

Statement of Ambassador Barbara A. Leaf
Nominee for Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
September 15, 2021

Thank you, Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and distinguished members of this committee. It is an honor to be here as President Biden's nominee for Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. If confirmed, this would be the culmination of a lifetime of work on behalf of the United States in the Middle East and North Africa. I cannot express how much this opportunity to serve my country and the American people means to me.

My story is like that of many Americans called to public service, inspired by multiple generations of family members who served in one capacity or another. My family has had someone serving in the military, continuously, for the past 80 years. So much of my wider family were also called upon to support those who served, making their own sacrifices along the way. My ever-entrepreneurial mother managed to raise six children on a tobacco farm during years my father, an air force pilot, served in far-off places. On an early assignment in the Foreign Service, I met up with my oldest brother, a deployed Marine officer, in the streets of newly-liberated Kuwait. My little brother deployed repeatedly during America's two longest wars, to Iraq and Afghanistan, with great costs borne by his young family. My younger sister is a Foreign Service officer, now serving in southern Africa, far from family and friends. My husband had a distinguished career in the Marine Corps, taking him to Jerusalem, where we met early in my career. He, like our two daughters, provided the unstinting loving support that helped me shoulder what was asked of me, even when that meant being apart for a year while I served in Iraq.

Service is a theme in my family, and it has more relevance today for Americans than ever before, given the multiplying challenges abroad and at home that require re-investment in ourselves, re-commitment to partnerships, and U.S. leadership globally.

In the Middle East, President Biden's strategic vision provides a roadmap and a set of principles for our engagement, based on re-building long-term relationships in the region to meet the manifold, emerging new challenges. But the President's vision demands the evolution of our partnerships beyond the conventional security realm that has defined our approach to the region for well over 30 years. If

confirmed, I would work to reinforce those partnerships around an affirmative agenda focused on building shared prosperity and confronting shared problems: fighting COVID-19 and developing an international health infrastructure to prevent future pandemics; building a new energy economy around renewables to arrest the drivers of climate change; addressing desertification and growing water shortages; combatting transnational repression, while promoting respect for fundamental freedoms and open societies; and sustaining the core institutions of the international order that have provided security and stability for over 70 years.

If confirmed, I pledge to represent the best of American values, and will make it clear that relationships with the United States are stronger when human rights principles are respected.

The region has been convulsed by conflict and instability for the past two decades, but many of our partners have turned in recent months towards de-escalation and to working with the United States to quell the region's conflicts. Iran, of course, has been the outlier to this trend. Tehran continues to pursue destabilizing policies, including through its support for terrorism, its ballistic missile program, its subversive support for violent groups, and its abhorrent human rights record and longstanding practice of using wrongfully detained U.S. citizens as political tools. An Iran with a nuclear weapon would pose an even greater threat.

As part of the Administration's renewed multilateral engagement, if confirmed I will work in tandem with partners and allies to advance UN peace processes in Libya, Syria, and Yemen.

The President's vision for a collaborative partnership with the countries of the Middle East comes in the wider context of a growing global challenge to our values of open societies and open economies, values that have underpinned the institutions of the international order. This challenge comes primarily from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia; both pursue influence in the region in a zero-sum fashion. If confirmed, I expect to have frank conversations with our partners about the challenges posed by certain Russian and PRC actions.

If confirmed, I will not be able to accomplish this ambitious agenda without the outstanding Foreign Service Officers, Civil Servants, Contractors, and family members employed here and in the region. I am committed to promoting the safety and security of our people overseas, the professional development of our employees, and the principles of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Bureau and our posts around the region.

If confirmed, I look forward to working closely with you as we reshape, rebuild, and reenergize the U.S. government's engagement with the Middle East, building a better future for the American people and the people of the region. Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.