

Press Releases: Interview With Margaret Brennan of CBS's Face the Nation

Interview
Michael R. Pompeo

Secretary of State

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QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, we are in the middle of this shutdown, and I know a number of State Department employees are not getting paid, including a quarter of U.S. employees in foreign countries. You've been going to U.S. embassies. What are you telling staff about when they can expect a paycheck?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Look, it's unfortunate that we're in this shutdown. I wish we weren't too. I hope that it's resolved quickly, and I've certainly told our teams that. But you have to know these great Americans who are working in our embassies around the world, they understand the mission and they understand its importance. They understand that whether the government is open or closed they have a task to do, and they are hard at it.

QUESTION: Well, I do want to ask you since we are so focused on what's happening with the shutdown here at home, the State Department, when it comes to border issues, has issued a report in 2017 about counterterrorism, and it says that there is no credible evidence that international terrorist groups have established bases in Mexico or sent operatives via Mexico into the United States. It adds the southern border is vulnerable, but terrorist groups likely seek other means of trying to enter the United States. How does this match with the claim that there is a border security crisis?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Make no mistake about it, Margaret; keeping our southern border secure is an important national security component. It's critical that we do that while – there's a real risk to the United States of America. We need to take this seriously. We need to secure our southern border. We need to make sure that those who want to do us harm don't have a way to access us in that way. There are many things we have to do; one of the reasons I'm in the Middle East is to work on prevailing against terror. There are lots of elements of this, but border security is certainly an important component.

QUESTION: So is the State Department report wrong to say that this is not how terrorists are trying to enter the United States?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Margaret, terrorists try to get into our country lots of ways. One of the ways they can come in is across our southern border. What you saw was an unclassified report. Make no mistake about it; terrorists will always find the weakest link, and we need to make sure that the weakest link in our national security isn't our southern border.

QUESTION: I want to get to your trip through the Middle East, but I first want to ask you about this *New York Times* report that says right after President Trump fired former FBI Director James Comey, the FBI began investigating whether President Trump himself was a potential threat to national security and whether he had been working for Russia or unintentionally influenced by Moscow. What is your reaction to this?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I'm not going to comment on *New York Times* stories, but I'll certainly say this: The notion that President Trump is a threat to American national security is absolutely ludicrous.

QUESTION: Just to clarify, since you were CIA director, did you have any idea that this investigation was happening?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Margaret, Margaret, Margaret, I've answered this question repeatedly – indeed, on your show. The idea that's contained in the *New York Times* story that President Trump was a threat to American national security is silly on its face and not worthy of a response.

QUESTION: One of the reasons you're in the Middle East is to reassure and explain to some of our allies what the U.S. policy in Syria is. So I'd like you to do that for us today, because the Pentagon announced yesterday that it actually has begun its withdrawal from Syria, yet the U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton said that wouldn't happen until two things: one, the U.S. defeated ISIS; and two, Turkey assured us it wouldn't go after our Kurdish allies. Have those two conditions been met?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Margaret, the President's guidance is incredibly clear. The roughly 2,000 uniformed soldiers that are in Syria today are going to be withdrawn. That activity is underway. We're going to do so in an orderly, deliberate way, a way that protects America's national security, a way that allows us to continue the important mission that they were on. The counterterrorism mission, the effort to make sure that the destruction of ISIS is not only complete but that their resurgence is not possible, our efforts to counter the threat from terrorism stemming from the Islamic Republic of Iran – those are all real missions. The tactical change we've made in the withdrawal of those 2,000 troops is just that, a tactical change. The mission remains the same.

QUESTION: So has Turkey's president promised you not to attack our Kurdish allies?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Yeah, look, when President Erdogan and President Trump

spoke, they talked about this issue. The Turks have made clear that they understand that there are folks down in Syria that have their rights. We also want to make sure that those in Syria aren't attacking, terrorists aren't attacking Turkey from Syria. We're fully engaged. Ambassador Jeffrey is fully engaged in conversations with the Turks as well as with the SDF in Syria to make sure that we accomplish all of those missions. We can do each of those things, Margaret.

QUESTION: The SDF among some of the fighters that we were talking about, Kurdish allies there, just to explain for our audience.

SECRETARY POMPEO: That's right.

QUESTION: I want to ask you here though, because you know as a diplomat the threat of credible use of military force is what gives you power at the negotiating table. How does taking out U.S. troops from Syria get you any closer to expelling Iran?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Margaret, the United States of America can project military power from lots of places in the world. The absence of a couple thousand soldiers on the ground in Syria in no way materially diminishes the capacity of the United States of America and our amazing Armed Forces to deliver American power to accomplish our objectives anywhere in the world. That certainly includes in Syria. It certainly includes into Iran, if need be. We still have those tools. American diplomats still have that leverage and that power standing behind them. I am very confident in our military capabilities here in the Middle East.

QUESTION: So by that, are you saying that having U.S. troops in nearby Iraq will fill any kind of vacuum left by pulling out of Syria?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Margaret, we have lots of tools in the arsenal. I was out visiting some amazing warriors out at NAVCENT yesterday in Bahrain. We have an enormous amount of American military capacity. Our ability to achieve what we need to do militarily is there. My task as America's Secretary of State is to make sure that we don't have to use that tool, that we get the diplomatic outcomes to secure the Middle East and keep it stable and protect the American people as well.

QUESTION: When it comes to Iran, the Trump administration has taken some confrontational tactics here – pulling out of the nuclear accord, saying that Iranian threats would be matched here. But we saw this week another American, a Navy vet, Michael White, has been behind Iranian bars since July. So the Trump administration is not stopping Iran from taking Americans hostage. What is happening with this American?

SECRETARY POMPEO: This administration is proud of the work that we've done to get Americans released all across the world. With respect to the Michael White case in particular, I can't say much. It's an ongoing consular matter. But the American people should know we take the security of every American, wherever they are traveling in the world, as one of our foremost priorities. We will continue to work to get each of them back.

And your point, your point about the Islamic Republic of Iran, is spot on. It's why the JCPOA was such a horrible idea. Many Americans are being held there today that were taken by the Iranian regime. These are a group of people who are among the worst terrorists in the world and who have the least respect for human rights in the world, and it's why this administration has taken the very hard line you just described against Iran.

QUESTION: Is the Trump administration open to a prisoner swap with Iran?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I'm not going to talk about something like that.

QUESTION: Well, I ask you because Michael White's mother spoke to CBS, and she said she would like the administration to negotiate for her son. She said, "What is a human life worth? I would like the U.S. to negotiate. I want him home." What can you tell her you're doing to bring her son home?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I have great sympathy for the families of those Americans who are wrongfully detained all across the world, and we do everything we can every day to get their return. We use our diplomatic tools in every corner of the world to reach out to these places, to get these young men and women home. We are intent to do that in Iran. We are intent to do that all across the world. We take this obligation as a solemn one, and this administration has had quite a few successes. I hope we have more.

QUESTION: Potentially open to negotiations then?

SECRETARY POMPEO: We're using every tool that we have in our arsenal to get these Americans back home wherever we find them.

QUESTION: Ambassador Bolton said the next summit with Kim Jong-un would be in January or February. We're in that window. When will we see President Trump sit down with the North Korean leader?

SECRETARY POMPEO: We're working out the details, Margaret. You will be among the first to know.

QUESTION: I know, sir, you're at the end of this trip. You will be headed to Saudi Arabia. It has been about a hundred days since *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi was brutally murdered. Will you raise this issue with Mohammed bin Salman, the crown prince?

SECRETARY POMPEO: Of course.

QUESTION: And what will you say?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I'll say what – Margaret, I'll say what we have said consistently. America's position both privately and publicly is the same. This was an outrageous act, an unacceptable murder. Those who were responsible will be held accountable by the United States of America. We're determined to do that. We're determined to get at the facts just as quickly and as comprehensively as we can.

We have had a policy that's been remarkably consistent with respect to this.

We, like the rest of the world, value human rights all across the globe, and the murder of Jamal Khashoggi was outrageous, and we'll hold those responsible accountable.

And then we'll talk about all the important things we do with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and all the support they provide to keep Americans in Kansas and Colorado and California and in Washington, D.C., safe.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, thank you very much for your time. Safe travels.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Margaret, thank you very much. You have a great day.

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