

Statement of

The Honorable Patrick Leahy

United States Senator
Vermont
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Opening Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy,
Ranking Member, Judiciary Committee
Hearing on "Saudi Arabia: Friend or Foe in the War on Terror?"
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With this hearing today, the Committee addresses an important aspect in our efforts to fight terrorism. As a nation, we cannot defeat al Qaeda and other Islamic extremists without the assistance of our allies in the Middle East. We all recall that the Saudis were less than cooperative when the FBI sought to interview Saudi nationals in the investigation of the Khobar Towers bombing. The attacks of September 11, 2001, further strained our relationship with Saudi Arabia and raised troubling questions about the Saudi government's commitment to fighting terrorism. While there has been some progress in recent years, there is still considerable room for improvement in the Saudi government's counterterrorism efforts.

As the 9/11 Commission noted in its recommendation in its final report:

"The problems in the U.S.-Saudi relationship must be confronted, openly. The United States and Saudi Arabia must determine if they can build a relationship that political leaders on both sides are prepared to publicly defend a relationship about more than oil. It should include a shared commitment to political and economic reform, as Saudis make common cause with the outside world. It should include a shared interest in greater tolerance and cultural respect, translating into a commitment to fight the violent extremists who foment hatred."

Despite the Commission's recommendation, we have done little to openly confront the problems in the U.S.-Saudi relationship. Critical information about the role of the Government of Saudi Arabia before and after September 11, and its level of cooperation with U.S. law enforcement agencies, before and after, has not been revealed to the public. Despite an outcry from Republican and Democratic Senators, alike, for the release of information, the Administration has denied the public its right to know these crucial facts. This is most evident in the refusal of the Executive Branch to declassify all or part of the 28 pages relating to Saudi Arabia in the Joint Intelligence Committee from July 2003. Several of my colleagues on the other side of the aisle who have seen these pages, including Senators Shelby and Brownback, believe that almost all of the data in these pages can be released with no harm to national security. Even Saudi Arabia's former ambassador to the United States asked that these pages be declassified.

Meanwhile, this Administration refuses to confront the Saudi government's role in promoting Islamic extremism. Particularly troubling has been the Saudi government's lavish funding of

religious schools, or madrasas, throughout the region that propagate extreme forms of Islam and advocate hatred and violence. These Saudi-funded madrasas threaten the existence of more moderate beliefs and practices in the Muslim world and foster anti-Western and anti-Semitic sentiments. Offering food, lodging, and a free education, madrasas have spread rapidly throughout the region, often calling on Muslims to fight non-believers and stand against what they see as the moral depravity of the West. More troubling is the strong link between madrasas and terrorist financing. It is widely known that the Saudi government has permitted and even encouraged fundraising by charitable Islamic groups and foundations that have been linked to known terrorist organizations. Although the Saudi government has announced restrictions to private charity organizations and relief groups sending funds overseas, the strict regulation of these restrictions remains to be seen.

The President condemns many of the repressive policies of Arab nations, but seems to have an obvious blind spot when it comes to Saudi Arabia. In a speech last month, the President noted that "the influence of Islamic radicalism is magnified by helpers and enablers. [Terrorists] have been sheltered by authoritarian regimes - allies of convenience like Syria and Iran. ... The United States makes no distinction between those who commit acts of terror and those who support and harbor them because they are equally guilty of murder." Despite this strong rhetoric, President Bush and Secretary Rumsfeld praise Saudi Arabia, a monarchy that has done more to promote Islamic extremism and discourage the emergence of moderate Muslim leaders than any nation. The President also defends Saudi Arabia's record on civil liberties and religious freedom. In April 25, 2005, the President said "the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia recognizes the principle of freedom upon which the United States was founded, including the freedoms enshrined under the First Amendment of the United States Constitution." I find it remarkable that the President can make such a statement. The State Department has designated Saudi Arabia as a "country of particular concern" for its violations of religious freedoms.

In its 2004 Country Report on Human Rights Practices, the State Department wrote that in Saudi Arabia "citizens did not have the right to change their government. Security forces continued to abuse detainees and prisoners, arbitrarily arrest, and hold persons in incommunicado detention. ... Most trials were closed, and defendants usually appeared before judges without legal counsel. Security forces arrested and detained reformers, some of whom continued at year's end to seek an open trial. The Government reportedly infringed on individuals' privacy rights. The Government continued to restrict freedoms of speech and press, assembly, association, religion, and movement." The Saudi government may recognize the freedoms enshrined in our First Amendment, but it certainly does not allow its citizens to enjoy those freedoms.

I understand that some of our witnesses today will discuss extremist publications found in U.S. mosques and broadcasts from Saudi television that advocate violence against Americans. While these should raise serious concerns about our Nation's security, it is important to understand that the extremist ideology promoted in these publications and broadcasts does not reflect the teachings of Islam or the beliefs of the vast majority of Muslims.

It is also noteworthy to mention that the broadcast of extremist ideologies is not limited to the Muslim faith or Saudi television. Several of America's best known Christian evangelists, who are suspected by many to speak for President Bush's and Vice President Cheney's strongest supporters, have made deplorable statements about Islam. The Reverend Franklin Graham, who gave the invocation at George W. Bush's inauguration, said on NBC News: "We're not attacking Islam but Islam has attacked us. The God of Islam is not the same God. He's not the Son of God

of the Christian or Judeo-Christian faith. It's a different God, and I believe [Islam] is a very evil and wicked religion." On CBS's "60 Minutes," the Reverend Jerry Falwell called the Prophet Muhammad "a terrorist." The Reverend Pat Robertson said on Christian Broadcasting Network News that, "If I say something that Islam is, you know, an erroneous religion, then I get criticized by the Anti-Defamation League. You just want to say: 'When are you going to open your eyes and see who your enemy is.'" Just as the majority of Christians or Jews reject these statements, the majority of Muslims reject the publications and broadcasts that will be discussed at today's hearing.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses and I commend the Chairman for his efforts to openly address the role of Saudi Arabia in our efforts to fight terrorism.