

STATEMENT OF JAMES B. SMITH
AMBASSADOR-DESIGNATE TO THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA
BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
July 22, 2009

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I want to thank you for your leadership and the important role this Committee plays in the national security of our country. I am honored by President Obama's nomination to be Ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and I appreciate Secretary Clinton's confidence in my nomination. I am delighted to have this opportunity to return to public service. If confirmed, I will endeavor to carry out the President's mandate and represent the United States to the best of my ability.

For 32 years, I wore the cloth of our nation in the United States Air Force, and for much of that professional career, I served with military officers of other nations, from training pilots from the Gulf Region early in my career, to serving as Wing Commander of Kadena Air Base, an installation of over 25,000, in Okinawa, Japan.

I have been involved in both the policy and operational aspects of our relations in the broad Near East/Middle East region. In the 1980s, I was assigned to consecutive tours in Europe, and as a staff officer at USAFE, focused on the many challenges in NATO, particularly in the southern region for Greece and Turkey. In addition, I deployed on Operation Arid Farmer to Khartoum, Sudan, in 1983, to support coalition operations after Libya invaded Chad. Later, as a squadron commander, my unit was tasked as a quick reaction force to the Gulf region where we became experts to support short notice deployment taskings.

During Desert Storm, I was deployed to Dhahran Air Base, Saudi Arabia as an F-15 pilot. Our task was clear: repel Iraqi aggression, support the liberation of Kuwait, and protect a long standing ally -- Saudi Arabia. While all personal relationships are important, I have come to believe that those relationships born in the crucible of combat carry with them a lifetime of meaning. Those of us providing air cover -- Saudi pilots and American -- were prepared to and willingly put our lives on the line to defend the people of the Kingdom. I maintain a great respect for the country, its culture and its commitment to regional stability. While we face many challenges together, I do not question the importance of the

relationship. We will not always agree, but we will always consult on the many challenges we face.

Following Desert Storm, I spent three years at the National War College as a student and then Air Force Chair and Professor of National Security Strategy. During those years I had the privilege of working with Ambassador David Newsom, Ambassador Kate Canavan, and a number of other State Department and USAID professionals, both as students and fellow faculty members. While at the College, I underwent a regional immersion in the Middle East and for two years led War College field studies to Syria, Jordan and Israel, which included high-level meetings with both political and military leadership. On retirement from the military I began a career in business which has given me the opportunity to forge a variety of professional relationships in the region. I have been engaged in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Qatar. I have also supported other initiatives in the UAE, Oman, Bahrain, Egypt and Turkey.

The United States and Saudi Arabia have a deep and abiding partnership and, if confirmed, I will work to further strengthen our ties with this vital ally to advance U.S. interests on a wide range of regional security challenges.

To realize the President's vision of two states in the Middle East -- Israel and Palestine -- living side by side in mutual peace and security, we must work closely with the Saudi leadership. Intensive consultations with this vital ally are also necessary as we strive to end Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, to promote long-term stability and development in Afghanistan and Pakistan, to bolster Yemen's capacity to defeat violent extremism, to urge Syria to play a constructive role in the region, and to reintegrate Iraq into the region. To address this daunting list of security challenges, the President and Secretary Clinton have nominated some of our nation's finest diplomats and peace-makers. If confirmed, I intend to draw on the substantive expertise of colleagues, including Senator George Mitchell and Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, to encourage Saudi Arabia to use its unique authority in the Arab and Muslim worlds to support our shared quest for peace, stability, and prosperity.

If confirmed, I will accept responsibility for safeguarding the welfare of American citizens living and working in Saudi Arabia, recognizing that this is among the Department of State's top priorities. In close consultation with this committee, the larger Congress, and the Department, I will ensure that the speedy resolution of child custody cases involving American citizens in Saudi Arabia remains a top priority. I will also endeavor to ensure that all American citizens,

regardless of gender, are free to travel to and from Saudi Arabia as they wish. I will place the highest priority on the security of American personnel at our diplomatic missions in Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dhahran, with an eye towards returning all dependents as soon as security conditions permit. In addition, I will accept the larger responsibility for providing our mission personnel with the resources and infrastructure necessary to do their jobs.

In the nearly eight years since the September 11, 2001 attacks upon our country, we have built a solid partnership with the Saudis focused on a shared interest in combating terrorism and confronting violent extremism. Our security cooperation with the Saudis is one of our strongest with any ally. With our support, the Saudis are making substantial progress in the fight against violent extremism, arresting and killing hundreds of terrorists over the past several years. At the same time, the Saudis must do more to address concerns about terror financing and to ensure that money from private Saudi sources does not go to support violent extremism in Afghanistan, Pakistan, or elsewhere. In addition to their effective military and law enforcement responses to the threats Al-Qaida continues to pose to the Arabian Peninsula, the Saudis have come to understand the centrality of confronting the extremist ideology that underpins violent extremism. Through public education programs and by working closely with religious authorities, the Saudis have proven themselves an important partner in the larger ideological struggle against extremism. If confirmed, I will work with the Saudi leadership to expand our cooperation in this crucial area.

We cannot overlook the strategic imperatives that underlie the long-standing U.S.-Saudi partnership on economic and energy issues. Saudi Arabia, the only Arab member of the G-20, has played a constructive role in support of international efforts to stem the global financial crisis. We particularly appreciate Saudi Arabia's role in supplying world energy markets with a stable and reliable source of petroleum. Their continued investment in their energy sector illustrates the Saudi commitment to meeting energy demands now and in the future. While the United States is focused on shifting our economy to cleaner energy technologies, at least in the medium term, petroleum will continue to be crucial to world energy markets. If confirmed by this committee, I will work as Ambassador to strengthen our energy partnership with Saudi Arabia. Bilateral trade and investment, already strong, must be strengthened further.

Finally, even as we pursue an ambitious regional agenda, the Saudis must continue to focus on supporting a meaningful social modernization program that will improve the lives of everyone living and working in Saudi Arabia. King

Abdullah has taken important steps towards modernizing the Kingdom's education and judicial establishments. He has advanced an interfaith dialogue, a significant contribution with the potential to improve understanding among religions. He has appointed the Kingdom's first female senior official. These are small but significant steps, and there is still much to do. We remain concerned with restrictions on religious freedom in Saudi Arabia. The Saudis are proud of their responsibility as guardian of Islam's two holiest sites; however, with this responsibility comes an obligation to promote moderation and toleration over hatred and zealotry. The Saudis have made bold commitments to remove intolerant passages from their educational curriculum and to protect the rights of individuals to practice their faiths, whatever their religious beliefs may be. If confirmed, I will hold the Saudis to these commitments.

If confirmed as Ambassador, I will use all the skills and knowledge I have developed in a career in the military and industry to serve the national security objectives of my country. I commit to you a willingness to understand your concerns and interests and to keep them firmly in mind while I carry out my responsibilities. It is my fervent hope that you will visit the Kingdom so that we together can continue to strengthen this vital strategic relationship.

Thank you for considering my nomination, and I look forward to your questions.