

**Opening Statement for the Honorable Joel Rayburn  
Nominee for Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs  
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations  
May 15, 2025**

Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Shaheen, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the privilege of coming before you today as the President's nominee to serve as Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs at the U.S. Department of State.

It is a time of rapid change in the Middle East, presenting the United States with opportunities of historic proportion.

The first area of opportunity is Iran. Israel's military successes in 2024, coupled with the departure of the Assad regime, crippled Hizballah and brought the Iranian-sponsored Axis of Resistance to its weakest point in decades. We now have the opportunity to use our diplomacy to capitalize on these changes so as to neutralize the threat Tehran has posed to U.S. interests and allies since 1979, including by ensuring the Iranian regime can never develop or obtain a nuclear weapon. We also have the opportunity to ensure that the Iranian regime can no longer use Lebanon and Syria as platforms for destabilizing the region, thereby giving those beleaguered countries a chance for a more promising future.

Second, there is a concurrent opportunity to promote peace and prosperity in the region by building on the landmark Abraham Accords, both by deepening the existing agreements reached in 2020 and by helping to forge new accords with new peace partners as well. The Gulf region, where the United States is growing its strategic partnerships and becoming the partner of choice, will naturally be a major focus of this effort. As the President's trip shows, the United States will benefit enormously by increasing our competitiveness in that region and providing opportunities for U.S. companies to help drive regional integration. I support the Administration's commitment to strengthening the existing partnerships between Israel and the **UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco** while also promoting normalization

between Israel and **Saudi Arabia** and other Arab states. Not only are these peace and normalization initiatives imperative for regional security and economic integration, but they also create opportunities for U.S. businesses, thereby expanding our trade and helping to make our country more prosperous. The President's first international trip during this administration proves – it is time we expand our relationships in the Gulf from security to prosperity.

Third, the developments in Syria and the weakening of the Iranian regime's terrorist proxies regionwide are creating another specific opportunity across the northern Middle East: the potential to end the conflict between our NATO ally Turkey and the PKK, a conflict that has been a source of violence and instability for almost half a century. The parties to that conflict are signaling an openness to end it, and the United States has a strong interest in using our diplomatic influence and tools to help bring that about. Resolving the conflict would be game-changing for the people of Turkey, Iraq, and Syria.

Alongside these opportunities, there are some risks and dangers to our interests.

First, the conflict that began with Hamas's October 7, 2023, attacks on **Israel** must be brought to a conclusion in which the hostages are returned home, and Hamas no longer poses a significant military threat. The President has been clear: Hamas cannot continue as a military or government force. The President also envisages a better future for the Palestinian people. That is why the Administration has been working with Israel and many of our Arab allies to support these goals.

Another danger to address in the region is the threat of jihadist terrorist groups such as ISIS and Al Qaeda. We and our allies defeated the ISIS caliphate in Iraq and Syria, but we must remain vigilant to ensure its remnants cannot exploit regional political conflicts to try and make a comeback.

Finally, our relationships in the region must be a bulwark against efforts by China to extend its influence. This includes engaging partners in the public and private sectors on the dangers of employing Chinese origin technology and why joining our trusted technology ecosystem is beneficial. The United States has a strong interest in ensuring that our Gulf allies integrate into U.S.-led technology, economic, and security ecosystems and preventing permanent Chinese security presence in the region.

I know that Secretary Rubio is clear-eyed about the challenges of the region – conflict, terrorism, economic integration, and Iran’s continuing attempts to destabilize its neighbors – but I also know he recognizes the potential for breakthroughs that would have enormous benefit for America and for international security. If confirmed, I look forward to helping guide U.S. diplomacy to the accomplishment of our national goals, and also to working with you on these issues. Thank you for your time and I look forward to your questions.