

Statement by Ambassador of the United States

to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia James B. Smith

Thanking Saudi Arabia for welcoming Muslim Americans performing Hajj

On behalf of the U.S. Mission to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and American Muslims visiting the Kingdom to perform the Hajj this year, I express our deep gratitude to the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, HRH Crown Prince Naif bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the Minister of Hajj Dr. Fuad bin Abdulsalam Al-Farsi and the Minister of Islamic Affairs, Endowments, Call and Guidance Mr. Saleh Abdulaziz Asheikh for welcoming the thousands of American Muslims participating in this year's pilgrimage. Additionally, I extend my thanks to the people of Saudi Arabia for their hospitality and generosity towards American Muslims. Their generous contributions of water, food and health services to visiting pilgrims speak volumes about Saudi hospitality both at home and abroad.

The Saudi government generously supports pilgrims performing the Hajj by providing health care, transportation, security, and other services free of charge. The Hajj is the largest annual gathering of people in the world, and we deeply appreciate the great efforts and meticulous planning of the Saudi government to ensure that it is a safe and comfortable experience for all participants.

For decades, Muslim Americans have travelled to the Kingdom to perform both Umra and Hajj, and their numbers are increasing every year. I am proud that the United States, with its guarantees of religious freedom, is home to millions of Muslims from all backgrounds. Muslim Americans live, study and work alongside their fellow countrymen with the same freedoms and opportunities granted to every other community.

As one of the five basic pillars of Islam, the pilgrimage to Mecca is incumbent on every able-bodied Muslim at least once in their lifetime, circumstances permitting, and Muslim Americans are grateful to Saudi Arabia for graciously welcoming them to observe this important part of their faith. In 2008, Keith Ellison, a Muslim member of Congress, performed the Hajj and commented, "It was an amazingly transformative experience; I'll never forget it." Congressman Ellison is but one example of the important role Muslim Americans play in the United States. As President Obama emphasized in his third Iftar dinner at the White House recently, "Islam, like so many faiths, has always been part of our American family, and Muslim Americans have long contributed to the strength and character of our country, in all walks of life."

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