

Statement of John Rakolta Jr.
Nominee to be U.S. Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
June 20, 2019

Chairman, Ranking Member, Members of the Committee, it is an honor to come before you today as President Trump's nominee to be the United States Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates.

I would like to thank President Trump and Secretary Pompeo for the trust and confidence that they have shown in me. I am humbled by this extraordinary opportunity to serve my country. If confirmed to serve as the next U.S. Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates, I will represent the interests and values of the United States and strengthen our nation's bonds with the government and people of the United Arab Emirates. This relationship is critical to our national security interests and is a moderating and stabilizing force in one of the world's most volatile regions.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my family, without whom I would never have been in a position to be considered for this job. Particularly, without the love, support and inspiration of my family, especially my wonderful wife of 43 years, Terry. She is here today with three of our four children, Eileen, Lauren and Paige. I could not be more proud of them.

My grandparents came to America from what is today Romania seeking freedom and a chance for a better life. They raised my father to work hard and be grateful for the blessings our nation made possible. These were qualities that served him well during World War II when he was imprisoned in a German prison camp after the B-26 bomber he was navigating crashed. After the war, he returned to Detroit more optimistic and determined to build his family and career, ultimately acquiring and running Walbridge, the 100-year-old construction company I've had the privilege to lead for the last 39 years.

Having grown this company into a \$40 million regional company into a \$1.6 billion international enterprise of nearly 2,000 employees, I have successfully managed assets and motivated teams of talented people to achieve great goals in highly competitive global economic environments. Walbridge projects have been completed throughout North and South America, as well as Asia and the Middle East for U.S. and foreign-based companies. We constructed Maritime City in Dubai, the largest complex for ship repair on the Indian Ocean.

The UAE is the largest market for U.S. goods and services in the Middle East. My experience in the private sector has allowed me to understand the complexities and opportunities of international finance and commerce. Having overseen large and complex international projects has given me insights into foreign business risk, competing on a foreign stage, and dealing with currency volatility, all of which will be extremely helpful to US business interests. If confirmed, I will use my experience in identifying and utilizing local joint ventures as a means and method of entering a foreign market to help American businesses expand into the UAE and beyond. Promoting and developing the expansion of US business interests will be a top priority. If confirmed, I will lead the Embassy in the continuation of efforts to promote and maintain fair and reciprocal trade with the UAE. The U.S. has enjoyed a healthy trade surplus with the UAE for the past nine years, and I would like to see that continue. If confirmed, I will work to promote U.S. business opportunities as well as direct investment in U.S. industries.

The World Expo 2020 in Dubai offers great potential to showcase America's story, ingenuity, and technology in the Middle East. I look forward to advancing American values to millions of visitors – many of them youth – that visit our national pavilion.

If confirmed, my highest priority will be ensuring the safety and security of all Americans in the United Arab Emirates, including all private citizens who live and work in the UAE, as well as employees under Chief of Mission authority. I also believe that continuing our dialogue with the UAE on human rights and religious freedom represents another priority, which I will work continuously to advance if confirmed. I understand that the UAE has been a key security partner for the U.S., and has joined us in several U.S.-led coalition operations including Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Somalia, as well as the ongoing fight against ISIS and Al Qaeda. I would work closely with the Embassy team, as well as with the members of this committee, to ensure that our security partnership remains strong.

If confirmed, I will fully support the UN-led peace efforts by UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths. The war in Yemen, which began among Yemenis, then drew in neighboring countries, has taken on larger regional implications with the involvement of Iran, and has created immense suffering among the Yemeni people. The Administration's position on bringing an end to the conflict has been clear: only a negotiated settlement can end this protracted war and unify Yemen. If confirmed, I will work to continue the Administration's support for UN-led efforts to achieve a lasting cessation of hostilities and a comprehensive peace agreement

in Yemen. I will also support efforts to address the dire humanitarian consequences of the conflict. I will continue to work with the UAE to ensure humanitarian efforts are prioritized, particularly in their role in the Saudi-led Coalition, continuing efforts such as ensuring the Red Sea ports remain open and operational. Other examples of such efforts include when the Saudi-led Coalition worked with the U.S. government to deliver the World Food Programme cranes in December 2017. In this regard, all parties need to increase access so that critical commercial and humanitarian goods reach all areas of Yemen. I understand that 80 percent of Yemenis are in need of some form of humanitarian assistance, and therefore the international community must remain coordinated in our response. All parties, especially the Houthi authorities, have to commit to lifting unnecessary impediments that slow down deliveries of aid.

The President has been clear Iran is responsible for the May 12 attacks on four commercial vessels off the coast of Fujairah, UAE and the June 13 attacks on two vessels in the Gulf of Oman. The Iranian regime poses a major threat to freedom of navigation and maritime security from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea. If confirmed, I will work to support the Administration's efforts to keep the Strait of Hormuz open, the narrow waterway in the Persian Gulf where 20 percent of global petroleum passes.

If confirmed, I will work tirelessly with President Trump, my State Department colleagues and this Committee to protect and advance the interests of the American people, passionately representing our service men and women, business community, tourists, academics, the 50,000 American citizens living in the UAE, and others wishing to engage with the people of the United Arab Emirates.

Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the privilege and opportunity to appear before you today and I look forward to answering your questions.