April 14, 2017

Groups Urge Creation of an Independent Investigation into Alleged Foreign Involvement in the 2016 Presidential Election and Strengthening Congressional Oversight of the Intelligence Community

We, the undersigned individuals and organizations, write to express our grave concerns arising from recent events involving the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (“HPSCI”) and its chairman, Representative Devin Nunes. Recent actions by Chairman Nunes have brought to the fore the Committee’s internal dysfunction and its chairman’s inability to lead an investigation that would be viewed as impartial and comprehensive into alleged foreign involvement in the 2016 presidential election.

Congress must renew its commitment to provide a meaningful check on the executive branch and reform how it oversees intelligence matters, and this can only be accomplished when Congress creates an independent investigation into alleged foreign involvement in the 2016 presidential election and Congress strengthens congressional oversight of the intelligence community. These decisions lie uniquely in the hands of House leadership and they require your urgent action.

Establish an Independent Investigation into Alleged Russian Involvement in 2016 Election
The question of Russian interference in the 2016 election needs serious and close attention. The partisan divide on HPSCI’s engagement on this topic has eroded its ability to lead such an inquiry. A Quinnipiac University poll recently found that 66 percent of American voters believe “[a]n independent commission should investigate links between some of Trump's campaign advisors and the Russian government.”

This is a matter of grave importance to our political system. We need an impartial, thorough, and trusted investigation. Accordingly, Congress should establish an independent commission or a select committee to investigate alleged Russian involvement in the 2016 election.

Strengthen Intelligence Oversight
HPSCI no longer functions as was intended when the House created it in the late 1970s. The committee has become too partisan, too insular, and too reliant on the intelligence community. In September, a bipartisan coalition of 33 organizations wrote to House leadership with recommendations on how to strengthen congressional oversight of the intelligence community.2

1 https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2444
We draw upon those recommendations and urge you to take the following three steps.

First, Congress must reform how the House Intelligence Committee operates, including by modernizing its membership, improving committee operations and transparency, and strengthening the investigatory ability of individual members through dedicated staff.

Second, Congress must empower each Representative to engage in effective oversight, including by making it easier for congressional offices to work with whistleblowers, providing members with sufficient staff, and easing the way for Congress to release classified information that the public should know.

Third, Congress must establish a distinct, broad-based review of the activities of the intelligence community since September 11, 2001, with a focus on identifying oversteps by the intelligence community and where congressional oversight mechanisms must be reformed.

Thank you for your service to our nation and for your attention to our request. We welcome the opportunity to discuss this with you further. Please contact Daniel Schuman, policy director at Demand Progress, at daniel@demandprogress.org or 202-792-4550.

Sincerely yours,

American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee
Center for Media and Democracy
CREDO
Demand Progress
Government Accountability Project
National Security Counselors
Sunlight Foundation
X-Lab