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An American Ambassador's Farewell to Saudi Arabia

By Dr. John Duke Anthony

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SUSRIS Editor's Note:

National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations President and CEO Dr. John Duke Anthony has just returned from Saudi Arabia. Two days ago he attended U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Ford Fraker's "Farewell Address" to the American Business Group of Riyadh. In keeping with longstanding American diplomatic tradition and custom, the ambassador announced at the meeting that he will relinquish his post on January 20, 2009.

SUSRIS is pleased to publish Dr. Anthony's report on Ambassador Fraker's remarks that highlighted some of the more memorable successes accomplished during his tour of duty in the kingdom. He writes that among those attending the ceremony were many who agreed that each of the successes the ambassador cited has helped to strengthen and expand the special bilateral relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States.

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Looking back on his tenure as American Ambassador in Riyadh, Ambassador Ford Fraker called attention to the following accomplishments:

Since the second official visit of President Bush to Riyadh in May 2008, six ground-breaking bilateral agreements have been signed and entered into between Saudi Arabia and the United States. These are an agreement whereby American and Saudi Arabian students, business representatives, and tourists can obtain five-year multiple re-entry visas; the Joint Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism Agreement; the Anti-Proliferation Initiative in which the two sides pledged to work to strengthen the existing Non-Proliferation Treaty; an Agreement for Joint Critical Infrastructure Cooperation; a Technical Cooperation Agreement for the Civil Uses of Nuclear Energy; and a Science and Technology Agreement between the United States Department of State and the King Abdalaziz Center for Science and Technology.

In addition, the United States has purchased land in Jeddah upon which to build a new American consulate; signed a new ten-year lease on the U.S. Consulate premises in Dhahran, where a new consulate is to be built; and agreed to construct a new American Embassy in Riyadh. Each of these substantial commitments for the future, the Ambassador noted, illustrates the long-term U.S. commitment to maintaining the strongest possible relationship between the two countries' governments and peoples.

In early 2008, the Embassy hosted U.S. Department of Homeland Security Director Michael Chertoff. This was the first-ever visit to Riyadh by a senior DHS official. During his stay in the country, Mr. Chertoff met with King Abdallah, Minister of Interior Nayef bin Abdalaziz, and Deputy Minister of Interior Muhammad bin Nayef, among others. The visit was a direct result of an earlier one by President Bush who was apprised of the necessity to reform and streamline the American visa process for Saudi Arabians traveling to the United States.

The Embassy succeeded in securing Saudi Arabian government approval to what has become known informally as a "pre-nuptial agreement." Entered into prior to marriage primarily by foreign brides and Saudi Arabian grooms, the agreement stipulates that, in the event of divorce, each of the parties shall be free to travel alone within the kingdom and abroad and accompanied by their children with or without the other party. The agreement enables couples to avoid a phenomenon associated with earlier divorce cases where American and other foreign women married to Saudi Arabians often encountered restrictions upon seeking to depart the country with their children unaccompanied by their husband or an appointed family male guardian. The right to

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enter into these new agreements is available to all couples prior to their marrying and regardless of the nationality of either party. Indicative of their popularity is a recent report that more than 10,000 Saudi Arabian couples have entered into such written and legally valid agreements prior to exchanging their marriage vows.

An additional breakthrough has been U.S. approval, after a lapse of quite some time, for dependents to accompany their American principals officially posted to the kingdom for the duration of their normal two-year assignments.

Ambassador Fraker opined that the measure of success of an organization's endeavors can be made in terms of the extent to which its accomplishments made a defining difference. In characteristic understatement and self-effacement, he was quick to add that the achievements cited were not a consequence of his efforts alone. Rather, in every instance they were also the result of efforts by the Embassy's management and staff in close association with the efforts of their Saudi Arabian counterparts. Not surprisingly, upon the conclusion of his remarks the ambassador received a standing ovation from the many Americans and Saudi Arabians in attendance.