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NUSACC HOSTS NEW U.S. AMBASSADORS TO KUWAIT AND OMAN

Hon. Alina Romanowski and Hon. Leslie Tsou See Opportunities with Two of America's Most Steadfast Allies, Kuwait and Oman

On February 24, 2020, the National U.S. - Arab Chamber of Commerce (NUSACC) hosted America's two new Ambassadors to Kuwait and Oman, Hon. Alina L. Romanowski and Hon. Leslie M. Tsou, at NUSACC's headquarters. Both Ambassadors were appointed earlier this year, and their "off the record" remarks at NUSACC were among the first that they have delivered to U.S. audiences in their new capacities as America's top diplomats in Kuwait and Oman, respectively.

The NUSACC Roundtable helped to kick off Chiefs of Mission (COM) Week, when U.S. Ambassadors meet at the U.S. Department of State to discuss America's policies and strategies worldwide. Half a dozen current or former ambassadors participated in the Roundtable, which attracted senior representatives from 25 U.S. companies. Citi served as Lead Sponsor for the event, which was also sponsored by Schlumberger.

"Kuwait and Oman are two of America's best allies in the world, and these nations are increasingly important markets for U.S. companies," said David Hamod, NUSACC's President & CEO. "Both countries have historically eschewed bravado, preferring instead to work quietly and effectively behind the scenes. As a result, each has made outsized contributions to diplomacy and stability in the region."



Foreground: Hon. Alina L. Romanowski (left), U.S. Ambassador to Kuwait; Hon. Leslie M. Tsou (right), U.S. Ambassador to Oman.

Background (from left to right): Mr. David Hamod, NUSACC President & CEO; Mr. Charles Johnston, Managing Director, Global Government Affairs at Citi (Lead Sponsor); Mr. Nawaf Al-Enezi, Deputy Chief of Mission at the Kuwait Embassy; Hon. Dwight Bush, NUSACC Board Member and former U.S. Ambassador to Morocco; H.E. Hunaina Al Mughairy, Ambassador of Oman to the United States; Mr. Ibrahim Alriyami, Minister Counselor at the Oman Embassy; Mr. Francisco Sanchez, Chairman & CEO of CNS Global Advisors and former Under Secretary of Commerce; Ms. Amanda Horan, Vice President and Head of Government Relations at Metlife.



The two ambassadors have just arrived in the region, but each has a wealth of experience serving in the U.S. Government. (The bios for both ambassadors may be accessed [here](#).)

Kuwait: A Deep, Longstanding Partnership



Hon. Alina L. Romanowski, U.S.
Ambassador to the State of Kuwait

Ambassador Romanowski highlighted the depth and breadth of America's relationship with the State of Kuwait, reminding everyone that the United States shares a long history of friendship and cooperation with Kuwait, rooted in shared values, democratic traditions, and institutions.

Kuwait is one of America's most trusted trading partners. On the commercial front, bilateral trade of goods and services totaled almost \$5 billion last year. The United States exported over \$3 billion worth of goods to Kuwait, and the USA imported about \$1.5 billion from Kuwait, mainly in petroleum products.

This is a reflection of Kuwaitis' preferences for high quality U.S. goods and services, which enables U.S. companies to be competitive in the Kuwait market.

U.S. goods exports to Kuwait rose more than six percent from end-2018 to end-2019, from \$2.98 billion to \$3.17 billion, highlighting that nation's steady business ties with the United States. (A one-page overview of U.S. goods exports to Kuwait in 2019 may be found [here](#).) Kuwait played a role in increasing U.S. exports to the MENA region in 2019, resulting in overall growth of four percent to Arab world countries in 2019. (NUSACC's report on U.S. exports to the MENA region's 22 nations in 2019 may be found [here](#).)

Trade and investment are key tenets of the **U.S. - Kuwait Strategic Dialogue**, which is planned to take place later this year. During the 2019 Dialogue, the Joint Statement called for "managing risks associated with travel and the trade in goods, preserving the integrity of financial transactions, and raising the level of cybersecurity." In that same spirit, both countries pledged to seek ways to continue reducing barriers to trade and investment.

Education and people-to-people programs are also important components of the U.S. - Kuwait Strategic Dialogue. Five generations of Kuwaitis have studied in the United States, and education remains a solid building block of the U.S. - Kuwait partnership. Education is gained inside and outside the classroom, including efforts to prepare young Kuwaitis for the workforce.

With this in mind, NUSACC, the Embassy of Kuwait, and the Kuwaiti Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences (KFAS) launched a highly successful pilot program several years ago that allowed select Kuwaiti graduates of U.S. universities to gain real-world experience with American companies. Some of those companies attended the NUSACC Roundtable, such as Boeing, Citi, MetLife, and Schlumberger.

The **Professional Development Initiative** (PDI) has created a network of more than 40 Kuwaiti “graduates” of this program, many of whom have entered the next stage in their professional careers in Kuwait and elsewhere. With a job placement rate of 90 percent, the PDI pilot program will now transition to a new initiative overseen by the Government of Kuwait.

Oman: A Country in Transition

The Honorable Leslie Tsou, U.S. Ambassador to Oman, arrived in the Sultanate just hours before the passing of H.M. Sultan Qaboos Bin Said Al Said, who had ruled that nation with wisdom and vision for five decades. Since early January 2020, Oman has undergone an orderly and seamless transition to the new Sultan, H.M. Haitham Bin Tariq Al Said.



Oman's new Sultan, H.M. Haitham bin Tariq (left), met with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Muscat on February 21, 2020.

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Sultan Haitham met on February 21 with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Pompeo expressed deep condolences on the passing of Sultan Qaboos, praising the late leader for being a great friend and partner to the United States. Following the discussion between Pompeo and Sultan Haitham, the U.S. Secretary of State conveyed an invitation from President Donald Trump to H.M. the Sultan to visit the White House, an invitation that was accepted.



Hon. Leslie M. Tsou, U.S. Ambassador to the Sultanate of Oman.

When Pompeo and Sultan Haitham met, according to reports, the two of them talked about the country's priorities, with a special focus on Oman's economic and budgetary issues. The Sultanate remains very dependent on oil and gas, which creates some hardships when energy prices drop, but Oman is taking important steps to diversify its economy through exports and imports.

U.S. goods exports to Oman surged 22 percent from end-2017 to end-2018, from \$1.99 billion to \$2.42 billion, probably on the strength of Boeing aircraft sales to Oman Air. In 2019, U.S. exports slipped a bit, to \$1.94 billion, making Oman the seventh largest importer of U.S. goods in the MENA region. Oman's strong position is a reflection of that nation's ties to the United States through the Oman – U.S. Free Trade Agreement, which entered into force more than a decade ago. (A one-page overview of U.S. goods exports to Oman in 2019 may be found [here](#).)

According to a new report issued by the *Oxford Business Group* on February 11, Oman is positioned for substantial economic expansion. “Given its natural assets, strategic location, and appealing geography,” the report stated, Oman has the potential to grow significantly in coming years. The Government of Oman “has had to contend with a series of budget deficits and rising debt” since 2014, when oil prices dipped globally, but “debt levels remain manageable, and the Government has implemented a series of fiscal reforms to get the budget back on a sustainable path,” noted the *OBG* report.



From left to right: Mr. Charles Johnston, Managing Director, Global Government Affairs at Citi (Lead Sponsor); Ms. Nancy Ziuzin Schlegel, NUSACC Board Member and Vice President of International Government Affairs at Lockheed Martin; Hon. Stuart Jones, President for Regions and Corporate Relations at Bechtel and former U.S. Ambassador to Jordan; Mr. Mike Schnabel, Director, Middle East and Africa at Boeing.

To strengthen this recovery, the Government of Oman recently adopted a “package” of five groundbreaking laws designed to promote joint ventures and to make Oman more business-friendly. These laws were highlighted by H.E. Ali Al-Sunaidy, Oman’s Minister of Commerce & Industry, when he addressed a [NUSACC Roundtable](#) in New York some months ago.

The five new laws include:

- The *Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Law*, which encourages the private sector to invest in infrastructure projects and public services.
- The *Foreign Capital Investment Law*, which facilitates investment in Oman by minimizing red tape and removing potential obstacles, including former requirements that overseas investors needed to have Omani partners.
- The *Privatization Law*, which encourages portions of the Omani economy to move from state enterprises to private enterprises, thereby building capacity and attracting expertise, technology, and investment.
- The *Bankruptcy Law*, which will create a legislative and legal framework that enables businesspeople to overcome debt and to revive distressed companies.
- The *Commercial Companies Law*, which focuses on building an even more robust capital market by overhauling the earlier code, which had been in place since 1974.

Another significant development in Oman has been the establishment of a new *Public Authority for Privatization and Partnership (PAPP)*, which will serve as the implementing body for the new PPP law and Privatization law. PAPP covers privatization, partnership projects, transfer projects for companies, development of a strategic framework, and preparation of plans and procedures needed to implement key projects.

As in Kuwait, capacity-building for youth is important in Oman. This is reflected in many ways, including development of *Oman’s National Training Fund (NTF)*, the Sultanate’s signature program for enhancing Oman’s workforce. Established three years ago, the NTF has been tasked to bridge the gap between labor supply and market demand. This includes Omanization, which helps to provide young Omanis with skillsets that are tailored to the needs of the national and international economies.



Executives from more than 25 NUSACC stakeholder companies attended the Roundtable, which was sponsored by Citi (Lead Sponsor) and Schlumberger.

Oman is also promoting entrepreneurship among the country's young men and women. One well-known hackathon, supported by NUSACC, is [SAS 48](#), a 48-hour competition to develop Web or mobile apps using emerging technologies. Organized by the Ministry of Technology and Communications (MTC) in partnership with Omantel, the most recent competition (November 2019) attracted 104 aspiring app developers from across the Sultanate. The goal of SAS 48 is to enhance Oman's culture of entrepreneurship and to encourage creative thinking in information and communication technologies (ICT).

Kuwait and Oman: Looking to the Future

Kuwait and Oman have both launched ambitious development plans that are designed to shape those nations' policies over the next 20 years and beyond.

Kuwait's Vision 2035 National Development Plan, aka "New Kuwait," establishes that nation's long-term development priorities. It is organized around five themes, or desired outcomes, and seven pillars, which are priority areas for investment and improvement. The seven pillars include: Public Administration, Economy, Infrastructure, Living Environment, Healthcare, Human Capital, and Global Position. Each pillar has a number of strategic programs and projects that are designed to have the most impact on achieving the vision of a New Kuwait.

H.H. the Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, has stated that *Vision 2035* will "transform Kuwait into a financial and trade hub, attractive to investors, where the private sector leads the economy, creating competition and promoting production efficiency, under the umbrella of enabling government institutions, which accentuates values, safeguards social identify, and achieves human resource development as well as balanced development, providing adequate infrastructure, advanced legislation and an inspiring business environment."

The centerpiece of *Vision 2035* is Kuwait's *Madinat al-Hareer* (Silk City) project in northern Kuwait, near the border with Iraq. Overseen by the Kuwait Direct Investment Promotion Authority (KDIPA), Silk City is integral to Kuwait's efforts to transform itself into a financial and trade hub for the region. It is also a priority project of China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative, and the first phase will establish Silk City as a multimodal rail and air hub. The project is expected to take 25 years to complete at a cost of \$132 billion.



Oman Vision 2040 is serving as a driver of Omani society by: aligning fiscal and monetary policies, as well as policies for trade, investment, industry, and labor markets; ensuring that economic plans will lead to a knowledge-based economy (rather than the traditional hydrocarbons-based economy); diversifying knowledge and innovation, with a special focus on technology; improving and expanding employment opportunities for Omani youth. Enhanced partnerships between Oman’s public and private sectors is also an essential piece of *Oman Vision 2040*.

Tanfeedh, working in tandem with *Oman Vision 2040*, is a government initiative designed to align the Sultanate’s strategic sectors: Manufacturing, tourism, transport & logistics, mining, and fisheries. A centerpiece of this initiative and *Oman Vision 2040* is the **Special Economic Zone Authority of Duqm (SEZAD)**, Oman’s largest and most important development project. The 770-square-mile Special Economic Zone is an integrated economic development composed of the following zones: A seaport, an industrial area, an urban area, a fishing harbor, a tourist zone, a logistics center, and an education & training zone.

The entire complex is supported by a multimodal transport system that connects Duqm to Asia, Africa, the Arabian Gulf nations, and the Middle East. Covering nearly 50 miles of coastline along the Arabian Sea, this Special Economic Zone is the biggest in the region and one of the largest in the world.

Later this year, NUSACC will organize a USA road show for a high-level delegation from Duqm. To participate, interested companies should send an e-mail to info@nusacc.org.



Half a dozen current or former ambassadors participated in the Roundtable, held at NUSACC’s headquarters.

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The National U.S.-Arab Chamber of Commerce, widely regarded as the voice of American business in the Arab world, is in touch with business communities across the United States and serves as the U.S. point of contact for the national chambers of commerce in the 22 Arab nations. On a daily basis, NUSACC works closely with leaders throughout the Arab world, as well as high-level decision makers in the U.S. business community, public policy research centers, multilateral institutions, nongovernmental organizations, media, and the U.S. Government.