

Statement by Joseph Evan LeBaron

Ambassador-designate to the State of Qatar

U.S. Department of State

Hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

May 1, 2008

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, it is a great privilege to appear before you today as the President's nominee to serve as U.S. Ambassador to the State of Qatar. I am honored by the confidence that President Bush and Secretary Rice have placed in me.

If confirmed by the Senate, I look forward to working with this Committee, and with other members of Congress, to strengthen the partnership between the United States and the State of Qatar and to advance the strategic objectives of the United States in the Gulf and in the broader Arab and Islamic worlds.

I began my diplomatic career in Qatar. I am thrilled that, if confirmed, I will be returning there as Ambassador. I have been involved in Middle Eastern affairs for over 35 years, including serving as U.S. Ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Mauritania in 2003-2006, during Mauritania's historic transition to free and fair elections. To serve now as the U.S. Ambassador to the State of Qatar would be a special honor. If confirmed, I will do my utmost to forge personal and governmental ties with the Qatari people and with the Qatari government in order to deepen the trust between our two countries and to expand the security and prosperity of our two countries.

The country to which my wife and I would return looks very different from the place we left over 25 years ago. What was once a quiet corner of the Middle East is now a thriving and cosmopolitan society. It is one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

It is also a place where the United States has many interests. Over 9000 private U.S. citizens now live in Qatar, and our Embassy estimates that 200 more arrive each month. They include business representatives and their families, military contractors, university faculty, and medical professionals.

This large influx of Americans has created a sharp increase in the demand for American Citizen Services last year – it was up nearly 30% last year. The demand for visa services rose 70% between 2006 and 2007, and it is continuing to increase at a similar pace this year. Everywhere I look in the relationship between Qatar and the United States, there is growth. From the burgeoning trade relationship, the new direct air service between Qatar and the United States, to the increase in American tourists to Qatar and the growing enrollments at U.S. universities.

If confirmed as Ambassador, I will work to ensure this growth continues, that the U.S. mission continues to meet the needs of our citizens in Qatar and to encourage Qataris and Qatar's many foreign residents to travel, study, and invest in America.

There is as well a large U.S. military presence in Qatar, one that plays a critical role in our efforts to bring stability to Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Horn of Africa, and to confront Al-Qa'ida and its associated networks in the region. The U.S.-Qatari military relationship is extremely strong, deeply valued by both. Qatar's Al Udayd Air Base hosts the United States Air Force's 379th Air Expeditionary Wing as well as the Combined Air Operations Center. Over a billion dollars in construction projects is either planned or already underway at Al Udayd. More than 70% of that money comes from the Qatari Government.

The U.S. Mission plays an important role in advancing U.S. regional policy goals through the Gulf Security Dialogue, and its interconnecting pillars on regional security, Iraq, defense cooperation, counterterrorism, counterproliferation, and critical energy infrastructure protection.

Qatar hosts important U.S. military facilities, the CENTCOM Forward Headquarters, al-Udayd air base, and CENTCOM's Combined Air Operations Center. These bases are critical for U.S. military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. Mission plays a vital role in coordinating this relationship. The Mission also participates in the planning for further development of U.S. installations through the Military Cooperative Committee. It is in daily contact with Qatar's armed forces. It consults frequently with senior U.S. military and civilian officials, as well as with visiting members of Congress.

U.S. strategic interests in Qatar include Qatar's critical and growing role in U.S. energy security. U.S. energy companies have invested over \$40 billion in Qatar's oil and gas sectors. Qatar's natural gas reserves are the third largest in the world, after Russia and Iran. Qatar is already the world's largest exporter of liquefied natural gas. When the Golden Pass LNG terminal in southwest Texas is completed in 2009, Qatar will become one of the largest suppliers of imported LNG to our country, if not the largest.

The income Qatar derives from oil and gas exports is very large, especially given the small size of Qatar's native population, just 200,000 in a total population of about 1 million. Over the next five years, the Qatari government plans to spend billions of dollars on domestic infrastructure projects. Even with all that spending, the Qatari government projects annual national budget surpluses in the tens of billions of dollars starting in 2010, as production from its gas fields increases.

Clearly, Qatar presents immense opportunities for American businesses and investors. If confirmed as Ambassador, working closely with Commerce Department and State Department offices, I will advocate aggressively for U.S. bidders on major Qatari government tenders. I will work closely with the Embassy's Commercial Service office to advise U.S. companies on developing business opportunities in Qatar and I will lead trade missions to the United States. I will support the U.S. defense industry, as appropriate, in the context of advancing our nation's security objectives. Qatar's wealth also creates many opportunities for direct inward investment to the United States. If confirmed as Ambassador, I will have a special responsibility to ensure

that the United States is an attractive destination for Qatari investment, both private and official.

In addition to its importance in military, energy, and commercial affairs, Qatar can play a pivotal role in helping the United States tell its story to the Arab and Muslim world. Qatar is the home of the Al Jazeera satellite television network, which broadcasts around-the-clock in Arabic and English. If confirmed as Ambassador, I intend to work closely not only with the Qatari media, but also with Al Jazeera to strengthen understanding of the United States and our policies among the millions of Arabs in Al Jazeera's audience.

Transnational terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction remain at the forefront of U.S. concerns in the Middle East. Qatar's strategic location and its plans to become a major transit point for people and cargo in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa will further increase the need for the United States to strengthen U.S.-Qatar collaboration on counterterrorism and counterproliferation efforts, including law enforcement and judicial cooperation, information sharing, and training.

In the area of democratization and education, Qatar is using its wealth wisely by investing in important reforms. Qatar is completely overhauling its primary and secondary schools along a U.S. model of competitive charter schools. At the university level, Qatar has imported not just the American model, but the U.S. universities themselves. There are six well-known U.S. universities with branch campuses in Qatar: Georgetown, Carnegie-Mellon, Texas A&M, Virginia Commonwealth, Weill-Cornell Medical School, and Northwestern. Even more will come.

Qatar has been a friend of the United States. In 2006, Qatar provided \$100 million to help the victims of Hurricane Katrina. The aid included a \$17.5 million grant to Xavier University, the only historically black Catholic university in the United States.

In terms of Qatar's political development, there is also good news to report. Qatar has held successful elections three times for seats on the country's Central Municipal Council. There are plans to hold elections for a national parliament. The United States is assisting this important development. Through technical training under the Middle East Partnership Initiative, Qatar will be able to strengthen this elected legislative body. Transparency International favorably ranks Qatar in terms of perceived corruption, listing it as 32nd in a global ranking of 179 countries. That's the best ranking in the entire Arab Middle East and North Africa. The United States is 20th.

Amid all this growth and development and good news, there are challenges, of course. Freedom House continued to list Qatar as Not Free in its 2007 report, in terms of political rights and civil liberties. The latest State Department Human Rights Report also highlighted those issues, adding that legal and cultural discrimination against women limited their full participation in society. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of foreign workers in Qatar too often live in poor conditions, and have few avenues of redress in employment disputes, the Report noted. If confirmed, I will continue the deep engagement by the United States with the government of Qatar on developing and implementing solutions to these problems.

Qatar has a highly activist foreign policy, often on issues of direct concern to the U.S. Government, including Iran, Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Lebanon, and Sudan. This often requires intense diplomatic efforts by the U.S. government to ensure that Qatari and U.S. interests and approaches are compatible. That said, Qatar is unique among its neighbors in that Qatar maintains a public relationship with Israel; Israel maintains a trade office there, and Israeli FM Livni recently participated publicly in a conference in Doha. We welcome this important engagement. The United States has been urging Gulf states to take actions exactly such as these to improve Israeli-Arab ties and to further the peace process.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

It is an exciting time to be in Qatar. It is an important time. Qatar is opening up. It is on the move. If confirmed, I look forward to working closely with the Congress to strengthen the partnership, and to deepen the trust, between Qatar and the United States of America.

Thank you.

