

Press Releases: Interview With Michel Ghandour of Al Hurra TV

Interview
Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State

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QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, first, thank you for your time and for the opportunity that you give Al Hurra. We start from where you finished your day in Kuwait – it's a long day. How do you view the fact that Kuwait, once invaded by the Iraqi – or by the former Iraqi regime, hosting this conference here for the very construction of Iraq?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I think it's a symbol of how important Kuwait, but also the entire Gulf countries and the Arab world, views the future of Iraq. Iraq was somewhat disenchanted with – from the rest of the Gulf for many, many years, and I think now having seen this outreach and the reconnection of economic activity, re-establishing relationships that will be very important to the future of Iraq, is really encouraging to see.

QUESTION: And more than a hundred American companies participated in this – or participate in the Iraq Reconstruction Conference. What role will the American private sector play in the reconstruction of Iraq, Mr. Secretary?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I think importantly, obviously, bringing investment dollars is important to Iraq in order to create jobs and create a growing economy in Iraq. But beyond that, bringing American business practices, bringing American values to Iraq. American businesses are accustomed to dealing with regimes with strong rule of law, and I think that reinforces what's needed for Iraq to be successful longer term.

QUESTION: Critics say that the Trump administration won't contribute money toward Iraq's reconstruction and will rely on the private sector and international organizations. What's your response?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, the event today obviously was not intended to be a donor conference or a pledging conference. This was really organizing to ensure that business, the private sector, as well as other lending institutions have a good understanding of the situation in Iraq now after the

defeat of ISIS/Daesh, of the opportunities that are available, and it is to generate interest and excitement about Iraq as a good business and investment opportunity. And in doing so, a lot of the reconstruction we're confident will be undertaken through both public and private sector approaches, and the lending institutions – OPIC, Ex-Im, World Bank, IMF – all of these are important elements of ensuring Iraq has a successful future.

QUESTION: And are you satisfied with the results that you achieved today?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I think the interest was overwhelming. We had a number of companies that came to attend, but also a number of companies that have made announcements of either opportunities that have been secured or opportunities that are well in the works in terms of their discussions with Iraq. And I think that was really the importance, was to showcase Iraq is now, as I've said in my remarks, open for business.

QUESTION: And regarding the future of the American presence in Iraq, how do you view the American presence in Iraq?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, if you're asking about American Government presence or military presence, that's a matter that's yet to be discussed with the Government of Iraq, with Prime Minister Abadi. Of course, they have elections upcoming. We are still there in Iraq today to continue to ensure that ISIS/Daesh cannot re-emerge. While we have defeated them by taking all of their territory from them in Iraq, we know – and as Prime Minister Abadi would also acknowledge – there are still elements of ISIS/Daesh that are a threat to Iraq, and we're going to stay for as long as we're certain we have dealt with those threats as well.

[PAUSE]

QUESTION: Thank you. Okay. Sorry for the interruption. The international Coalition to Defeat ISIS has made big progress in Syria and in Iraq. What are the main challenges that you still face and what are the plans or the goals for next year?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, the ministerial that we had today for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS was a very important opportunity for all of the members of the coalition to meet together, acknowledge the success that has been achieved in Iraq and Syria. But we know that defeating ISIS or Daesh, it is a global threat, and we are sharing opportunities to identify how foreign fighters may be returning home, how do we document and keep track of people who have been involved with ISIS or Daesh. And so we approved a new set of guiding principles that are – that will guide our efforts in the future, and it's based on a lot of information sharing, collecting information using INTERPOL databases. And so this is really about the next phase of ensuring that we achieve ultimately an enduring defeat of ISIS.

QUESTION: Very good. Mr. Secretary, there are concerns in the region based on the last confrontation between Israel, Iran, and Syria, and the concerns based on the fear that maybe a war will break in the region and it will be a regional war. Do you share these concerns?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, just prior to leaving for my trip to the region, I had a very lengthy telephone conversation with Prime Minister Netanyahu because of the strikes, and we had a long discussion around the threats that Israel is confronted with that emanate both from Lebanon due to Lebanese Hizballah, but also from Syria. We take the threats to Israel seriously and we take a view that Israel has every right to defend itself from those threats.

We are concerned about Syria not creating instability and opportunities for further threats to Israel, but also to Jordan, to Turkey, to all of its neighbors, and that's why we will remain in Syria until ISIS is fully defeated and we are certain will not re-emerge. And we will remain engaged in the political solution for Syria, which we think is the long-term means of bringing stability to Syria and restoring Syria's independent nature.

QUESTION: But on the ground, what is the U.S. doing specifically to contain Iran's rising influence in Syria, in Lebanon, in Iraq, and elsewhere?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: We believe the future of responding to Iran's influence in Syria is through the political process, through the peace process itself. Again, U.S. is present in Syria for one purpose only, and that is the defeat of ISIS, the enduring defeat of ISIS. In doing so, though, we have taken the approach that we also want to take the opportunity to ensure that fighting amongst factions inside of Syria, the re-eruption of the civil war, does not take place. And so we want to use our presence to also be a stabilizing force to support talks in Geneva under the UN Security Council resolution process, allow the Syrian people to write a new constitution, allow them to hold free and fair elections. And through that process, we believe Syria will strengthen its independence and will take its own actions to reduce and ultimately reject the influence of Iran inside of Syria.

Iran's influence inside of Syria is not positive, it is a negative, because they bring with it instability, they bring with it violence.

QUESTION: But you're focusing, Mr. Secretary, on defeating ISIS. And Iran, Syria, the Syrian regime, and Russia are gaining ground. What will you do in this case?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I don't see the regime, Russia, and Iran necessarily gaining ground. I see the entire country eventually defeating ISIS. And again, what we're encouraging Russia and others is to de-escalate the violence – once ISIS is defeated, do not promote the violence. And we've asked Russia to persuade the regime to stop the march and the campaign against opposition forces. They have agreed to ceasefire areas and stabilization areas, but they need to enforce those in order to create the conditions for a peaceful solution for Syria's future.

And with respect to Iran's broader involvement in the region, we have spoken very clearly about Iran's destabilizing presence in Yemen, their destabilizing presence in Syria, in Lebanon, and in Iraq as well. It is our view – I think it's the view by and large of the international community – that Iran's presence in these countries is not helpful. It does not bring

stability. It does not bring security to the citizens there. We ask Iran to withdraw and send their forces home, and that's what we believe is the right pathway for the future.

QUESTION: But they're doing the opposite.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, they're not going to go just because we ask them. I think ultimately the will – the will of the Syrian people and restoring a free, whole, democratic and independent Syria, that will result in them rejecting outside interference from Iran.

QUESTION: It looks like so far, Mr. Secretary, Sochi and Geneva process are not working. The coordination and the cooperation with Russia is not working too. Is the U.S. – or will the U.S. continue the same process, or are you looking for something else, supporting again or arming the Syrian opposition to regain the ground?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: No, our only effort is to support the UN peace process in Geneva. I think it's important to remember that President Trump and President Putin both issued a joint statement last November on the margins of the ASEAN meeting in Danang, Vietnam, both committing themselves to Geneva as the way to move forward in Syria. We continue to work with the Russians and with other partners in the region to support the Geneva process. The Sochi event in some respects failed to deliver on some of the aspirations that I think the organizers had hoped, but on the other hand, Sochi itself, if you read the statement that came from the Sochi event, it said clearly Geneva is where these issues will be resolved, and it reaffirmed the important role that the UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura has to play in guiding the process forward.

So I think all of the significant parties – Russia, the United States, our coalition, likeminded for Syria – all are supporting the Geneva process.

QUESTION: The Trump administration has threatened to react militarily in case the Syrian regime uses chemical weapons. Reports say that the regime has used the chemical weapons six times last month. Would there be any U.S. or international reaction to that?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: We're quite concerned about these reports – the use of both chlorine bombs, which is weaponizing chlorine, as well as reports of sarin being used again. I think what's important is today the international community doesn't have a good mechanism to confirm these reports. The UN Security Council has held multiple votes to reissue the mandate for the Joint Investigative Mechanism to allow experts to go into Syria, investigate these reports, and confirm first whether they're true, and second to determine who is responsible.

The Trump administration takes the use of these weapons very seriously, as was indicated by actions taken last year. We need to have independent analysis and investigation of these, and what we really need is for Russia to stop vetoing the mandate for the Joint Investigative Mechanism so we have better information as to exactly what is happening.

QUESTION: But nothing happened or changed since you struck (inaudible), when the Syrian regime has used the chemical weapons.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, there's been no large, widespread use of sarin in particular. And so we think we have stopped Syria from using that type of chemical weapon. Having said that, these reports are very disturbing. What we do know is there are people that died from the effects of what appear to be chemical weapons. We need better information from experts like would be in the country through the Joint Investigative Mechanism.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, in this long trip you are going to visit Lebanon, with the tension between Lebanon and Israel escalating, based on maritime and territorial boundaries. The U.S. has been mediating between the two countries. Are we getting closer to an agreement or to war, do you think?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, we – obviously, we want to avoid conflict as best we can, and we will continue to play a role there to strengthen an independent government, again, in Lebanon, to strengthen independent Lebanese security forces. We know that Lebanon is going through what will likely be a long transition period. I think they have taken some positive steps with their law on disassociation, to require that Lebanese forces withdraw from the presence in Yemen and other locations. And we're there to support Lebanon through this long transition.

QUESTION: And meanwhile, you are putting more pressure and more sanctions on Hizballah. Is the Lebanese Government coordinating or cooperating with the U.S. in this regard? And how can you pressure Hizballah without affecting the Lebanese Government?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, it is – it's a very good question, and we're very mindful of our issue is with Lebanese Hizballah, a terrorist organization; it is not with the Lebanese people, it is not with the Lebanese Government. So we try to be very precise in the actions we take to not harm the Lebanese people.

Having said that, we do need support from the Lebanon Government to deal very clearly and firmly with those activities undertaken by Lebanese Hizballah that are unacceptable to the rest of the world.

QUESTION: My last question, Mr. Secretary: President Abbas told the Russian president that he would no longer cooperate if any form – in any form with the U.S. as a mediator with Israel. Do you have any reaction to that?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I understand President Abbas, his concern about certain steps and decisions taken by the United States. My message to President Abbas is the United States is still committed to seeing a successful Middle East peace process, and are prepared to assist in that effort going forward. We hope that President Abbas will find his way back to the table.

QUESTION: Thank you so much, Mr. Secretary. We appreciate your time.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Thank you. It's my pleasure.

QUESTION: Thank you.

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