

Press Releases: Background Briefing Update on Secretary Tillerson's Trip to Amman, Jordan; Ankara, Turkey; Beirut, Lebanon; Cairo, Egypt; and Kuwait City, Kuwait

Special Briefing
Senior State Department Official
Kuwait City, Kuwait
February 12, 2018

MODERATOR: We're recording this for our purposes and we will make a transcript like we did the last time. All right.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I think it'll be easier – you all saw the statement that was made after the meeting. Why don't you ask me?

QUESTION: Which? The – Sisi's new –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: After – correct. After the Egypt meetings.

QUESTION: Well, if people want to ask about Egypt – I want to look forward to tomorrow and short – I want to ask –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Can we do Egypt first?

QUESTION: Yeah, that's what I was saying.

QUESTION: Yeah, certainly.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: That's fine.

QUESTION: I just – I'm Felicia Schwartz with *The Wall Street Journal*. Nice to see you. I thought when we asked the Secretary about the election his answer – he wasn't exactly – since we're on background, I was wondering if you might be a little more specific about whether –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Sure.

QUESTION: – Tillerson did, in fact, raise the kind of situation that's going on there.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Look, when we made the comment in the statement that was released – we have a strong relationship; it's deep; we talk about a lot of things, including things where we have concern and how we can have those concerns addressed. That was the line used in that.

QUESTION: Yeah.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: But yes, every one of the issues, which I think you all know quite well, were raised, discussed by the Secretary, in the course of his meetings. There was none that was –

QUESTION: What was the tone?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: – omitted from that. I found the meeting to be substantive. It was not a dialogue where you ask and I have a talking point prepared which I will cut across your query with. It was a very engaged discussion. It was one of the best, frankly, in many years of watching Sisi that I have ever seen.

This does not mean there is a resolution to all of these issues. What it means is they were raised and they were discussed in more than a pro forma fashion on both sides, and that was positive.

QUESTION: Can you tell us – I'm Carol Morello with *The Washington Post*.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Hi, Carol.

QUESTION: Hi. Can you tell us if you have any reason to believe or hope that things may change sometime in the near future as a result of these entreaties by you at State?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Well, Carol, we have several issues which have long been pending in the relationship, questions relating to specific cases, the NGO law, the NGO cases that go back to 2012 in their origin. We have concerns over other issues – North Korea and the relationship there – concerns that we address, frankly, just about everywhere we go but are particularly of concern in Egypt – and broadly speaking, the civil society/democratic process baskets, or single basket of issues; the importance for any state that seeks to be stable, seeks to be secure in the real sense of the word, to have elections and a political process in general that is seen as inclusive not exclusive, as open and as free as possible. That's the idea.

Do we expect resolutions on all these? Frankly, I think there are some issues on which we had a very good engagement where I think some progress may well be made, but I don't – even on background – want to tell you anything is assured. But this was not, as I have often heard in the past, a meeting whose exchange of points could be written without the need for the two interlocutors to actually be in the room together talking. This was different.

QUESTION: What about the Americans who have been arrested? Do you have any number?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: The –

QUESTION: And did you discuss those?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: They were indeed discussed and we made our concerns quite clear on issues relating from access to condition to the broader question of the judicial process transparency or lack thereof. No hesitancy at all in speaking to those on the Egyptian side. He is well aware of our concerns on those cases.

QUESTION: How many are there?

QUESTION: Francesco Fontemaggi – I'm sorry.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I think – I think we have two right now.

QUESTION: Francesco Fontemaggi for AFP. I think the Secretary didn't answer during the presser about – he raised the possibility of withholding more assistance if things are not going in the right directions.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: The issue of withholding more – to quote you back – of withholding more assistance if things don't go right was not raised. What both sides understand – ours and theirs – is that there are certain areas of progress we want to see that would enable our relationship, both with respect to the FMF program but more broadly the overall relationship, to go on a more positive, more normal course, which is what the Egyptians wants, it's what we want, what the Secretary wants as well. But there are certain things that will need to be done.

But no, the way you phrased your question to me, no, that was not –

QUESTION: Not?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: – not posed.

QUESTION: Explicitly or – yeah.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: No, no. No, no, it was not.

QUESTION: Yara Bayomi from Reuters. Could I just ask what was the reaction of the Egyptians when you were raising these issues? Was it kind of the lecturing that we sort of heard in response to –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: No.

QUESTION: – Carol's question today, or was it bridling, or –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: No, there was none of that. It –

QUESTION: I mean, how did they –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: When I told you I thought the tone of the meeting was substantive and engaged on both sides, I meant that quite literally. No, it was not. And I've been in many other meetings where the

tone was quite different – very different.

QUESTION: So I guess just in a way, do you go away, then, from this meeting, given the tone that you said that it was, thinking that there may be some moves that we might see from the Egyptian side even if you're not willing to elaborate?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: It was a positive, substantive engagement on both sides; and from that we have to hope that similarly there will be positive, substantive movement.

QUESTION: Can I ask about ahead? Are we –

QUESTION: Yeah.

QUESTION: Next steps. The situation even since – even since Friday with the D-ISIS Coalition and the whole situation there has become intensely – or more fraught than it was and more complicated than –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I view fraughtness as a cyclical and relative concept. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: It has. But it's still – but it's still fraught. Not necessarily amongst members of the coalition except for Turkey, but the side – they're not side players – people outside of the coalition – the Russians, the Iranians, the Syrians themselves, and now the Israelis. And I'm just wondering how you see that as a factor in the meeting tomorrow as the Secretary tries to kind of refocus and make sure everyone is on the same page so that the gains you've made don't –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Sure. Well, there are several different issues all being folded in here, so let's talk to the one you opened with, the D-ISIS Coalition, which really means the D-ISIS fight and how's it going.

We've made very clear and we will continue to make very clear, including at the venue tomorrow, that the eyes have to be on the prize – the prize is the enduring defeat of ISIS; that things that happen, things that don't happen, that derogate from, detract from the ability to get that goal achieved as rapidly as possible really hit at the key artery of doing anything else – stabilization, meaningful political process, political transition underway, the ultimate goal of how do you get at the big strategic target of constraining, containing, addressing more affirmatively, Iran's behaviors, the threat they pose in, through Syria. All those things. You've got to have the ISIS fight pursued.

Now, in the category of things that derogate from, detract from, the ability to do that fight, clearly, what has been happening in Afrin is of great concern – no surprise to any of you. We've registered that concern. It is a major focus not just of the U.S. but of all of our partners in how do we move to a situation where once again focus can be on closing up that fight in the Middle Euphrates Valley (a); (b) avoiding steps that create new IDP flows, new violence, new potential for problems erupting in a different area, the northwest, completely. And there's an interrelationship; there's an interlock

here. If the SDF, YPG feel threatened, they're going to draw elements away from that fight to the places where they feel their interests are at stake. And that's not theoretical; that's an actual event.

We are very sympathetic, and the Secretary, as other senior U.S. interlocutors have made clear, both civilian and military, the Secretary is very sympathetic to Turkish security concerns. These are not new. These are things we have discussed with the Turks, have sought to discuss with the Turks in great detail. But we do need to keep the objective of the enduring defeat of ISIS out there as a goal which is not made more difficult and other problems created beyond making the D-ISIS fight more difficult. We need to keep that to a minimum.

And this is a tough target. I think you all understand where the Turkish focus is. It's on PKK/YPG and the threat that they see there. We believe there's a way to work through, walk through, these problems, and that's why the Secretary is going to Ankara, to have those discussions; why a succession of senior U.S. officials have reached out, have engaged the Turks on the threat that they see, measures that might be taken to address that threat. We want to engage with them, but we want to do it in a way that is coincident with, not contrary to, the other objective of bringing to an end the Daesh problem. To repeat what I said at the beginning of my answer to your question, why? It's not just the defeat of Daesh, it's the ability to move on to other critical goals in Syria and through Syria that affect Jordan, affect Israel, affect Lebanon, affect Iraq of course. All of that's out there. Let's not – it's complicated enough as it is. Let's not make it more so.

QUESTION: But does that apply to people – to countries other than Turkey?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: In what sense, Matt?

QUESTION: That are not in the coalition. Well, I mean complicating factors, like everyone says they have the same – their eyes are on the prize, and yet there are these distractions that keep getting in the way, and now – and then now you have this potential Iran-Israel –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Okay, let's just – just a moment on that. I would not put that in the category of a distraction at all. I would put that in the category of a regrettable but absolutely, sadly, predictable symptom of the behaviors of Iran, ever more aggressive, ever more continued, in and through Syria. This is not – the character of this particular encounter was different and more dramatic – first aircraft shot down, by report, since 1982; yes, that attracts headline attention. But the action, a threat, an Israeli response to a threat in, over Syrian territory, that's not new. We wish it were old news. We wish the nature of the threat and the challenge by Iran would cease, but it hasn't.

It continues to go on. Now, does that particular event affect the D-ISIS fight? Frankly, it doesn't. That's in a whole 'nother world completely. However, until the ISIS fight can be continued, the ability to cogently and comprehensively deal with the challenge Iran poses is of necessity something that cannot be addressed as well as we would like, as well as others would

like. And we've made that clear. There's a tiering here of threats and priorities. We are concerned, as Israel's concerned, about these behaviors, and we would hope they would stop, but they continue. So I wouldn't put it as distraction; I would put it as a symptom of a problem which we all see out there.

QUESTION: Has Israel been telegraphing to the U.S. or the Europeans in recent weeks that some kind of clash was –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: No.

QUESTION: There's some reporting in the Israeli press –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: No, if you – if you sort of dissect, I think I know what you're getting at. The reportage in the Israeli press, which included I believe, Eizenkot's Arabic language message and some other statements that were made – Lieberman had a few statements along the line – they weren't about this. They were about – well, they were and they weren't. They weren't about this specific event at all, zero.

QUESTION: (Off-mike)

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: No, no association. This was a specific response to a particular minute-by-minute thing – the drone, what happened after the drone was detected, et cetera. But broadly speaking, what Israel is signaling, in different ways in terms of messaging, is that there's a real security threat here. There's a concern, and we certainly understand it. Prime Minister Netanyahu's been to Moscow; the Russians certainly understand the character of that threat. The party that doesn't seem to appreciate the consequences are the Iranians, and Hizballah, with Iran, and that worries us. It worries us because at the end of the day, further conflict in Syria is not a good thing for that country.

It does not accelerate the process of stabilization, political transition, tough enough in a completely peaceful, permissive environment, much less in this environment. But let's turn to the real innocents here, the people of Lebanon, who have too often in the past paid a price for Iranians/Hizballah adventurism, what the Lebanese like to call "war for others," *guerre pour les autres*. But we don't want to see Lebanon suffer – we don't want to see Syria suffer in all of this. There's a way to avoid it, but it is not by the continued aggressive proliferation of weapons, of technology, of facilities into and through Syria to Lebanon. That is going to lead to a very different outcome.

QUESTION: And what do you make of outcry from I guess the left and the right that Tillerson should be going to Israel?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I'm not quite sure, here in the remove of hotels and aircraft, the outcry has quite reached my ear. I was actually in –

QUESTION: Get on Twitter.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I was actually in Lebanon and Israel.

QUESTION: I have many emails from editors around the globe at the *Journal* wanting to know. (Laughter.)

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yes. I was actually there through most of this and I didn't hear all that much of the outcry.

Yeah, look, the Secretary is very much following these events, as is the White House. We are in touch with the Israelis on this. We have, in our own voice, put out a message which is reflective from State, from the White House, that's very clear: support for Israel's right to defend itself is a fundamental, fundamental pillar of U.S. policy. And what's happened here is another consequence of a regionwide pattern of Iranian adventurism – I think we used that word – of adventurism, of expansion, of proliferation, from Yemen to Lebanon. And this needs to stop. It is putting the peoples – plural – of the region, all the region, at risk for Iran. That's not something that should be tolerated over time.

QUESTION: About the Turkish operation, you were saying you think there is a way to go through this.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: We want –

QUESTION: What do you expect from Friday now?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I would simply say we want to continue the process of engaging the Turks to find a way to address their concerns in a manner which does not precipitate further violence, further instability, and make more difficult the campaign against Daesh. And I leave it at that. That has been a consistent quest of U.S. Government officials at the highest levels.

QUESTION: It doesn't suggest a real hope and a real breakthrough this week –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I wouldn't –

QUESTION: – in Ankara because –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I wouldn't –

QUESTION: – they want to continue to engage –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I wouldn't – I would not take away any such conclusion. It is a sign of the continued most senior level of the U.S. Government, civilian and military, desire to engage our NATO ally, Turkey, in a discussion of the challenges it faces as we discuss with them the challenges we face.

QUESTION: Surely you saw that Mr. Cavusoglu said – I think it was today; I'm losing a little track of days – but I think he said today that the relationship between the U.S. and Turkey is at a breaking point.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I would –

QUESTION: It sounds like you do not share that assessment?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Carol, I would –

QUESTION: He said Tillerson's trip was a make-or-break trip.

QUESTION: Make-or-break trip. Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: (A), I never comment on foreign government officials' statements, (a). (B), The fact the Secretary is traveling is an indication that we regard – the U.S. Government regards – this as still a relationship which allows us to talk quite openly, quite freely, with each other. And I won't go beyond –

QUESTION: But the converse is not true on Israel? Because the Secretary isn't going to Israel, that means that – that clearly means –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: *J'accuse*. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: That clearly means the relationship is falling apart.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: *Monsieur le secretaire*. (Laughter.) That's fine. You go with that. (Laughter.) I'd run with that all the way to the bank.

QUESTION: I guess maybe on the flip side just to understand a little better, are you hearing from the Turks going into this meeting or McMaster's meetings maybe indications of what – what you want to hear from them to make these conversations go more smoothly?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: The fact that the Secretary is traveling is an indication that we believe discussions are worthwhile and we'll continue to pursue them.

QUESTION: Very briefly on Jordan? You were in Jordan as well, apparently.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I believe so.

QUESTION: All right. Do they have reason – will they have reason to be pleased on Wednesday with this?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: We strongly support Jordan. Jordan is a critical partner and ally for us, and we try to reflect that in the nature of our relationship.

QUESTION: Okay. And the same with Lebanon, at least for the LAF and the –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I think, look, we strongly support the LAF and we support the LAF for its own reasons. It is a credible entity. We have quite a lot of time and effort, as have others, but we have been in the lead in building up the capacity of the LAF. The LAF has moved in much greater strength to the south than ever has been the case before. They have a program for a model regiment to be set up that is a best practices regiment to be

established. UNIFIL is working more closely than ever before with the LAF in the south. These are all very positive indicators.

But when we come to issues like the Rome II conference, or rather the Rome conference in support of the LAF, that's to send a political signal that it's not just about the LAF, but that legitimate security institutions of Lebanon enjoy broad international support. And –

QUESTION: Ones that don't begin with the letter H?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: – in contrast to militias, which is – which are different animals altogether. But yes, I think the Secretary will have very good discussions in Lebanon.

QUESTION: And on Iraq, can you preview some – any announcement the Secretary is going to do tomorrow at the conference for reconstruction? Or –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Well, we've made clear we look at this as an opportunity, this conference, to reinforce several things. Obviously, the – and you're speaking now about the Iraq focus –

QUESTION: Yes, (inaudible) the reconstruction.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: – not the D-ISIS? Sure. The issue here is how do you mobilize broad international support, broad Arab community support, for Iraq? That's on the side of the who is supporting Iraq. On the Iraqi side, it is another opportunity in the voice of the international community to reinforce those things that Iraq needs to do which are structural. And in a way, it's a very happy world for me that we're in the position of having conferences where the focus of Iraq is on structural reforms, investor-friendly reforms, judicial reforms, necessary to bring in and attract investment and to restructure the budget in terms of grappling with issues as subsidies and spending.

That's pretty good progress, but it's not, in our eyes, a donor – for the U.S. a donor issue. It's talking about structural reforms and welcoming the engagement and support particularly of Iraq's Arab neighbors.

QUESTION: So there will be no contribution announced at all?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: It is not, it has never been, for the U.S. a pledging conference. The U.S. is – and we can get you the numbers; we've got them on sheets –

QUESTION: I know. I have them.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: – the largest supporter of Iraq there is out there in any category: economic, humanitarian, security. This is different. In our eyes, this is about structure, attracting investment, regional neighbor support.

QUESTION: But that's not to say that the Secretary isn't going to be making any announcements or announcement.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: We do not view this as a pledging conference.

QUESTION: Okay. So what –

QUESTION: Are you referencing Ex-Im?

QUESTION: Yes.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Hmm?

QUESTION: I heard he's not even going to the press conference to unveil it.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: What?

QUESTION: He's speaking with the people.

QUESTION: They're doing some sort of press conference. Is Tillerson going to be the one to make the Ex-Im announcement?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I would have to check for you on that. [Moderator], we can take that one back. I can't give you an answer; I simply don't know.

QUESTION: Just on Iraq and U.S. support for Abadi, though, and sort of –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yes.

QUESTION: – trying to decrease sort of the Iranian influence through the Saudi rapprochement as well. I mean, how – what is the sort of – the game plan for the run-up to the Iraqi elections? I mean, there's a lot of support – there's a lot of U.S. support for Abadi. You see him as a person who you can work with and who says he can stamp out corruption.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: There's a lot of broad support for Abadi.

QUESTION: It's not – I mean, it's not a done deal that he will be able –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Certainly not.

QUESTION: – to get the coalition –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: No.

QUESTION: – that he needs. What, then, next?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: It's actually an election.

QUESTION: Right.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: There are real politics.

QUESTION: And so you would be ready for if he doesn't – if he doesn't then get it and then –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I'm not going – I am not ever going to talk about hypotheticals that involve election outcomes.

QUESTION: Okay.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: What I will say is this: We have encouraged all of the actors who we see as responsible and constructive in Iraq – Sunni, Shia, Kurdish – to engage, to engage for the common goal of a unified Iraq capable of moving forward. They've just been through a horrific and terribly damaging fight. In a lesser level of damage, the consequences of the ill-advised referendum still, to an extent, affect the course of politics.

So what's needed here? What's needed is a focus on Iraq as a whole. What's needed is dialogue and conversation. That's certainly true between Prime Minister Abadi and the governing –

QUESTION: Barzani.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: – force, Qubad and Nechirvan in the KRG. And it's also needed between Shia elements, Sunni elements, as they look at how they wish to coalesce before an election, and the choices they have to make. And those are Iraqi choices, profoundly. But you asked about Prime Minister Abadi, and with Prime Minister Abadi we believe as a responsible – and he is a responsible national leader – he needs to support, engage in dialogue. That's what leaders do.

QUESTION: Do you have conversations with him about how to rein in the Shia militia further? I know he says he's under the reserve force, but if you still keep people in power like (inaudible) –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I think the prime minister is well aware of how one deals with the phenomenon unleashed by the Daesh threat of these various PMF elements, and there are various of them – some responsive to the Marjiyyah, some to Iran, some to other elements, some to the state itself. And he's made very clear that at the end of the day, and that day is coming very soon, militias either need to integrate into the proper Iraqi Armed Forces or they need to return to their homes. Those should be the disposition of these forces. And it's not, "Is the U.S. telling him how to do it?" He has a very good idea of how to carry this out, and I think he very much sees for Iraq, the objective is you have a monopoly by the state in use of force, and those who are not part of that state monopoly really can't be considered as contributing to the state, and will need to be addressed.

QUESTION: Going back to the Egypt meetings for a second, Tillerson and Shoukry got a question about Middle East peace in Jerusalem. And there's – I know the White House put out a statement about the comments –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yes.

QUESTION: – that Bibi allegedly made about –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Yes.

QUESTION: – settlements. But are – can you just, like, explain what you think went on there? Is there any discussions at all about settlements, if not a specific –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: What went on where?

QUESTION: There is a report in Israel – in the Israeli press about – the White House issued a statement – I can show you off – if –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: We've – we were following that rather closely, including the words –

QUESTION: I'm sure you wrote the statement.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: – including the words of that statement. The statement speaks for itself.

QUESTION: Okay.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I believe the Israelis have put out a statement. We separately put out a statement. The report is not correct. The President, the administration is focused on our peace.

QUESTION: But what's the – what's the message about the peace plan – if the specifics are sort of closely held, what is Tillerson saying about that process in his meetings this week?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: He listens to the comments made to him by his interlocutors. Those are comments, which in some cases aren't new, in some cases they reflect more current events. We understand very well worries in many governments throughout the region regarding what they see, what they don't see. But at the end of the day, the administration is committed, the President is committed to trying to see if a peace is possible. And beyond that, I'm not going to comment, except that the leaders with whom we all meet share with us their views and their hopes, not just their concerns, but their hopes as well, that indeed a resolution can be found. And there's a common message from everyone, which is that the U.S. should not turn its back, that the U.S. must stay engaged, that the U.S. is the primary actor, and that's a near uniform message we receive.

QUESTION: Abbas said today in Moscow, I think, that if there was to be an initiative, the U.S. don't have to be the only mediator. I mean –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I –

QUESTION: He was saying that they couldn't be the mediator any – anymore?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: The – the last thing, particularly at this hour of the evening, I am going to do is attempt to interpret, extrapolate upon, comment upon latest comments by Mahmoud Abbas.

QUESTION: And about the settlement story, can you tell us, even off the record, where do you think that this comes from or what –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I have no idea. I have no idea. Ask the Israelis where it came from.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I don't know, I'm not going to extrapolate on it, because I can't. I'm not trying to conceal anything. Ask them. They'd be happy to talk.

QUESTION: They seem to.

QUESTION: I have sort of a Syria, Iraqi rebuilding question. The Secretary said –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Re-what?

QUESTION: Pardon me?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Re –

QUESTION: Rebuilding.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Rebuilding.

QUESTION: Rebuilding.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I thought you said rebooting.

QUESTION: No, rebuilding or reconstruction. The Secretary has said multiple times that the United States is not in the business of nation building. He's also talking about roads and schools and –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: No. Here what the –

QUESTION: – it sounds like nation building.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Carol, here's what – no. Here is what the Secretary is talking about. The Secretary is talking about how do you achieve stability? How do you extend the image, the face of a state, the state, when there are lots of challengers from non-state actors, from external states? Look at the south if Iraq, very poor. Iran steps in, just as Hizballah stepped in in the south and in the Baqa'a – the Jihad al-Bina, the building jihad, construction jihad. And how do you counter that? It's not by kinetic activity, it's by showing the state is there, and the state is meeting the needs of its people. And so, when we hear from our Arab friends of the importance of building an Iraq which is a national Iraq, and not subject to undue influence our pressure from Iran, what is a way to do it?

It is by providing the kinds of assistance and engagement that creates a different kind of reality for the people in those areas where Iran has taken advantage of the seams, the cracks, or the simple absence of the state. That's not nation building, that's something very different. It is encouraging the Iraqi Government, those interested in investing in and

supporting Iraq, to help the state build the kind of services and infrastructure that a state needs to establish itself, to make itself appear to be the source of a better life for its people.

QUESTION: Are you asking other Gulf Arab countries – the U.S. hasn't made any pledge, but is there an ask for regional partners?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: It's not in the question of a pledging thing where we go out with requests, it's underscoring – there is a need for support. It's investment, it's private company engagement, it's DFI, but it is also – and there are Arab donors willing to help and support – focus your efforts on those areas where it actually achieves something in terms of stabilization and countering foreign influence.

QUESTION: Are you having trouble courting any of –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: No, no, I think there's been quite a good – quite a good turnout on this, not so much because of our efforts, but because many in the Arab world see this as in their interests to do.

MODERATOR: Maybe have time for one more?

QUESTION: Just very briefly, on the off-chance that you've seen this. I just got a note. I guess CNN or someone is reporting about Baghdadi being badly wounded and out of commission.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I haven't seen that, no.

QUESTION: Five months? Okay.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Haven't seen it.

QUESTION: May, yeah.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Huh?

QUESTION: In May.

QUESTION: I think it's in May – in May.

QUESTION: Oh.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: He's in Maine?

QUESTION: No, in May.

QUESTION: The month of May.

QUESTION: Last May. I don't know, he's in Maine?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Who knows? No, I haven't seen it, can't comment on it. Okay?

QUESTION: Yup.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thank you all.

QUESTION: Thank you very much.

QUESTION: Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: I'm sure we'll see each other again. Have a nice night.

QUESTION: Thanks so much.

QUESTION: Thank you, good night.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL: Thank you.

The Office of Website Management, Bureau of Public Affairs, manages this site as a portal for information from the U.S. State Department. External links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views or privacy policies contained therein.