

Press Releases: Briefing With Traveling Press

Special Briefing
Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

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MR PALLADINO: All right. Do we have any questions?

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah.

MR PALLADINO: Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you. There are reports that the United States is considering recognizing the annexation of the Golan Heights, which would obviously be of enormous strategic value to Israel. Can you give us any insight into where that would stand?

SECRETARY POMPEO: No.

QUESTION: Why not?

QUESTION: Is it being considered?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I don't have anything to say about that.

QUESTION: What is your view toward that? What –

SECRETARY POMPEO: I'm not going to comment. We – the administration's considering lots of things always, and I try to make sure we get to answers before we talk about them publicly.

QUESTION: And could you talk about what the downside of that would be? What would be the risks?

SECRETARY POMPEO: No. I'm just not going to comment on it.

MR PALLADINO: Let's move on. Next question, Barbara, please.

QUESTION: Just on that same idea and the question I've been asking previously, you said yesterday that the policy hasn't changed with regards to whether the U.S. considers the West Bank and Golan occupied territory. Can you just tell – you didn't say what the policy was. What is the policy?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah, so I'm not going to spend time talking about this. I've answered this question previously, and you'd asked yesterday. I'll give you the same answer. Our mission statement in the Human Rights Report is to –

QUESTION: No, it's not the Human Rights Report. Just generally speaking on –

SECRETARY POMPEO: But this is where the language – this is what you're – this is why you're asking. Am I mistaken?

QUESTION: Well, more than that because –

SECRETARY POMPEO: No, but this is where you saw the language, right?

QUESTION: That's what's triggered this round of questioning.

SECRETARY POMPEO: And that's the question I'm going to answer, yeah.

QUESTION: But the use of the term occupied or occupation has been decreasing over time, and when we ask the spokespeople doing the briefings, they always say the policy hasn't changed.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yes.

QUESTION: So I just would like – it would be helpful for us to get a clear statement of what the policy is with regards to whether the U.S. considers the West Bank and the Golan occupied territory.

SECRETARY POMPEO: I understand the question you're asking. I understand why you're asking the question. We used that language in the Human Rights Report with great intentionality. We didn't make a mistake. It's there for a reason. It's not a change in U.S. policy. It was our intent, as it is in every element of the Human Rights Report, to be as factually descriptive as we can, and that's what we did.

QUESTION: Can I ask –

SECRETARY POMPEO: So it wasn't a mistake; it wasn't an error. It was done knowingly, and we believe we have the most factual actual description that was appropriate for the report.

Yes, sir.

MR PALLADINO: Go ahead, Matt.

QUESTION: Thanks. Slightly different. When you talk about this – what you're going to be doing this afternoon, in terms of going to the wall with the prime minister, you apparently are going to be the highest-ranking foreign official to go there with him. Is that meant to signify anything about

Israeli sovereignty over that particular part of the city or not? Is it just a coincidence?

And then looking ahead to tomorrow, can you give us any kind of a preview about just how tough you're going to be on Hizballah and the Iranian role not just in Lebanon but in Syria and Iraq?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah. So the trip to the wall is something that I had talked with Prime Minister Netanyahu about doing some time ago, and it's our first chance to go there together. I think it's important. I think it's symbolic that a senior American official go there with the prime minister of Israel. It's a place that's important to many faiths, and I'm looking forward to it. I think it'll be – I think I'll be very special.

With respect to the trip tomorrow, Hizballah is a terrorist organization. So when you ask how tough I'm going to be, we're going to –

QUESTION: But it's also part of the government.

SECRETARY POMPEO: No, it's a terrorist organization – period, full stop. These are – this is an organization underwritten by the Islamic Republic of Iran with the intention of the destruction of Israel and, if you listen to them closely, the destruction of Western democracy, including the United States of America as well. Maybe that answers your question about how tough I'm going to be. (Laughter.) But there's – we –

QUESTION: Well, that sounds like you're not to mince words, clearly. You're going to be on their home turf, and so that's –

SECRETARY POMPEO: We're going to be very clear about how America sees Hizballah and our expectations about how Lebanon's success depends on – the Lebanese people will demand that a terrorist organization not be in control of their government and not drive policies and create risk for their country as well. We all know the risk, right? Hizballah does something inside of Lebanon; the risk of escalation is real. The people of Lebanon don't want that. The people of Israel don't want that. The people of the United States of America don't want that. And we're going to make that abundantly clear, and then we're going to make sure that they have all the information we have about this as well.

MR PALLADINO: AFP, Francesco.

QUESTION: Thanks. Mr. Secretary, to follow on Matt's question on the wall, if it's important and special that a U.S. official goes there with the Israeli prime minister, why is it the first time? Why wasn't it the case for President Trump or Vice President Pence? Is this an evolution in the relationship and how you see the Western Wall?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I don't know. I don't know why they didn't go there before. I can't answer that.

QUESTION: It's not an evolution in the U.S. stance towards Israel and –

SECRETARY POMPEO: I'm looking forward to going to the wall with the prime minister.

MR PALLADINO: CBN, David.

QUESTION: Secretary Pompeo, anti-Semitism and the Democrats, did some of that come up with Prime Minister Netanyahu? And can you kind of term – give us a sense of what was discussed about the concern he has, you have, on that?

SECRETARY POMPEO: We didn't talk about it in terms of U.S. – I don't want to give – I try to stay away from conversations we have privately, but I will say we didn't talk about U.S. domestic politics. For that matter, I'm sure of your next question. We didn't talk about Israeli internal politics either. (Laughter.)

We did talk about anti-Semitism, that I made some remarks yesterday about it. It is a growing threat in Europe and around the world and something that this administration takes incredibly seriously and something that presents increasing risk not only to Jews but to all of us.

MR PALLADINO: *New York Times*, Ed.

QUESTION: The prime minister said yesterday that the two of you spoke about additional ways to apply pressure to Iran. Can you elaborate on that?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I won't say what we talked about, but each of the pillars that we have – each of the vectors we've used to put back – push back against them, the sanctions that are in place – we have another decision about waivers that'll be coming up in 60 days, I guess it is, the beginning of May. The sanctions regime that we've put in place for designating those connected to Iranian malign activity, wherever we find them, including in places like Iraq. You would have seen that recently we designated an organization inside of Iraq, which we had not done before. Our cooperation with Israel, our attempts to deny the Iranians the resources to continue to foment terror. We're going to continue to increase the pressure we're applying along each of those vectors of pressure.

Remember the simple goal. The simple goal is to get Iran to behave like a normal nation: stop blowing up things around the world; stop fomenting terrorism; stop their assassination campaign in Europe; stop underwriting the Houthis, Hamas, Hizballah. Simple things – the same things we ask every nation in the world to do we're asking of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

MR PALLADINO: *LA Times*, Tracy.

QUESTION: Thank you. President Rivlin this morning spoke to you about the Palestinians as a very important issue, and he even raised the idea of Israel having to take care of the Palestinians if the Palestinian Authority were to collapse. Is that something the United States is now thinking about, how to take – how to help Israel take care of the Palestinians?

SECRETARY POMPEO: You have to put this in context, right, of the larger U.S. Middle East policy and what we're trying to accomplish. I've been talking

about this since I – since almost the beginning of my time as Secretary of State. The conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians is a component of that, right? These threats that I just talked about in Iran, these are all pieces of it. The work that we're doing in Syria, the Defeat ISIS coalition that we built up – these are all elements of the Trump administration's policy in the Middle East.

With respect to the particular question there, look, the Israelis and Palestinians live side-by-side. We need to help them figure out how to do that. And that's what I think the president was pointing to. He and I had a chance to talk about that a little bit more. It's a fact, and this administration wishes well for the Palestinian people.

QUESTION: But not necessarily a two-state solution, right?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah, we want the Palestinian people, whether they live in the West Bank or in Gaza or, frankly, Palestinians that live anywhere in the world – I mean, think about where we are, where we're sitting today. We're sitting in a country that has Christians, Jews, Muslims all living in a democracy.

This is unique and special and what we would hope for broader parts of the Middle East as well. It's a – this is an amazing, unique place in which we're sitting. And so you asked this question in the context of the Palestinians. We hope they have a brighter future as well, and as you see us lay out our plans over the coming months, I think you'll see that very clearly.

MR PALLADINO: Question? Let's go ABC, Conor.

QUESTION: You mentioned before we arrived in Kuwait that one of the things you'd focus on while here would be Syria. There have been some reports that SDF forces have taken the final square kilometers of territory.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah.

QUESTION: Are you ready to declare the end of the ISIS caliphate?

SECRETARY POMPEO: We're close. People – there's – it's an amazing accomplishment that the coalition achieved there. I'm incredibly proud of having been a small part of continuing to build that coalition out and the work that United States did, Department of Defense did, that the folks fighting down the Euphrates River valley did. The threat from radical Islamic terrorism remains. We need to finish out the last few square meters there in Syria. Still work to do.

MR PALLADINO: One more. *New York Times*, Ed.

QUESTION: Can you give us a preview of the conversations that might take place between the prime minister and President Trump next week? What will be at the top of the agenda?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Oh, goodness, I think it'll be the same set of things I came here to help prepare for their meeting. I think it'll be the same set of

issues, right: the great relationship between our two countries, the critical nature of that relationship, our common threats from terrorism, including terrorism that emanates from the Islamic Republic of Iran. I would guess those would be the issues that will dominate their conversation.

MR PALLADINO: NBC, Andrea.

QUESTION: Can you share whether you, in your conversation with the crown prince that was the day before yesterday, if my time is – did you discuss the women who were arrested? There have been reports of torture involving al-Qahtani, in fact, his close aide – Khashoggi – were any of those human rights issues more broadly discussed in that conversation?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah, it was actually a pretty short conversation. I had a couple of specific things I wanted to talk to him about, but never a conversation goes by where we don't talk about the human rights issues broadly, those in Saudi Arabia as well.

QUESTION: And the investigation, are they getting any closer to (inaudible) clearing it up for you?

SECRETARY POMPEO: There's still work to do. We are still keenly interested in making sure that all the facts come to bear and are brought, and that not only do the Saudis handle this properly inside the country, but that we get the information that we need so that we can make good decisions for the United States government as well as we continue to honor the commitment we have made since the beginning, which is that we will follow the facts to wherever they go.

MR PALLADINO: BBC, Barbara.

QUESTION: Mr. Netanyahu has been criticized by some elements in Israel and also amongst American Jews about aligning himself with the extremist right wing here in Israel ahead of the elections. Have you – does that concern you and have you expressed any concern about that?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I'm going to stay far away from the decisions that the Israeli people will make here in a few weeks. It wouldn't be appropriate for the U.S. Secretary of State to comment on Israeli domestic politics.

QUESTION: In that line – oh, sorry.

MR PALLADINO: Go ahead, please.

QUESTION: I'm sorry. In that line, though –

SECRETARY POMPEO: Go ahead. Yes, ma'am.

QUESTION: – you spoke of Israel being this great democracy where everyone's living freely.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah.

QUESTION: It's not the elections; what about the law that they passed that this is only a Jewish state?

SECRETARY POMPEO: The Israelis will have – this is Israeli domestic politics. I must say, as I stare around the world at democracies, this is pretty close to the top of the list, right? When you see the freedom, the pluralism, the ability to jostle, to ensure that rights are protected, Israel is something that the world can look up to in terms of its democratic values and institutions. I'm very comfortable saying that.

We don't get it right in the United States every day either, but this is what our republic, their democracy, does. We have competitive elections. People get to make judgments about their leaders – in our case, every couple years or every four years for our president; in Israel's case, their elections are timed differently. But in each case, these are places where the people get to have their voices heard on a recurring basis, and when they don't like the direction of travel of their nation, they can change it.

MR PALLADINO: Last question. CBN, David.

QUESTION: Has there been a narrative, Secretary Pompeo, that has frustrated you from what is dubbed the "mainstream media," whether it be U.S. policy or Middle East policy or what's been reported? Is there a story – not necessarily that's not being told, but you feel frustrated over at all when you see headlines and certain articles written?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I'm going to just pass on that. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Thank you.

SECRETARY POMPEO: But I must say, I'm not prone to frustration.

QUESTION: Why's that?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Because you – I'm a deep believer in our republic, and my task as the Secretary of State is to get up every day and drive towards achieving the mission that President Trump lays out for me. The Constitution that I'm sworn to defend and uphold, I work at it every day. I'm very focused on the mission. There'll be critiques from all across the political spectrum. I'm not immune to reading them. My son makes sure I don't miss the good ones. (Laughter.)

But my mission set is clear, and I'm – if we have a story to tell, if we have a thing that's important for you all to know, it's our task to make sure that we share that and we communicate what we're doing and why we're trying to do it. And we certainly have constraints on what we can say and what we can't from time to time, but our mission is to make sure that the American people understand what it is President Trump's trying to deliver, and how it is he's trying to deliver that for the American people.

QUESTION: As a matter of faith, can you just say –

MR PALLADINO: We need stop there. I'm sorry. We're out time, Mr. Secretary.

QUESTION: – how important to you the events –

SECRETARY POMPEO: I'll take one more, and then I'll go.

MR PALLADINO: Okay.

QUESTION: As a matter of faith, can you just say how important the events here in Jerusalem are to you? You're going to be seeing the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Wailing Wall and so on. What does it mean to you?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah, so I don't know. I've been to Israel now a whole handful of times. I came here the first time as a private citizen, long before I entered Congress, brought my son here, because I wanted him to see this place that had a special meaning for the people of my faith of Christianity. We had a chance to see most of the main Christian sights and travel up north to the Sea of Galilee and see the Christian sights up there as well.

So each time I get a chance to come back and see the history and remind myself of the – of this place that you read about in the Bible, it's of enormous value to me personally. It always reminds me of the spirituality that I hope informs many of the things that I do, trying to fulfill my mission to the Constitution and on behalf of America and President Trump.

MR PALLADINO: Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you all very much.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR PALLADINO: The embargo is lifted.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah. You all have a good day.

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