

Statement by Jonathan R. Cohen
Nominee for U.S. Ambassador to the Arab Republic of Egypt
Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
June 20, 2019

Chairman, Ranking Member, Members of the Committee:

It is an honor to appear before you today as the President's nominee to be Ambassador to Egypt. I am grateful to President Trump and Secretary Pompeo for their continuing confidence in me. If confirmed, I look forward to working closely with you and your colleagues to advance U.S. interests in Egypt and the region.

Serving our nation as a Foreign Service Officer for the past 33 years has been and continues to be a great privilege. I want to thank my wonderful wife, Lidija, and our amazing daughters, Alexandra and Gabriella, for their love and support over the years. I also want to thank my Foreign Service mentors, Ambassadors, Deputy Chiefs of Mission, and Assistant Secretaries with whom I have served. In particular, I would like to thank Ambassador Ryan Crocker, who encouraged me to join the Foreign Service in the mid-1980s and with whom I had the honor of serving in Baghdad in 2003; my friend, Stuart Jones, who, as Ambassador to Iraq when I was his Deputy Chief of Mission from 2014 to 2016, set an example that I hope to emulate if confirmed; and Ambassador Jim Jeffrey, a national treasure, who has been a steady source of wisdom, strategic thinking, friendship, and support since we met over 25 years ago.

As I had the honor of telling the Committee the last time I appeared before you, I grew up in a California family that paid little attention to foreign affairs, and I began my journey to the Foreign Service in high school, through involvement in Model United Nations and as an AFS exchange student. My journey continued in college, studying international relations and near eastern affairs. Serving for the past six months as the Acting U.S. Representative to the United Nations has been a remarkable experience that exceeded what I dreamed possible in my Model UN days. However, I joined the Foreign Service with the intention of serving our nation in the Middle East, and I am particularly honored to have been nominated to be the next U.S. Ambassador to Egypt.

America's strategic relationship with Egypt is crucial to our national security interests. The United States is affected by Egypt's geostrategic influence on regional political, economic, and military affairs; its governance of the Suez Canal, through which nearly 10 percent of global maritime trade transits; and its demographic weight as the most populous Arab country, with almost a quarter of the world's Arab population. It hosts the headquarters of the Arab League and, in February, became the chair of the African Union for the year. Egypt continues to meet its obligations under the 1979 Egypt-Israel Treaty of Peace, which is a model for regional cooperation and stability. If confirmed, my primary concern will be to continue to shape our strategic relationship with Egypt in order to advance U.S. interests.

Egypt is a key partner in countering potential threats to the United States and our allies from ISIS and al-Qa'ida and faces serious terrorist threats in its mainland, in its western desert, along its lengthy borders with Libya and Sudan, and in its Sinai Peninsula. Terrorist groups frequently

attack Egyptian military and government targets in the Sinai and periodically attack civilian targets there and in mainland Egypt. The Sinai Peninsula is the home base of one of the most capable ISIS affiliates, and the Egyptian military campaign against ISIS-Sinai Province continues. In combatting terrorism and promoting regional stability, President al-Sisi frequently acknowledges the importance of the U.S. role. If confirmed, I will seek to ensure our counterterrorism partnership with Egypt continues to reduce threats to U.S. interests.

Egypt is the second-largest recipient of U.S. security assistance and one of the top-ten of U.S. economic assistance. The Departments of State and Defense ensure that U.S. security assistance is well targeted to achieve bilateral security objectives, including encouraging Egypt to use its defense budget to purchase more U.S.-produced military equipment, supplies, and services. As Secretary Pompeo said during his testimony to Congress in April, we have told Egypt that CAATSA requires sanctions on any person who knowingly engages in a significant transaction with Russia's defense or intelligence sectors. If confirmed, I will carry that message forward. The United States should have greater insight into the Sinai Peninsula to verify whether U.S.-provided weapons are being used appropriately. If confirmed, I will request additional travel for U.S. officials into the Sinai as security conditions permit. I also will urge Egypt to grant journalists more access to the Sinai.

Egypt publicly supports U.S. policy towards Syria; it has played a vital role negotiating repeated ceasefires in Gaza between Hamas and Israel. Egypt can be a strong force for good in the Middle East and Africa. We have encouraged Egypt to play a positive role in resolving the Gulf Rift with Qatar and to join us in developing the Middle East Strategic Alliance. If confirmed, I will press for greater Egyptian support of U.S. efforts to increase regional cooperation.

U.S. exports to Egypt have sustained, in recent years, an estimated 25 thousand U.S. jobs. President al-Sisi has taken bold action on difficult but essential economic reforms that should offer U.S. companies and investors greater opportunities in Egypt. If confirmed, I will encourage Egypt to continue implementing reforms that make doing business in Egypt easier, and I will encourage more U.S. companies to trade with and invest in Egypt as these changes create a more hospitable investment climate.

The defeat of terrorism requires a comprehensive approach that includes preventing others from falling victim to the false allure of violent extremism. In my work at the UN, I have seen Egypt lead efforts in this regard. I also have witnessed disagreements between the United States and Egypt on human rights issues and peacekeeping reform. Our relationship can be complicated even as we pursue many shared interests. However, our continuing work on counterterrorism and regional stability, despite our disagreements, demonstrates the strength of our enduring partnership. If confirmed, I will strive for achievement of U.S. priorities, as well as objectives the United States and Egypt share.

I know this Committee shares our concerns about Egypt's restrictions on the freedoms of expression, association, peaceful assembly, and the press; about protecting the rights of vulnerable populations, particularly religious minorities and women; about restrictions on civil society, including the NGO law; and about allegations of abuses by Egyptian security forces. I know that you are concerned about the reasons for and conditions of imprisonment of U.S.

citizens in Egypt. Let me assure you that I strongly share all these concerns. If confirmed, I will emphasize the vital role that protection for fundamental freedoms and rule of law play in the progress of democracies and the building of prosperous economies. I will point out that opportunities for nonviolent political dissent are necessary and can help prevent insecurity and political instability by allowing citizens to participate more in their civic affairs and have a stronger voice in their future. I will echo the call Secretary Pompeo made in Cairo for President al-Sisi to “unleash the creative energy of Egypt’s people, unfetter the economy, and promote a free and open exchange of ideas.” For that same reason, I also will commend President al-Sisi for his support of religious tolerance and the participation of women in politics.

Embassy Cairo is one of our largest embassies, and it offers consular services to more than 68,000 U.S. citizens in Egypt. The embassy staff, both American and Egyptian, is committed to furthering U.S. priorities and strengthening our partnership with Egypt in sometimes-difficult conditions. If confirmed, I look forward to joining in their efforts. My highest priority will always be the safety and security of all U.S. citizens in Egypt.

I want thank you again for the opportunity to testify before you today, and I look forward to taking your questions.