

Statement by John P. Abizaid
Nominee to be U.S. Ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
March 6, 2019

Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Menendez, Members of the Committee:

I am honored to appear before you today as President Trump's nominee to be the next U.S. Ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. I am grateful to the President for his nomination and to Secretary Pompeo for his trust and confidence. If confirmed by the Senate, I pledge to work closely with the members of the Committee to advance U.S. interests and values in Saudi Arabia and the region.

I would first like to thank my wife, Kathy, as well as my children Sharon, Christine, and David for their love, support, and service to this nation.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Menendez, Members of the Committee:

Having served for a considerable part of my life in the Middle East – including in Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and of course Iraq – I am aware of both how difficult this region can be, and just how essential it is to U.S. interests and national security.

Today, there are an abundance of active forces that would foment regional insecurity. Iran continues its expansionist, destabilizing foreign policy. In Yemen, Iran helps the Houthis obtain weapons and equipment used to attack Yemeni civilians and bordering countries. In Syria, Iran props up Bashar al Assad, who has terrorized his own citizens with unspeakable brutality. In Lebanon, Iran funnels weapons to Hizballah, strains the fragile Lebanese democracy, and threatens our ally Israel.

The United States also continues to combat the scourge of international terrorism. While nearly vanquished on the ground, ISIS remains a potent threat to the United States and our allies across the globe. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) maintains a foothold in Yemen and seeks to inflict harm on those who do not agree with its false vision of Islam.

Our relationships with regional partners are essential to countering these and other threats we face. We cannot protect the homeland, safeguard our citizens overseas, and promote our core interests and values without these partners. It is my firm conviction that Saudi Arabia has been, and will continue to be, an essential partner.

I am clear-eyed about the challenges facing the U.S.-Saudi partnership. I know that the Saudis must do more to end the suffering of the Yemeni people and build peace there. I know there must be accountability for the terrible murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. If confirmed as ambassador, I pledge to work tirelessly on both these issues, and to urge our Saudi partners to reach the highest standards of accountability.

Despite these challenges, I firmly believe these objectives are achievable through close, continued engagement and cooperation with the Kingdom. We are able to influence, steer, and advance U.S. national security interests and values because of our ability to have honest, often difficult conversations with Saudi leadership. Any scaling back of that relationship diminishes our ability to secure vital American national security interests in the region, and cedes influence to our competitors around the world.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Menendez, Members of the Committee, I submit to you the important ways in which this relationship benefits the United States and promotes regional and global security.

During my nearly four decades serving in the U.S. military, it was my highest honor and duty to protect and defend the United States and its citizens. If confirmed as ambassador, my top priority will continue to be safeguarding America and its people. Given my experience in the region, I have no doubt that the U.S-Saudi security partnership is essential to doing so.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia plays a critical role in countering global terrorism and threats to U.S. interests. The Kingdom hosted the inaugural conference of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS in Jeddah in September 2014, helping set in motion the Coalition's successful push to defeat the so-called Islamic State. As Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman and King Abdullah before him swiftly condemned ISIS and enacted tough enforcement and criminal penalties for Saudis who sought to travel to fight in Iraq and Syria. Critically, Saudi Arabia has led Coalition efforts to disrupt ISIS financial and facilitation networks, and to build Coalition members' capacity to target such networks and counter illicit financial flows.

Our military-to-military cooperation with the Kingdom is also essential to countering threats and protecting American lives. The Houthis have fired numerous missiles and rockets into Saudi Arabia – home to over 80,000 Americans – specifically targeting populated areas and civilian infrastructure in Riyadh, Jeddah, and elsewhere, including Saudi Aramco facilities and vessels in Red Sea shipping lanes.

The United States and Saudi Arabia joined forces in May 2017 to inaugurate and co-chair the Terrorist Financing Targeting Center, a U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council initiative to disrupt a broad range of new and evolving terrorist financing networks including ISIS, al Qaeda, Hizballah, the IRGC-Qods Force, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, the Taliban, and the Haqqani Network.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia also runs among the most successful de-radicalization programs in the world. The Care Rehabilitation Center in Riyadh has helped thousands of individuals convicted of terrorism turn away from poisonous ideologies.

The Kingdom remains a key diplomatic player in the Middle East and supports an active role for the United States in maintaining stability in the region. Specifically, it is a central partner in combatting Iran's expansionist and destructive foreign policy throughout the region.

Take, for example, Iraq. After decades of estrangement, the Kingdom and Iraq are forging closer ties. At the heart of this rapprochement is the promise of economic investment

and relationship building that bucks traditional ethnic and sectarian lines. This was dramatically evidenced by Moqtada al Sadr's visit to Riyadh in July 2017 – an event that would have been unthinkable a decade earlier – as well as numerous other high-level visits between Riyadh and Baghdad. These steps are critically important in buttressing U.S. efforts to bring peace and security to Iraq, in demonstrating to the Iraqi people an alternative to Tehran, and in ensuring the lasting defeat of ISIS and forestalling the resurgence of Islamic extremist terrorist groups in Iraq.

The Kingdom has also been a central U.S. partner in diplomatic efforts to forge a political solution to the Syrian civil war, one that ensures Iran is not granted a permanent foothold in Damascus. Saudi Arabia has allowed at least 500,000 Syrians to enter the Kingdom since the Syrian conflict began in 2011. This fact is little known, yet its importance cannot be overstated. Rather than languish in refugee camps in neighboring countries or make the treacherous journey to Europe in search of asylum, these Syrians in Saudi Arabia are permitted to work and are provided basic education and healthcare free of charge. In addition, Saudi Arabia provided \$100 million in funding for U.S. government stabilization programs in northeast Syria so that Syrians recovering from years of ISIS rule could begin to rebuild their lives.

On numerous other important U.S. foreign policy objectives – including promoting Middle East Peace and negotiating Afghanistan reconciliation – the United States is best served by recognizing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's considerable influence and by partnering with the Kingdom to advance mutually beneficial policy objectives.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Menendez, Members of the Committee, I know you are concerned about the situation in Yemen, as am I. The conflict there enters its fifth year this month; over 80 percent of Yemeni citizens need some kind of international aid to make it by each day. By any measure, the situation in Yemen is a political, humanitarian, and security crisis that urgently needs resolution.

In this difficult space, the Administration believes it is firmly in the United States' national security interest to provide support to the Saudi-led Coalition. Doing so bolsters the self-defense capabilities of our partners and reduces the risk of harm to civilians.

At the same time as it fights to deter a threat on its border, Saudi Arabia has provided over \$3 billion in stabilization and economic support for the Yemeni people. I understand Saudi funding helped stabilize the Yemen central bank as the country's currency verged on collapse last year. Saudi Arabia, along with the United Arab Emirates, provided \$970 million toward the United Nation's 2018 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan and, since November, pledged another \$750 million.

Inside the Kingdom, Saudi leadership are undertaking wide-ranging reforms under the banner of "Vision 2030" to diversify the Saudi economy, create more professional opportunities for Saudi citizens, and expand women's roles in public and professional life. Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Menendez, Members of the Committee, these are positive developments which, if confirmed, I will strongly advocate for as ambassador. I feel particularly strongly that Saudi Arabia, like any nation, will benefit greatly by expanding the space for women in public

and professional life. Advocating for women's rights is a critical goal for U.S. foreign policy, and I fully commit to making this a key element of my potential tenure as ambassador.

While I am encouraged by the economic and social reforms the Saudis have instituted in recent years, I am fully aware of the disturbing reports that political, human rights, and women activists – as well as Dr. Walid al Fitaihi, a U.S. citizen – have been detained and at times allegedly tortured by the Saudi government. While we should encourage reforms that are beneficial to U.S. interests and represent our values, we should also speak frankly to our partners when they do wrong.

The Administration has made clear that the United States is concerned by the detention of these Saudis activists and takes all allegations of abuse seriously. The Administration continues to urge the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and all governments, to ensure fair trial guarantees, freedom from arbitrary and extrajudicial detention, transparency, and rule of law. If confirmed as Ambassador, I will continue to call on the Government of Saudi Arabia to treat prisoners and detainees humanely, and to ensure that allegations of abuse are investigated quickly and thoroughly. I will stress to the Saudis that political repression endangers and undercuts the ambitious and positive goals of Vision 2030.

If confirmed, I will also continue to press Saudi leadership on the heinous killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The President and Secretary Pompeo have been clear that Saudi Arabia must hold accountable the individuals responsible for this horrific crime, including high-ranking members of the Saudi government. If confirmed, I will continue to deploy the full range of diplomatic tools to demand accountability and find justice for Mr. Khashoggi.

Outside the realm of security and foreign policy, our bilateral relationship with the Kingdom is anchored by significant economic linkages that benefit the United States. We are Saudi Arabia's second largest export market, U.S. exports to the Kingdom support 165,000 U.S. jobs, and our trade surplus now tops \$5.4 billion. Saudi Arabia's foreign direct investment in the United States exceeded \$14 billion in 2018 alone. These investments support thousands of American businesses and jobs across the United States. American energy companies rely on Saudi cooperation, and Saudi-American cooperation is behind the largest oil refinery in the United States in Port Arthur, TX.

Finally, I would like to stress the importance of our diplomatic mission in Saudi Arabia and my great desire to lead it. Over 1,000 men and women of numerous nationalities work at Embassy Riyadh, Consulate General Jeddah, and Consulate General Dhahran. They engage Saudi government officials each day to advance America's interests; issue visas for Saudi students and their family members – who total over 100,000 in the United States today; and work to ensure American companies can compete fairly in the Kingdom and greater Middle East. Perhaps most importantly, they work tirelessly to protect the over 80,000 American citizens now living in Saudi Arabia, and provide consular support to another 20,000 U.S. citizens who make the Haj and Umrah pilgrimages each year.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Menendez, Members of the Committee, it would be my highest honor to lead this team and to advance U.S. interests and values in Saudi Arabia and the region. I am grateful for the opportunity to appear before you today, and I look forward to answering your questions.