saudi program relies heavily on socio-cultural aspects which are considered *sui generis*.

The de-radicalization program has largely focused on returned detainees from Guantanamo Bay and convicted terrorists. In addi-

⁵Department of State’s International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (2009); <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/120055.pdf>.

⁶See Christopher Boucek, “Counter-Terrorism from Within: Assessing Saudi Arabia’s Religious Rehabilitation and Disengagement Programme,” (Royal United Services Institute Journal, vol. 153, no. 6, pp. 60–65), December 2008.

tion, the Kingdom is seeking to do more in the area of pre-emptive programs to counter the appeal of extremism to at-risk populations. Staff had the opportunity to meet with the leadership of the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue, along with several youth volunteers who have participated in various national and international dialogues to promote tolerance. The Center represents a potentially important mechanism to foster religious and cultural tolerance. More could be done in this regard, however, including by more thoroughly vetting the curricula of Saudi-funded madrassas, both within and outside the Kingdom.

2. Process

Doing business with the Saudi government is complicated. Power is concentrated among a small group of individuals that includes the King and several key advisors. Mid-level officials, and even relatively high-level officials outside that circle, are generally not empowered to take independent action or convey official positions. As a result, day-to-day diplomacy is often subject to bureaucratic hold-ups.

Complicating this process challenge is a long-standing tradition whereby the Saudi King prefers to rely on the Saudi Ambassador to the United States as his exclusive intermediary with the U.S. Government. As a result, the U.S. Ambassador and team are not always in a position effectively to perform their proper functions. This phenomenon of over reliance on the Washington channel is not new; many observers point out that Prince Bandar served such a function during his long tenure as Ambassador to the United States. The status quo is, nonetheless, frustrating to the U.S. Embassy and to the State Department. The United States has a capable Ambassador and Country Team in Riyadh; they should be empowered with a greater role in the division of labor between the Washington and Riyadh channels.

One of the ideas for changing this dynamic includes the reinvigoration of the U.S.-Saudi strategic dialogue. This dialogue was established in 2005 and provided a strategic framework for discussions on issues including counterterrorism, energy, political-military issues, economic and trade issues, consular issues, and education, exchange, and human development. Asked about the merits of such a mechanism, some interlocutors underscored the significant potential benefits of the imposition of discipline on official interactions, on the one hand, and of having a formal framework for resolving differences, on the other. Both Saudi and U.S. diplomats cautioned, however, that an inherent drawback of such strategic dialogue exercises is that they sometimes end up being process-driven without producing sufficient results to justify the outlay in effort.

B. SYRIA

Relations with Syria have been strained for many years, reflecting U.S. rejection of Syria's sponsorship of terrorism, not only through hosting and supporting Palestinian rejectionist groups, but also by providing materiel and financial assistance to Hizballah in Lebanon. Tensions culminated with the recalling of the U.S. Ambassador to Syria five years ago in the aftermath of the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. This move sent a strong signal of condemnation of Syria's destabilizing behavior in the region and served to further isolate the regime in Damascus. The Obama Administration has for the past year changed tack, pursuing an engagement track with the Assad regime, including a series of visits by high-level delegations to Damascus. The purpose of the staff trip was not to review the history of bilateral relations—many public reports provide such background.⁷ Instead, taking into consideration the pending nomination of Robert Ford as U.S. Ambassador to Syria, staff focused primarily on the extent to which the U.S. Embassy in Damascus is able to operate effectively in the absence of a U.S. Ambassador. Staff also reviewed several key U.S. interests that have not been advancing adequately in the absence of a U.S. Ambassador.

1. Ambassadorial Access (or Lack Thereof) . . .

Against the backdrop of Congressional debate about the nomination of Robert Ford as U.S. Ambassador to Syria, staff reviewed Embassy operations in the absence of an Ambassador. Staff found that the lack of an Ambassador in Damascus renders the Embassy extremely limited in its ability to conduct normal business. For protocol reasons, the Syrian Government will not receive the very capable Chargé d'Affaires ad interim at the Ministerial level or above. The only exceptions have been the Chargé's meeting with the Foreign Minister to present the U.S. request for agrément for Robert Ford's nomination, and when he has accompanied delegations of high-level U.S. visitors. The business the Embassy does manage to conduct is hardly efficient: all interactions with the Government of Syria must be handled by diplomatic note—the Embassy had logged some 400 in the first five months of 2010. Of course, the presence of an Ambassador would not negate the continued need to conduct much day-to-day business via diplomatic note, but an empowered Ambassador could be expected to break through logjams.

As a result of its relative lack of access, the Embassy has been hampered in its ability to press for progress on a range of specific issues, some of which are of great importance to U.S. interests. The Embassy is often unable to deliver critical demarches to policy makers, as in the aftermath of reports of the transfer of long-range missiles via Syria to Hizballah. This has led to an over-reliance on the Washington channel. In this context, some critics have expressed doubts about whether the Syrian Ambassador to Washington is a reliable conveyor of U.S. views to his home capital. One

⁷ See, for example, Jeremy M. Sharp, "Syria: Background and U.S. Relations," (Congressional Research Service RL33487, April 26, 2010); and the Department of State's Background Note on Syria (February 17, 2010); <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm>.

thing is clear: in the absence of an Ambassador, the U.S. message is not adequately heard.

It should be noted, however, that even in such a non-permissive environment, the Embassy has done an admirable job of breaching obstacles to engage directly with the Syrian people. In the above-cited report, the OIG credited the Embassy's Public Affairs Section with the "best practice," now being replicated by other U.S. Missions, of initiating a free text messaging service to improve recipients' English, offering a weekly example of American idiomatic usage. As a result, the Embassy has a growing client base of service subscribers with whom it can engage. The Public Affairs shop has also made excellent use of the extremely limited exchange programs available to Syrians. Although the Fulbright exchange program came under serious strain in recent years, the section was able to generate 10 Fulbright exchanges and 34 International Visitor Leadership Program participants. Staff had the opportunity to make a site visit to a Syrian non-governmental organization that provides services to and raises public awareness about autistic and hearing-impaired children. The NGO is benefiting from a series of U.S. experts provided under the auspices of the Fulbright program. This kind of collaboration represents a positive case study in how creatively to build bridges through partnerships in difficult environments.

2. . . . To Better Advance U.S. Interests

Of course, having a U.S. Ambassador on the ground is not an end in itself but should be a means to more effectively pursue U.S. goals. Staff made this point directly to Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Miqdad and asked whether it was reasonable to expect that with an Ambassador on the ground the United States would be able to make progress on issues of key concern. The Deputy Minister emphasized a willingness on the part of the Syrian leadership to improve relations with the United States. He said that a U.S. Ambassador with the full confidence of the U.S. Administration would find "all doors open to him." He predicted that differences would not disappear instantaneously but undertook that such differences could be moved to the margins. He observed that much would depend on the instructions given to the U.S. Ambassador, however.

Among the key issues on which a U.S. Ambassador should be able to press for progress are the following:

a. A Suitable New Embassy Compound

The Embassy compound does not meet U.S. State Department security guidelines for setback and the physical space is no longer sufficient. The Administration has long been seeking permission from the Government of Syria to relocate its Embassy away from the busy thoroughfare on which it is situated, to a more secure location and larger facility that can better accommodate the Embassy's needs. Syrian foot-dragging on this issue probably reflects a combination of bureaucratic inertia as well as Syrian pique over U.S. sanctions and disengagement.

In the above-cited report, the OIG found that the security situation faced by the Embassy had not materially changed since the

unsuccessful vehicle-borne attack on the embassy compound in 2006, meaning that U.S. and Syrian personnel working there continue to be vulnerable. Experts believe that Hizballah and Hamas have residences in Damascus and that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps has a presence as well. Based on staff interviews it is quite possible to imagine that these groups, other Palestinian rejectionist groups headquartered there, or Islamist extremists might wish to target Embassy staff. In light of the potential threat, staff shares the OIG's assessment that, "Physical security at the aging, poorly situated chancery is shocking."⁸

During the staff visit, the Chargé d'Affaires was granted a meeting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to review prospective properties for a New Embassy Compound. This was a promising development, but the presence of an Ambassador on the ground would no doubt enhance forward movement for a new property. Staff pressed the Foreign Ministry for early progress on identifying suitable land for a New Embassy Compound, emphasizing that the security of U.S. Embassy staff was at stake.

b. A Responsible Syrian Role in the Region

There are many ways in which Syrian actions in the region are hostile to U.S. interests. It would be naïve to believe that the regime will alter its policies dramatically in the near term, but a U.S. Ambassador in place would be able to make the case that Syria's own interests are not being well served, for example, by its friendly relations with Iran, its support for Hizballah and Palestinian terrorist groups, its meddling in Lebanon, its role as a "spoiler" in the Middle East peace process, or by its efforts to encourage continued unrest in Iraq. The fact that Syria has tightened controls on the Syrian-Iraqi border to stem the flow of foreign fighters is indicative that it can be persuaded to take some responsible actions.

c. Halting Missile Transfers to Hizballah

In mid-April, reports began to surface that Syria had transferred long-range SCUD missiles to Hizballah from Iran. Israeli Government officials reacted strongly to this potentially game-changing development, pointing out that missiles with longer range and greater accuracy could effectively put the entire State of Israel at risk. The Administration has since stated publically that it does have information confirming that Syria has transferred ballistic missiles to Hizballah. The Administration has demanded an immediate end to arms transfers to Hizballah, pointing out that they are in contravention of UN Security Council Resolution 1701. Staff took advantage of meeting with Foreign Ministry officials to underscore strong concern about these destabilizing weapons transfers. Syria has denied the accusations, including in exchanges with staff. It is unlikely that the presence of a U.S. envoy on the ground alone would change the Syrian leadership's calculus on such weapons transfers, but given the stakes involved, it would be irresponsible

⁸U.S. Department of State and the Broadcasting Board of Governors Office of Inspector General's Report of Inspection: Embassy Damascus, Syria, Report Number ISP-I-10-34A, March 2010, p. 1.

to risk that U.S. warnings about the potential consequences of such activities might not be properly heard or interpreted.

3. Security and Morale

Given the difficult work environment in Syria, staff made a point of sounding out Embassy employees about morale issues. Not surprisingly, safety and security impact staff morale in a significant—and negative—manner. Embassy personnel expressed genuine fear about the Embassy compound's lack of a setback. They also pointed out that the Embassy in Syria is the longest-operating Embassy located in a designated state-sponsor-of-terrorism where employees are not compensated with premium danger pay. The need for a new Embassy compound has already been addressed; staff believes the issue of danger pay warrants reconsideration by State Department authorities.

III. CONCLUSION

The United States has critical interests at stake in Saudi Arabia and Syria. The U.S. Embassies in those countries should be empowered to work to maximum effect to advance those interests. In Saudi Arabia, that means the widening of official exchanges beyond the Washington channel, including the reinvigoration of the strategic dialogue. In Damascus, that means the presence of an Ambassador at the helm to make sure the U.S. message is heard. Strong leadership and open channels are necessary precursors to advance U.S. interests, but concerted U.S. diplomacy will be necessary to gain traction on the more difficult issues.

Appendix—Interlocutors

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia:

Ambassador James Smith and the Country Team
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Head of Arab Affairs Department
Representatives of the American business community
Office of Program Management-Ministry of the Interior
Naif Arab University for Security Studies
Assistant Minister for Petroleum Affairs
King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue

Damascus, Syria:

Chargé d’Affaires Charles Hunter and the Country Team
Vice Foreign Minister of Foreign Affairs
Syrian non-governmental organization AAMAL
UN High Commissioner for Refugees Deputy Country Representative
Select group of Syrian youth
Select group of Syrian business people
UN Relief Works Agency Country Representative

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